Beyond the Line: How Toyota’s Culture Shapes Everyday Life

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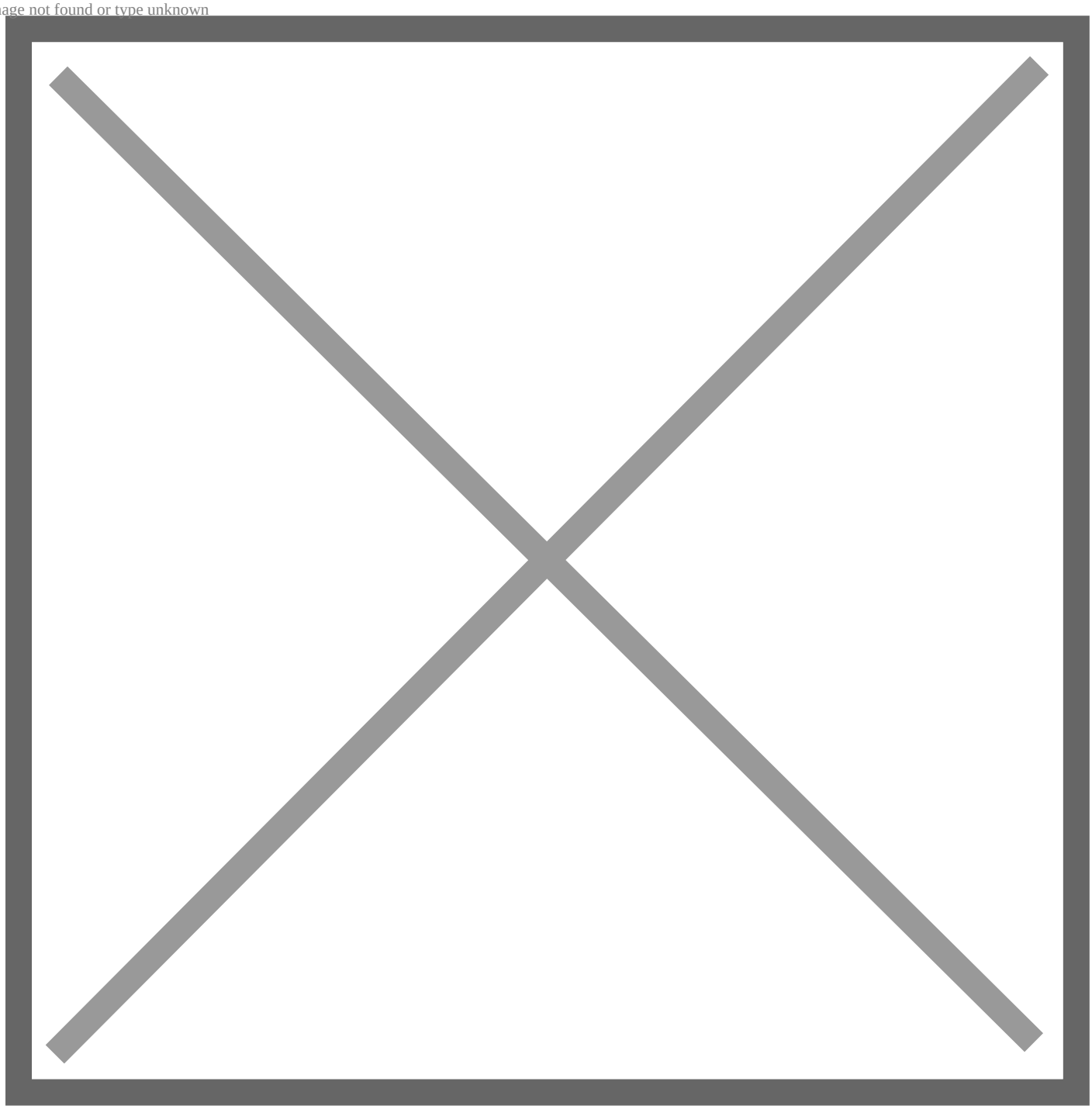

Toyota's manufacturing legacy in the United States began nearly 60 years ago and has grown into a nationwide manufacturing powerhouse with 11 sites, five of which (Kentucky, Indiana, Missouri, Alabama and West Virginia) celebrated milestone anniversaries this year.

Rooted in the Toyota Way — a culture built on respect for people, continuous improvement and a commitment to doing things the right way has developed. Over the decades, that culture has shaped more than the vehicles Toyota builds; it has influenced the daily habits, mindsets and values of generations of employees.

Many of those principles extend far beyond the workplace, showing up in homes, schools, neighborhoods and community organizations where Toyota team members live and serve.

Safety First: Stop, Look and Point

At Toyota manufacturing facilities, safety starts long before a vehicle reaches the road. One visible example is team members stopping at intersections on the shop floor or in the plant, raising their hand and physically pointing in the direction they plan to go.

Known as "stop, look and point," the practice combines a visual check with a physical action. By pointing in the direction they are headed, team members verify that the path is clear. For one Toyota West Virginia employee — and countless other team members — the practice is so ingrained that it follows them beyond the plant.

"Safety is paramount for Toyota," said Lindsay, a safety analyst at Toyota West Virginia in Buffalo, W.Va. "It guides everything we do. That commitment goes beyond our gates. You can always spot [Toyota] team members when we're out and about in the community because we point in the direction we're crossing before stepping into or moving through a busy intersection."

Though simple, the practice is significant. Team members create a brief pause for observation and decision-making. In busy environments where people, equipment and vehicles share the same space, those few seconds can help prevent incidents and protect team members.

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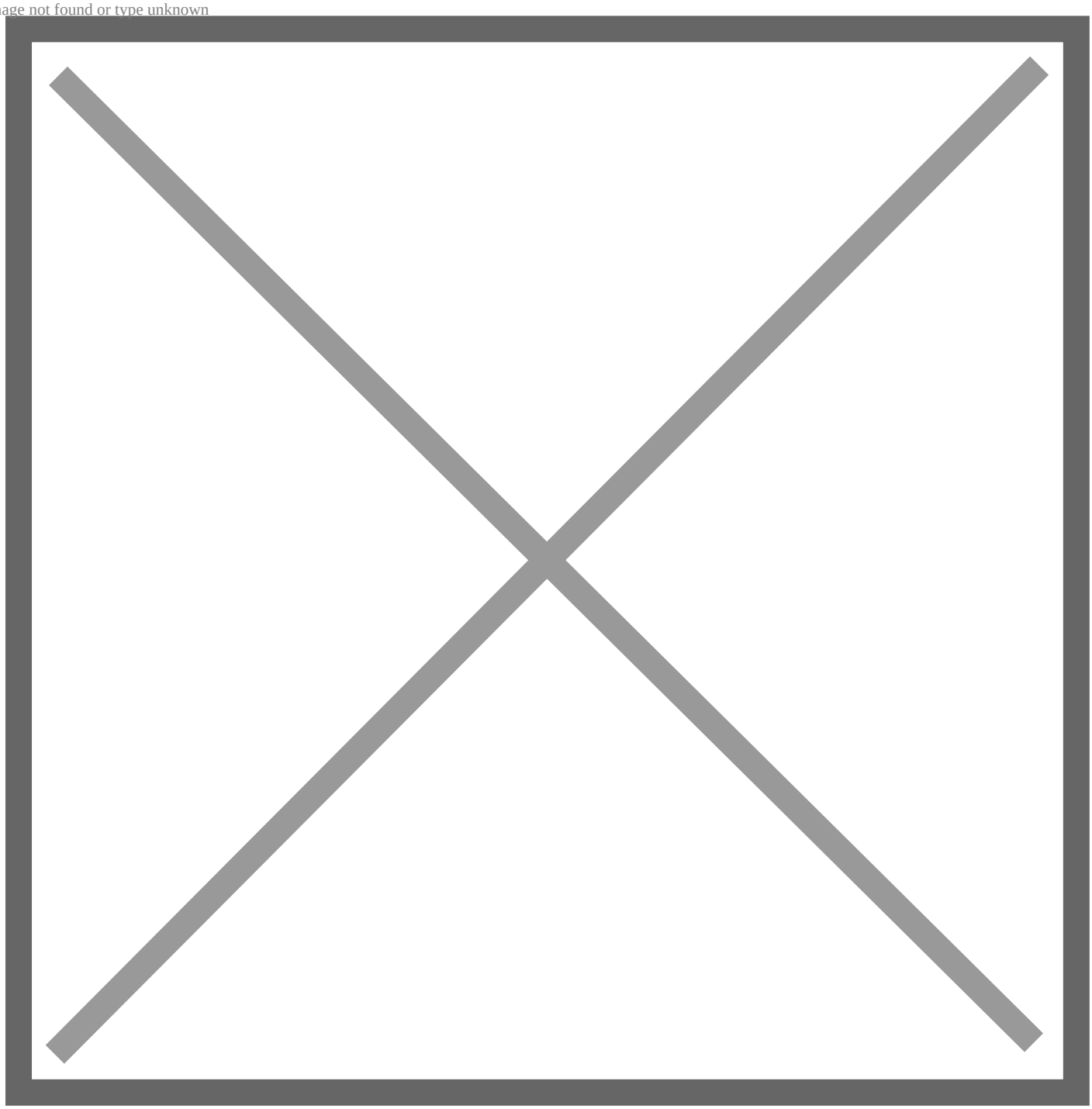


A Toyota West Virginia team member practices "stop, look and point," pausing to verify that the path is clear while running errands with her daughter.

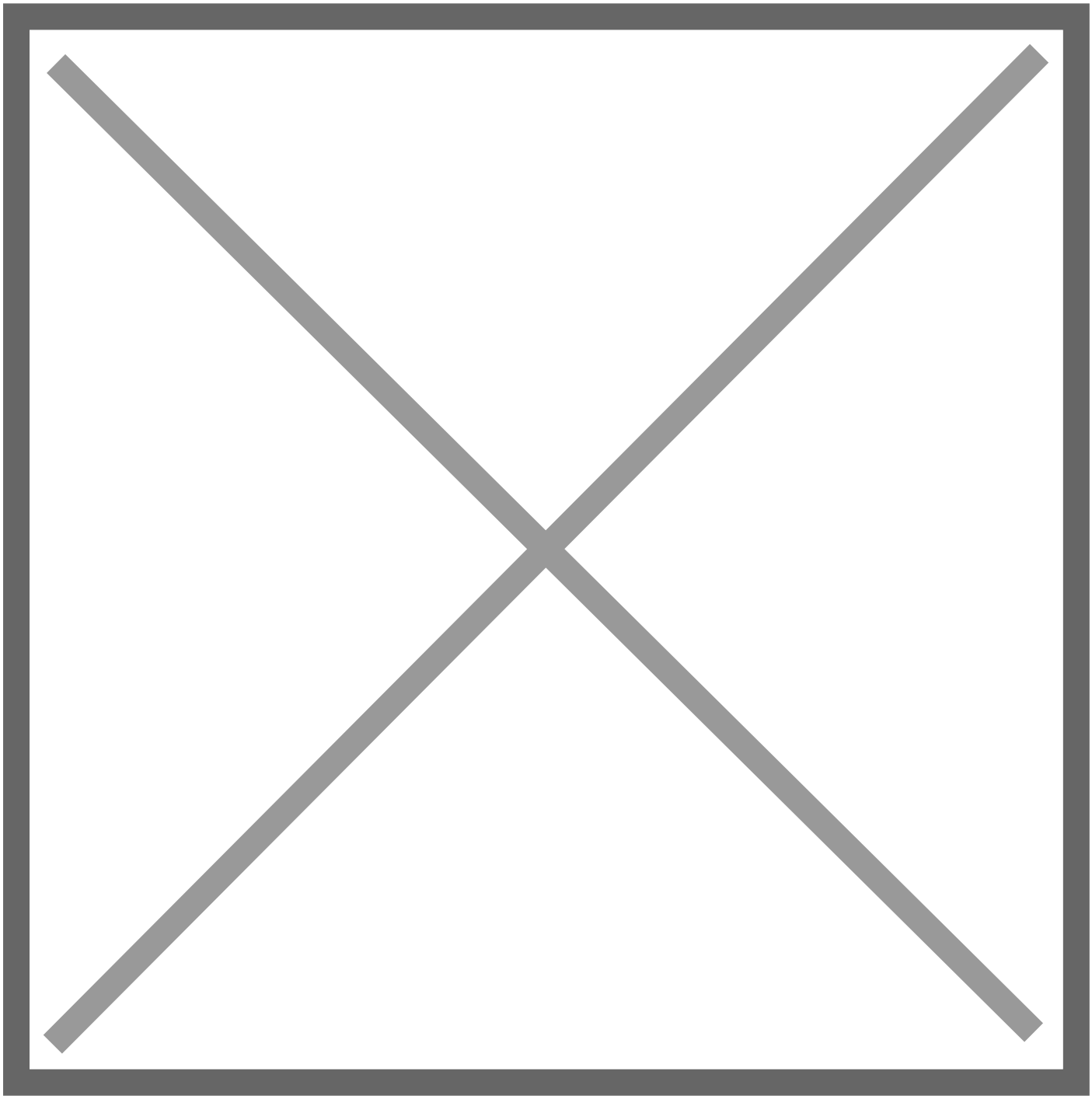
Pull the Andon

Another Toyota habit that team members carry into daily life is the concept behind the andon cord. At Toyota, team members are empowered to stop the production line by pulling the andon cord allowing an issue to be addressed promptly while minimizing impact on production.

Beyond the physical cords available on the production line, the andon represents Toyota's culture of accountability, collaboration and continuous improvement.

Team members also apply the concept to pause a project or meeting when a plan or discussion raises concerns. Before moving forward, they take the time to reevaluate the situation, ask for help and choose the best path forward. At work and at home, "pull the andon" now serves as a clear call to stop, speak up and reassess.

"The andon reminds us that problems aren't something to hide," said Michael a group leader at Toyota Kentucky. "They're opportunities to improve at work and life. Speak up early and ask for help."



A Toyota Kentucky team member pulls the andon to pause production to identify an issue, ask for support and determine the best path forward.

Kaizen in the Community

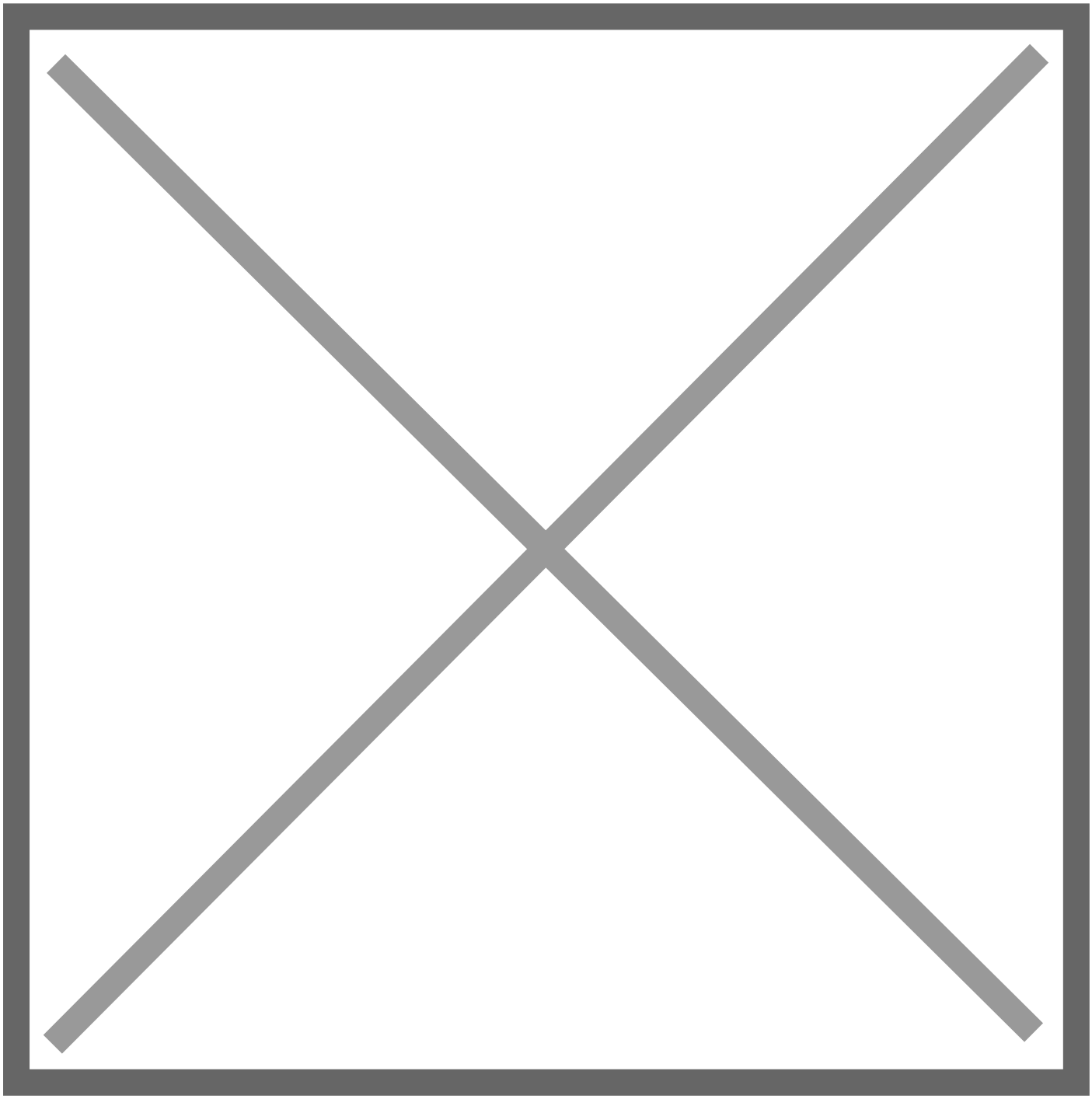
Kaizen, or continuous improvement, is one of the two foundational pillars of The Toyota Way. Maybe more than any other area, the idea of kaizen is an essential part of Toyota's culture.

It is the idea that small improvements at work, at home and in the community can lead to meaningful results. Within Toyota, kaizen can be seen in action at every level, every day.

Team members apply the same principle beyond manufacturing to projects at home and in their communities. Whether they are improving the snack process for a child's soccer team, or organizing a bake sale for a school, Toyota employees will key in on the few small changes that can make the work easier and more effective.

When team members at Toyota Indiana recently volunteered at Habitat for Humanity of Gibson County's new ReStore, they organized and streamlined the work so effectively that the project moved ahead of schedule by months.

"I can't say enough about Toyota volunteers," said Julia Rahman, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Gibson County. "When they show up to volunteer, they get to work. Before you know it, they have put systems in place that make everything run very smoothly and efficiently. I am always impressed with the amount of work they are able to accomplish in such a short amount of time."



Toyota Indiana team member puts kaizen into action while volunteering at Habitat for Humanity of Gibson County ReStore.

See for Yourself

Genchi Genbutsu— “go and see for yourself”— asks people to understand a situation at its source before drawing conclusions or proposing improvements. At Toyota, that means leaving a conference room, observing the work firsthand and listening to the people closest to it. Direct experience reveals details that reports and

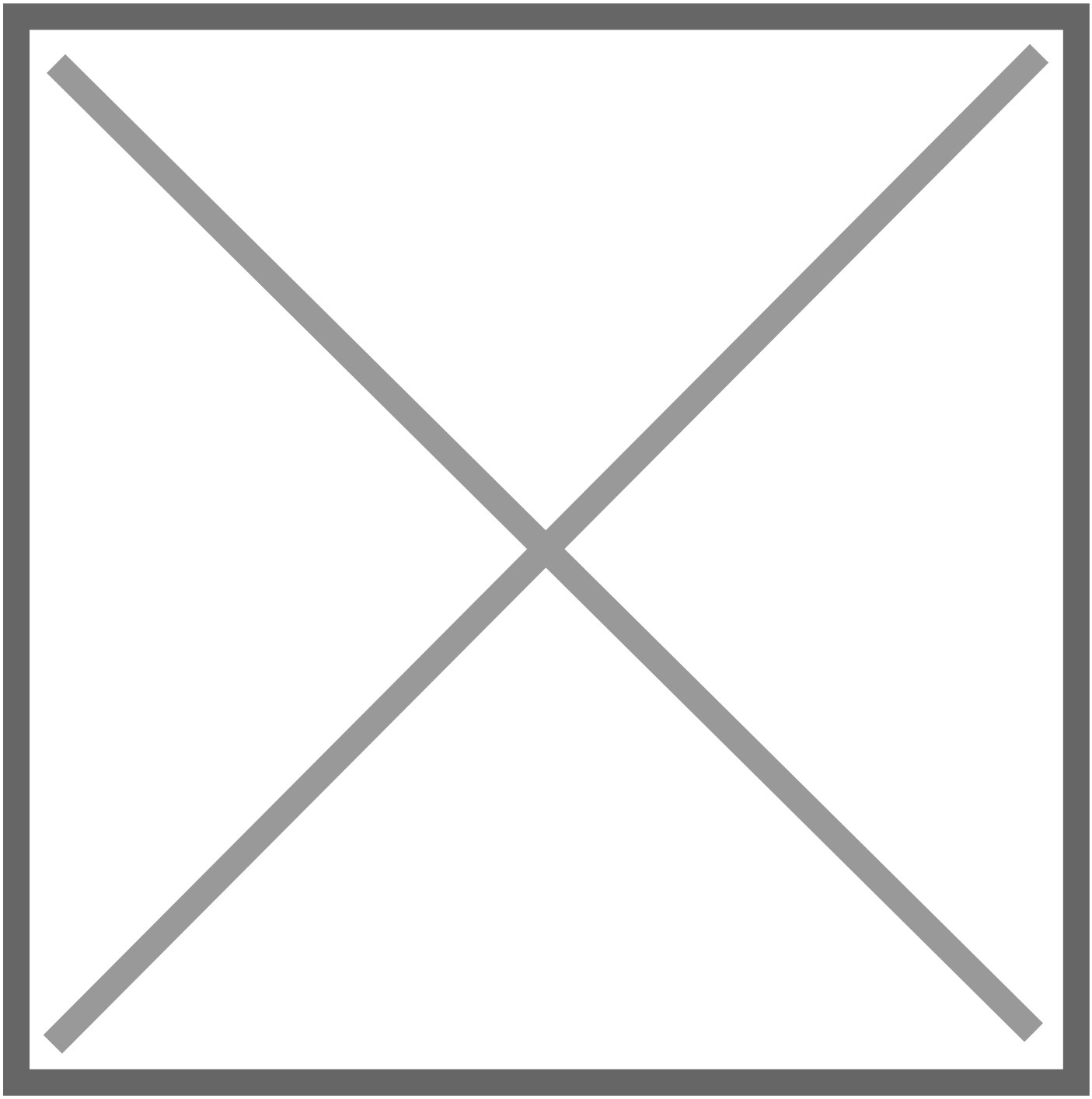
assumptions can miss, leading to better questions, sounder decisions and more effective solutions.

That principle comes to life at Toyota Alabama. Rather than simply exchanging ideas from a distance, Gibson Guitars sought firsthand insight into how Toyota team members build quality into their work, identify problems and improve processes.

The connection began with Todd, a former Director of Quality at Toyota Alabama, now Gibson's quality director in Nashville, Tennessee, who understood the value of bringing people directly to the place where the work happens.

Through direct engagement, the Gibson team could observe Toyota Alabama's practices, ask questions of the people doing the work and translate what they learned to their own operations. The experience turned an abstract set of principles into practical lessons grounded in real processes, real challenges and real results.

By practicing Genchi Genbutsu, Toyota Alabama and Gibson built a shared understanding that extends the Toyota Way beyond automotive manufacturing and into another craft driven by precision and quality.



A custom Gibson Les Paul electric guitar painted by Toyota Alabama finishing team member, Hunter, is proudly displayed at Toyota Alabama.

Preparing the Way

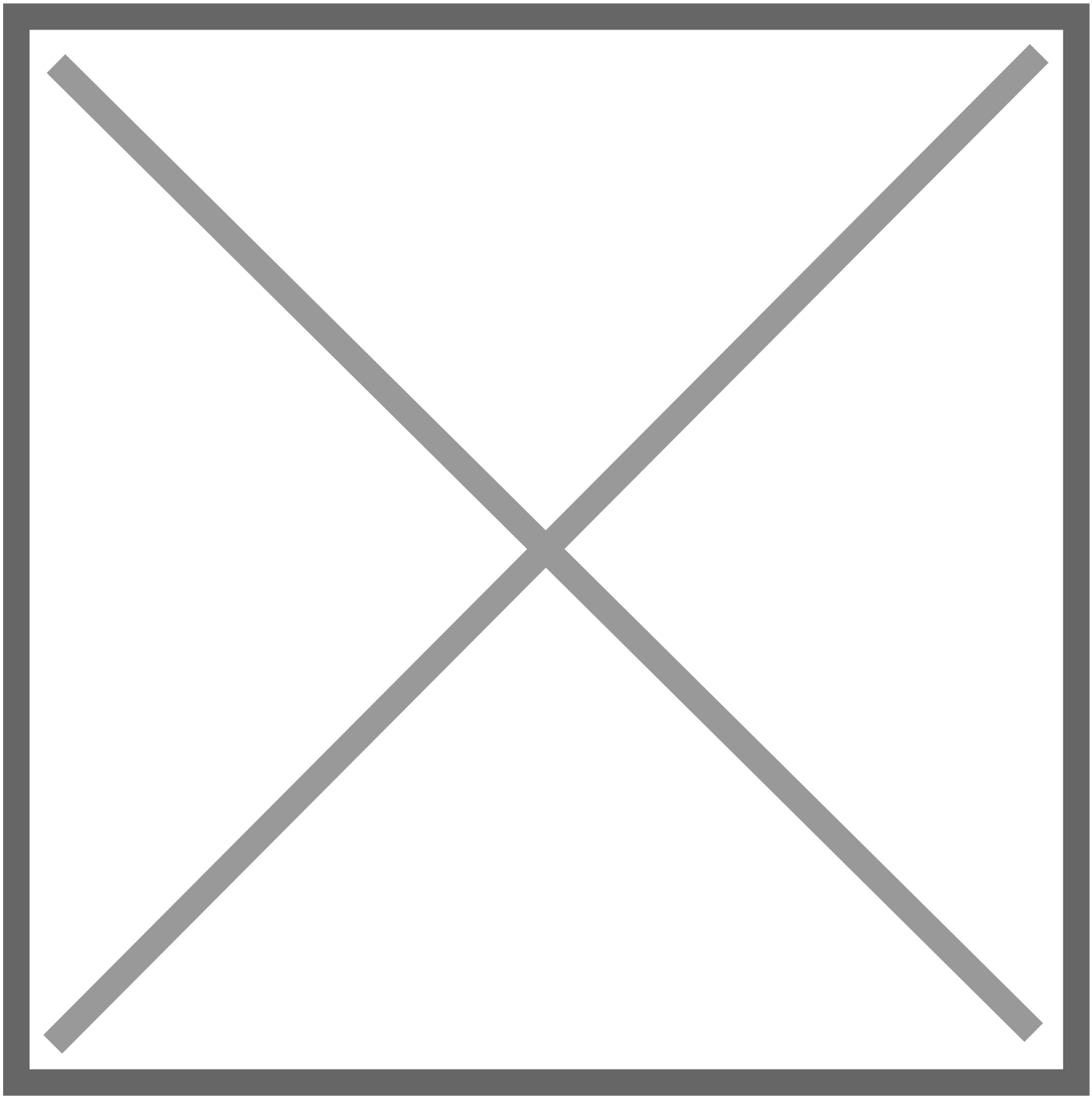
Great products come to life through teamwork, thoughtful planning and shared understanding. That's why nemawashi, the practice of preparing the way and building consensus, is an essential part of the Toyota Production System.

The term literally means “going around the roots.” It comes from the careful process of preparing the roots before transplanting, giving the tree the best chance to thrive in its new location.

Throughout Toyota’s culture, nemawashi describes the informal conversations and preparation that happen before a formal change is made. By inviting perspectives early, teams can surface concerns, strengthen ideas and build alignment around a process or project.

A Toyota Missouri group leader recently explained that nemawashi is regularly used on the casting line to get everyone on the same page. From getting the teams input on improving cleaning productivity to sharing best practices across other casting lines, building consensus helps everyone feel good about the direction or a changepoint.

Many Toyota team members practice nemawashi beyond the workplace. Before launching a volunteer project or proposing a community initiative, for example, a team member might meet with local leaders, nonprofit partners and neighbors to hear their ideas and understand their needs. Gathering input early and shaping the plan together can build trust, strengthen the project and broaden support to move forward.



Toyota Missouri team member Meaghan and group leader Michael put nemawashi into practice by listening, sharing perspectives and building alignment before moving forward together.