Norm!

July 07, 2016

You can call him the Sultan of Sequoia, the Head Honcho of Highlander, the Sire of the Sienna, but Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Indiana President Norm Bafunno has no problem talking sports, family and misfiring a few thousand emails.

First, sports play a big role in guiding Bafunno (He loved the "win as a team" aspect of high school football, and his favorite book is written by famed Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy). Second, Bafunno brings to work an optimistic, upbeat attitude infectious to those around him.

So, as he leads more than 6,000 team members at the plant that makes Highlander, Highlander Hybrid, Sienna and Sequoia, Bafunno makes a point to take a hands-on role in day-to-day operations.

How do you approach your role as a leader of 6,000 people?
Everything starts with spending the appropriate amount of time doing the go-and-see and visiting people in their actual workplace setting. It is so easy, the larger a company gets, to spend time away from the real activity. I try to actually schedule time to just go out and look at current activity as often as possible.

For me it is very important to get a real feel for what's going on. People make all kinds of effort every day, so I want to do my best to get out there and acknowledge their hard work. Some things you can't even see day-to-day by walking down an aisle. But when you talk to somebody about the change they made in the way their tool operates, or a maintenance team member who has a new software fix for a cycle-time reduction on a robot, you see it really makes a big difference.

How did you get interested in engineering?
In high school, I was a math, physics, science type person. Most importantly, my grandfather was an engineer and one of the smartest men I have ever been around. He could do anything. Everybody in the family asked him to fix just about anything that would break. But what really motivated me was his ability to simplify very complex pieces of equipment to make them understandable. Whether it is fixing a car, a lawn mower or washing machine, he had the ability to not only do things but to *share* how he did each task. That was very encouraging and really piqued my interest in engineering.

I would come home after college finals and my grandfather would ask me if I had a copy of my calculus exam. And I'd be like, "Uh, no, but I can see if I can get one." He wanted to take my final. He was a great example of continuous learning, and he just tried to make it simple. So many times people try to present things in such complex ways. He had a way of simplifying it to a point of really engaging other people.

Tell me a little bit about your life at home.
Family is a huge priority in my life. I have three children that are all grown. My wife, Julie, and I spend quite a bit of time between three cities where they live helping with whatever we can or just visiting. Those moments to me are the most important. Getting our family together, spending time relaxing and catching up with everyone is priceless, but finding the time is difficult. We look at work/life balance at our company, but I don't think there's any way to justify time away from your spouse or children. The key is to maximize the time together.

What event in your life has meant the most to your current success?
Flexibility. Reflecting on my career, I have rotated around to six or seven major assignments over the past 30

plus years. Rotating from an area early in my career where I felt very comfortable to a whole new job in a completely new state. It took me way out of my comfort zone. I wondered if I would be able to apply the knowledge I attained to this completely new environment. Looking back, working in that kind of situation allowed me to grow. I was able to apply that knowledge in another workplace and it built my confidence. These experiences introduced me to so many talented people, creating a great opportunity to learn. Those were the experiences necessary to build the skills that have allowed me to make positive contributions in my leadership role today.

What's your most embarrassing professional experience?
I have a pretty good one. I was in about my third year at General Motors, and I was working in our controls engineering area. I was testing a brand new laptop, and I was sending a test email to a counterpart in Canada. And I basically just put "this is a test of the system. Let me know if you receive. Norm."

Well, when I hit the return key, there was a wildcard asterisk recorded in the "to," "cc" and "bcc" fields that was not visible. When I hit the send button, I sent this email to everybody who had an email address at General Motors. And, I cc'd and bcc'd everybody at General Motors too. I just about shut down the entire email system for a day. Suddenly, I had these computer guys coming up to me saying, "I'd like to talk to Norm Bafunno." I got hundreds of emails saying, "Norm, I received your email. Thanks."

What is the biggest challenge you face in your current job?
First, how do we continue to innovate at a very rapid pace? This team at Indiana has earned an outstanding reputation for vehicle quality. But we can never sit still. Our competition is very good, and the need for innovation continues year after year.

And second, how do we evolve as a high-performing company generationally. We have a lot of baby boomers in the plant, but now Gen X and Millennials are the largest groups. So how do we all work together? How do we communicate in an effective way? It's super important to make sure everyone feels comfortable as demographics change. Going back 10 or 15 years, a majority of our team members were baby boomers, but our younger workers are going to carry the torch for the next 20 years after the older generation is gone.

What's one thing you do on a regular basis that people might find odd or surprising?
I stop and get a frozen Coke everywhere I can. I love frozen Cokes. If I'm driving somewhere and I see a place, I always pull in to check out their version.

So you're the guy at the Slurpee machine holding everyone up, eh?
I love Slurpees. Are you kidding me? For Christmas one year, my nephews got me this 128-ounce guitar-shaped mug that you can fill up. I don't know where they found it, but I'm sure when they saw it they said, "Uncle Norm's gotta have this." It was great. So what do I do? I go to 7-Eleven to fill it up.

How many frozen Cokes a week are we talking?
I would say 4-5 a week if the timing is right.

Over the course of your career, what's the best advice you've received?
Just do everything to the best of your ability. No matter what the project may be, work on it as if it is the most important project that you could do. When you work on a project to the best of your ability, you will learn a lot about the subject matter. And that foundation of small project after small project gives you an incredible foundation for your career.

Why do you love working at TMMI and what we should know about it.
First and foremost, the performance of the plant is at a very high level. It has earned a reputation through the years for consistency and innovation. There is an incredible sense of ownership by the people who work here. If

I look at the team members building our product every day, plus the new team members coming on board, I see a real thought process that they can make a difference, and I am going to make a difference, and I can make this place better and I can help other people be successful. There is truly an environment in Indiana that is inviting and receptive to all people.