

Toyota's Engine

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When Jim Bolte first began dating his wife, Tami, in college, there was a bit of a language barrier. See, Tami, was a sign language major.

“I would go out with Tami and her friends and they would sign to each other and point at me and laugh,” says Bolte, who has been president of Toyota Motor Manufacturing Alabama (TMMAL) since 2009. “And I wouldn’t have a clue what they were saying.”

To fix the problem, Bolte took a sign language class of his own to make sure they weren’t saying anything *too* bad. Nowadays, Bolte can use sign language to communicate with hearing impaired team members.

Bolte’s professional life now revolves around building V-8, V-6 and 4-cylinder engines for Toyota vehicles. In September, TMMAL built its 4 millionth engine, so things are going pretty well.

Tell me about life growing up.

I was born in Louisville, Ky. My father was transferred to Buffalo, N.Y. He was with an oil company. Then he got transferred to Ashland, Ky. I graduated from Eastern Kentucky University with a Computer Science degree and joined Ashland oil company right out of college as a computer programmer. Sad to say, this was before the Internet even existed.

Why did you decide to get into computers?

I thought someday everyone would own a computer. I had no idea how or why. Back then it was just big mainframes.

How did you get to Toyota?

When Toyota came to Georgetown, I was the 351st person they hired. Even before the plant was finished, I was working in information systems and ended up becoming the vice president of IS for Toyota North America on the manufacturing side. Then I got a call one day from the TEMA president asking if I would be willing to go to the new plant in Alabama. I ended up double capping as VP of IS and VP of the Alabama plant for three years.

Talk about the demands of double duty.

For three years, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, I was in Alabama. Thursday I was in Erlanger and Friday I was in Georgetown.

It’s tough because you really can’t do either job 100 percent as well as you could or should because you’re dividing your time. But sometimes you have to do it. Just to bridge the gap until someone else is named.

In July 2006 I decided to stay here in Alabama full time, and in April 2009 I became president. Despite my involvement, it’s gone really well so far.

Why did they tap an IS guy to run a manufacturing plant?

I have no clue. But really, I think it’s because IS people are pretty good at problem solving. This plant, with 1,300 people and 1.2 million square feet is very dynamic. Something is changing all the time. Humans are going to make mistakes and machines are going to break down. It’s a given. I think IS people have that kind of logical thinking that helps solve the problems. But it has got to be someone that can communicate well because you’re leading a big organization. So I’m not sure why I was sent to Alabama, but I like to think it was because of communication and problem solving experience.

What event in your life meant the most to your current success?

I left IS for about four years from 1994 to 1998 and did a corporate strategy function at TEMA, which really gave me a lot of exposure to all the plants in North America. That really opened the door to movement in my career. But it was really scary to leave my area of training and expertise to do something totally different, but I think it really grew me in terms of the breadth of my experience and exposure to the regional organization.

What is the biggest challenge you face in your current role?

Sales are very strong in North America, so our demand is very high. Team members are working 10-hour days. In some cases on Saturdays, Sundays and over a holiday weekend.

I'm so impressed with their willingness to do that. But it's hard and nobody wants to do it forever. For us, it's balancing team member morale, keeping motivation high and staying focused on good quality, safety and productivity.

What's the most effective way to lead people?

Build personal relationships. I've probably met with hundreds of people individually. My assistant will schedule one-on-one meetings randomly several times a week. We just sit down and chat about whatever they want to talk about. I think that resonates with people. I always ask if they've heard any rumors. It's a great way for me to hear what's going on. And I hear a lot.

Does that affect how you do your job at all?

It affects the decision making. As a management team, we look at team members as our customers. I want to be able to try to remove any obstacles that prevent them from doing their job the best they can. Every decision we make is predicated around how it's going to impact the team members. I can lead all day long, but without the team members, we don't get one engine built. So it's important to understand who is really running the company. It's really the team members.