

The Compassionate Leader

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When you talk to Wil James – the president of Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Kentucky, Inc. (TMMK) – he gives you his undivided attention. He comes off as a man who genuinely cares about those around him, and as a leader who can galvanize people to do great things.

Over the course of a conversation, it's easy to see why that is. James grew up in Virginia, with a nurse for a mother and a truck driver for a father. They instilled in him a sense of right and wrong, along with a healthy respect for people.

He still speaks of his parents in reverential tones. And he uses the same type of tone to talk about the team members he leads at TMMK, Toyota's largest North American manufacturing plant. This week, [TMMK began production of the Lexus ES](#), the first Lexus to be manufactured on U.S. soil.

What lessons from your parents do you carry with you?

My parents were the type of folks who would see a person in need and bring them in. Through my high school and college years, I can't think of a time we didn't have someone outside of our immediate family living in our house. There was always a cousin or a neighbor.

What's an experience that was trying for you?

One that stands out is when I was preparing to go to college. I graduated high school at the top of my class and knew that I wanted to be an engineer. So I went to my college to talk to the dean of engineering. The dean looked at my transcripts and said without hesitation, "Son, I don't think you have what it takes to be an engineer." Honestly that's the first time anyone had ever told me I could not accomplish anything in my life. I was in this guy's office less than five minutes. I was devastated. I'd never felt like that before. So I left there trying to figure out how to explain to my parents that I've maybe changed what I'm going to do. All I ever talked about was engineering.

I'll never forget. My dad comes home and says, "Let me get this straight. You want to be an engineer?" Yes sir. "You've performed well in school all these years?" Yes sir. "You've got the grades and were accepted there?" Yes sir. "And you go into a man's office, a man who you don't know and who doesn't know you and in less than five minutes you let him tell you what you're going to do with the rest of your life?" He waited a second and says, "I thought I taught you better than that." He got up and walked off. As he walks off, he says, "So, what are you gonna do?"

I couldn't wait to get to school to show that dean that he was wrong. One of the special moments came two years later when the dean handed me a plaque for the Dean's List. He remembered who I was and said, "I'm sorry." And I asked, "How many other people have you done this to?"

What's the most effective way to lead people?

First of all, you have to have a vision for where you want the organization to go, and be able to communicate that vision in a way that people *want* to go with you. Not because they have to, but because they see what's in it for them and why it's important for the team to move in that direction.

And you have to have compassion. Things happen all the time, and some things are not within people's control. You've got to be able to recognize that that's the case and be open to supporting people. An old saying I heard: That people don't care what you know until they know that you care. It is absolutely true. It's got to be about the people.

I believe the strongest leaders think about working for the employees as opposed to the employees working for them. I really do. I treat the members of my team like I work for them. My job is to find the issues that get in their way and remove them so they can focus on what they need to do.

What's one thing you do that people might find odd or surprising?

I'm not a boastful person, but I'm one of the best table tennis players that I know. I actually stopped playing because I couldn't find anyone that would give me serious competition.

I don't play anymore because I started seeing a side of myself that I didn't like. Being the guy that's a little boastful, inviting folks up to the table, taking them out quickly and walking off. That's not the kind of guy I really am. But yeah, I haven't lost very many table tennis games in my life.

Let's talk about the Lexus ES line. What does that mean to TMMK?

Back in 2010-11, I discussed with our team that if we were ever going to be truly considered for something of that magnitude, we couldn't just talk about wanting to do it, we had to show we were able. So we started on a path back in 2011 to show TMC that we should be a serious competitor for it.

How did you show that?

Through our quality activities and working on our product while improving our operations. We implemented hundreds of different kaizens. I asked team members to go back to the absolute basics of not letting a defect get by you. If you see something wrong, stop the line. Let's make it right and then let's proceed. We had to explain it until everyone in the organization got it. Once that happened, all our indicators headed in the right direction. That's when we started thinking more Lexus-like. It became a passion for the organization and we are a far better plant today having gone through that preparation stage.

What's your favorite part of your job?

Having the opportunity to work with all of the team members at TMMK. Considering all the things we've been able to achieve over the years, I am blessed to have such a strong team in Georgetown. We are a huge plant, but work tirelessly to make it a big family.