

Executive Insider: 5 Questions for Chris Reynolds

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Chris Reynolds, chief administration officer, Manufacturing and Corporate Resources for TMNA, oversees the process of delivering quality cars to market while ensuring that the methods and procedures in place are executed safely and efficiently.

In 2007, you started your career at Toyota as the chief legal officer. A year ago, did you foresee transitioning into manufacturing?

I had no idea, no clue. Here's what was explained to me: My role in Legal was one that I've been trained for and had in my background from the beginning of my career, even outside of Toyota. I think the perception of Akio Toyoda – because Akio makes these decisions – was that Toyota is about human development, team member development, and that includes senior executives. So, I needed to do something challenging to help me develop and that could be beneficial to the company.

What have you learned since becoming the head of manufacturing?

Manufacturing is the simplest, most complex business I've ever come across. The components and variables that go into manufacturing are relatively simple, but the how-to and the fact that on any given day, something can happen that throws those constants out of whack, that's what makes it complex.

The other thing I've learned is that we have a secret sauce that is unique to Toyota, and that is we empower team members on the line to improve our processes. A lot of the improvements and breakthroughs that I've seen in each of our plants come from the mind of team members who work on that process every day. They own it. That's our edge. We can never lose that.

At Toyota, team members are charged to “Start Your Impossible.” What does that mean to you?

Start your impossible means not accepting limits that are put on you by others, or even by yourself, and recognizing that the most important ingredient to success is your own attitude. When you look at the history of Toyota, you would consider it impossible that a loom-making company could transfer its knowledge and expertise to making cars that have the highest quality, durability and reliability in the world. That's impossible.

But Akio Toyoda's grandfather started that and was able to envision something bigger, broader and better than being a loom maker. To me it means, again, not accepting those limits and recognizing the biggest obstacle to achieving something is usually your own sense of limits; your own attitude about whether or not you'll succeed.

A key cultural priority for Toyota is “Challenge the Status Quo.” Sometimes this means that teams or individuals might fail. How does Toyota embrace failure in pursuit of this priority?

At Toyota, you have the room to fail. We need everybody to be aggressive in their thinking, so they really do think, I can start my impossible and it's OK to fail as long as I try to push the organization. We still have a long way to go. This is a company where it's actually okay to get out of your comfort zone. I'm exhibit A, right? I'm out of my comfort zone in my current role.

How did growing up in Detroit—the historic center of the American auto industry—help shape your character and work ethic?

Growing up in Detroit taught me that nobody works alone. In a typical assembly line, you've got to show up on time and hit it, and the person next to you has to show up on time and hit it. If it's just one of you, the whole thing falls apart. So, there's a lot of connectivity between you and your coworker.

Another thing that shaped me, particularly in the large African American community that existed in Detroit: I had so many examples of achievement, of academic excellence, of hard work, of people who had multiple jobs, of folks who created—even with just a high school education or even less than that—a successful life for themselves and their families.