

Executive Insider: 5 Questions for Al Smith

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Al Smith, group vice president, Chief Social Innovation Officer for Toyota Motor North America (TMNA), oversees the organization's community engagement efforts, corporate diversity and inclusion strategy, and environmental sustainability.

Why did you want to work in Social Innovation?

Social Innovation can be the epicenter for creating a culture where people will flourish. I believe my job is to help address the issues that affect us all, our people, our environment and our communities. Back in the late '90s, I was one of the two-member team that started our diversity initiative. I was a young, eager professional, wanting to make a difference in our world—at that time—somewhat like today's millennials. I've always had a strong drive to help Toyota do better and be better, and this role allows me to help Toyota team members fulfill their life's goals, as their professional goals and values align with those of the company.

What social innovation programs are you most excited about?

Our support for youth development, and in particular our work in West Dallas to co-create a new PreK-8 STEM school with Dallas ISD, SMU and the local community, is one of many Social Innovation programs that excite me. Not only are we collaborating to inform curriculum, develop teachers and design the school, we are working to address pervasive issues both before and after school and in the broader community, so that students are ready and able to learn. It's a model of a public-private partnership that leverages our collective strengths to benefit students, their families and the community, while engaging the passions of our team members and their "know-how." It's all very exciting.

Social Innovation is about doing good for the community and helping improve the business. How do you do both?

Toyota's business, like most, is driven by customers and the feeling they get when they invest in our products and our brand. Customers and consumers want the companies they support not only to make good, safe products, but to do good for the world as well. Social innovation works to address societal issues, connecting people with opportunity through inclusive mobility solutions, investing in youth to prepare them for the careers of tomorrow, and working not only to minimize environmental impact, but to leave the world a better place (net positive). This is good for society and good for business—and that benefits everyone.

What is your biggest challenge?

One of the biggest challenges we face is the creation of a new culture at TMNA to help drive the transition from a traditional automaker to a mobility company. The decision to consolidate operations in Plano, under the One Toyota banner, was the first major step taken in that cultural shift. It all starts with a strong culture committed to building the best products, respecting people and our differences, and an uncompromising desire to please our customers.

What career advice would you give to someone just starting out, or in need of a new direction?

I'm a believer that career development is a personal journey, and what worked for me won't always work for someone else. However, one point I try to convey to mentees is to pursue areas they're passionate about. Find your passion, and then seek a path that aligns your passion and career with your life's purpose. The right career is the one you're excited about every time you go to work. I have a passion for helping, and my job is all about helping and respecting people. Everything my team does, in one form or another, is about uplifting people, whether that's in our business or communities in need.