

Executive Insider: 5 Questions for Jacqueline Thomas

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[Jacqueline Thomas](#), Toyota Motor North America's chief compliance officer, manages a team of about 90 people as head of the Compliance and Audit Office, which ensures the company follows the law and maintains a standard of ethics.

Why is compliance important?

Compliance is vital because we should always strive to do the right thing. Our senior leaders are committed to making sure that we remain a company of good standing focused on the safety and quality of our products. A strong compliance and ethics culture encourage our team members to speak up, take action and promote transparency at every level to address matters that could compromise our values and reputation.

Did you always follow the rules growing up?

Yes, that was always my objective. But when I felt like the rules weren't fair, I would approach my parents in a very transparent manner and explain why the rules were unfair, why we should change the rule and why doing so was important. And more times than not, they got it.

Compliance rules in the industry are always changing. How do you stay on top of it all?

We rely on the strong partnerships that we have established across the organization and with external colleagues. We've adopted the regulatory model of three lines of defense.

The first line is management, which performs quality checks as part of operations. Within a group, everybody knows what they're responsible for doing. They check their work and processes. The second line augments management's activities through a centralized compliance oversight and monitoring function. They partner with management, providing them with an extra set of fresh eyes to help confirm effectiveness of processes to identify and rectify gaps or issues. And then the third line is internal audit, which provides objective assurance to validate that the company's operations, priorities, and strategies are effectively managed.

How has your background shaped you as a person?

My upbringing had a lot to do with the person that I am today.

My parents immigrated from Cuba in the early 60s. My uncle fought in the Bay of Pigs, and we had family members and friends who were imprisoned for their beliefs. I learned several important lessons growing up. The three most important ones were:

Don't be a victim of your circumstances you always have options; the power of team effort and working together; and the importance of standing for something and being passionate in what you do.

For my parents, it was really important to preserve important values for themselves and their family. They sacrificed a lot for their beliefs and gave up everything. This left a lasting impression on me on the importance of being your authentic self.

Growing up in Miami and later in Los Angeles, we didn't have a lot, but we would support each other in different ways whether it was helping to move a family member or pulling our resources to help one of our relatives buy a car so that they could have transportation to get to their job. I also learned about personal accountability in observing how that relative paid back the debt that was owed.

How did your upbringing prepare you for your role?

In many ways, my upbringing prepared me for this job. My parents sacrifice to immigrate from their native country to provide me with the basic rights like freedom of choice and free speech made me value the impact of sharing my opinion and letting my voice be heard. I also understood the importance of working together to safeguard what matters. Both are important qualities that drew me to this career.

I learned to have a passion for what you do, always. I think that's why I care about what my team and I do every day. Compliance is vital to the sustainment of our business. It reinforces our senior leaders' commitment to principled performance. We cannot compete effectively and grow our business, if our processes, systems and people are not positioned for maximum success.

I've been blessed with the connections that I have formed throughout my life which started with my parents who fueled my desire to do everything with passion. I wanted to honor them for their sacrifice. My husband is my anchor and my greatest support system. He has shown me the true meaning of partnership. My kids are my pride and joy and they teach me something new every day.

Professionally, I have encountered a lot of people who have impacted me positively and negatively but helped me learn from every experience.

I grew up during an era where assimilation was required. There was a lot of discrimination and not a lot of support for being different. I had to learn to adapt in this environment and did so by compartmentalizing my personal life and my school and professional life. I was not happy because I wasn't truly authentic. What I realized when I started my career is that it's the same person. It's just who I am and the values that I bring to the table. Through sharing my story, I hope I can inspire others to have courage to be the person that they are meant to be.