Executive Insider: 5 Questions for Susan Elkington

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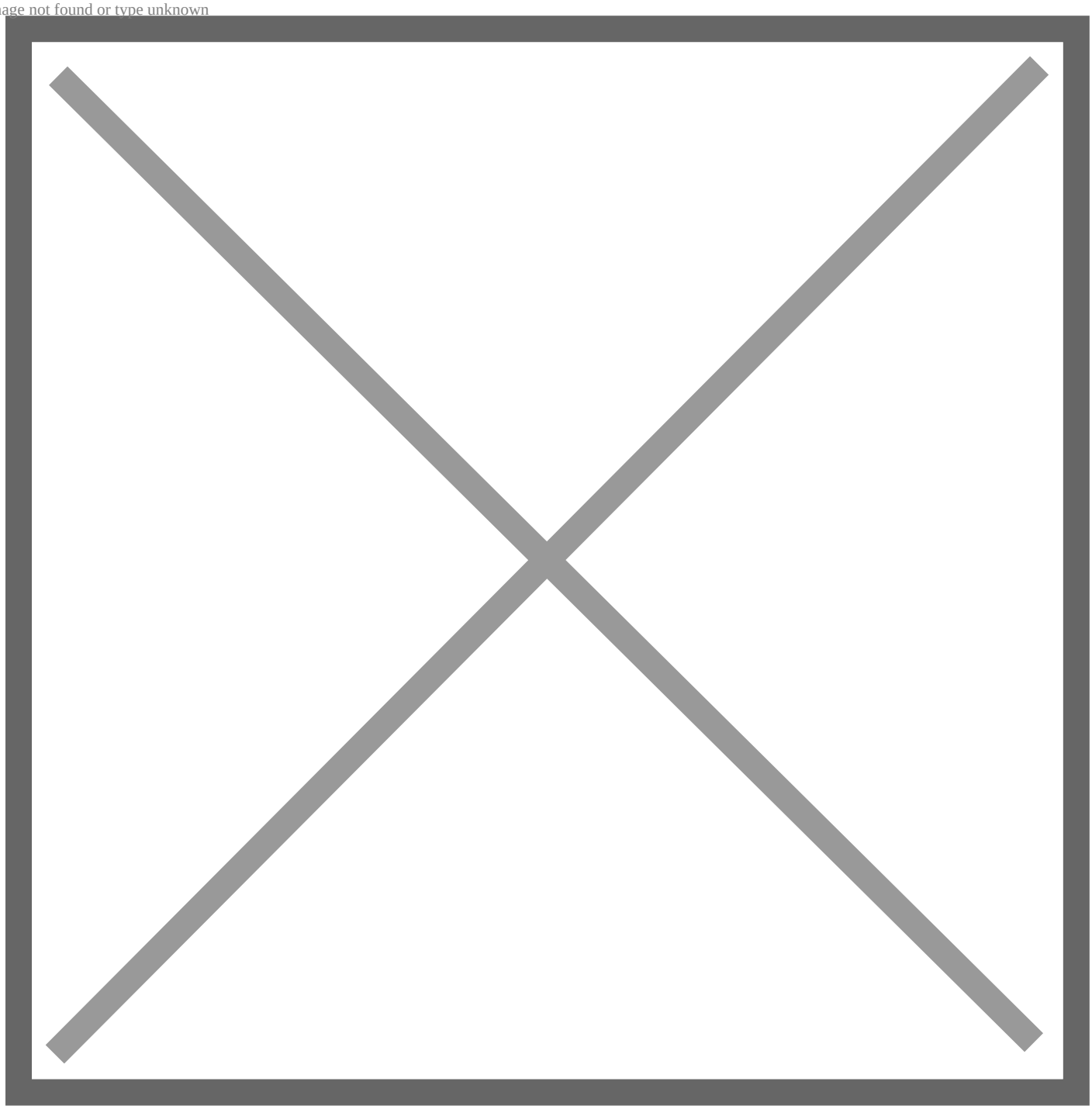

Susan Elkington, president of Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky (TMMK), supervises more than 8,000 employees at the company's largest assembly plant in the country, where the Toyota Camry, Avalon, RAV4 Hybrid and Lexus ES350 are produced.

What stops did you make along the road to president of TMMK?

I worked at TMMI (Toyota Motor Manufacturing Indiana) for 16 years. I started as an engineer in assembly a year before the plant opened. I worked in many different roles: production, maintenance, engineering, administration. Then, I had the opportunity to go to Japan for three years and work at TMC headquarters. I worked with all 53 plants around the world, so I got to see what we do well globally, examine the strengths of North America, and see the opportunities for us to improve.

What's it like overseeing Toyota's biggest U.S. assembly plant?

At first, I thought the sheer size of the facility would be daunting. For example, we have over 240 restrooms at the facility. But the thing that probably hit me the most is the fact that, besides the 8,000 jobs Toyota has here, we've impacted about 25,000 jobs in Kentucky. Since the plant opened in 1986, we have donated more than $114 million to the commonwealth of Kentucky. It's daunting to think that your job and your decisions have such a big impact on the community. And it's not just for the people working there now, but for generations to come.

How can we encourage more girls to pursue engineering and manufacturing as a career?

We need to start giving encouragement early on because influence is very subtle in everything we do. It's not just about women encouraging women, it's about men encouraging women, and men encouraging men to make change. I have a daughter who works as an engineer at TMMI, so I was able to see, even in today's age, what it's like for young girls who have a desire to build, or have a technical type of background, to get through the schools and be allowed to do what they want to do. The same thing must happen inside our facilities.

How do you keep your employees engaged and inspired?

The most important thing is that you're listening and engaging and to realize the value each team member adds to what we do. It's a family. Say you're on the line and you have a vehicle going by every 55 seconds. How do you have time to go and do something else? As leaders, we have to make sure we can tap team members to go offline and give them the tools to implement ideas themselves. We must respect everyone who comes to work by let them know they and their ideas are valued. We must ask the question: How can we take those ideas and make them a reality?

What's your favorite quote?

"I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to you and 90% of how I react to it." Charles R. Swindoll