

How Toyota's Asian American Business Partner Group Celebrates Diversity

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For Toyota's Monica Tieu, being part of a Business Partnering Group (BPG) at Toyota helps her meet new people and make the large company feel a little bit smaller. Plus, Tieu gets to put her skills toward something she really cares about: connecting with her peers and communicating with others about the importance of highlighting diverse backgrounds.

“Being involved in BPGs like TAASiA allows you to pursue passions other than your career,” Tieu says. “I'm very passionate about my work, but I also love being able to apply my project management experience to something else I find fulfilling.”

Toyota's BPGs are employee-driven networks within Toyota based on shared experiences that give team members a place to form inclusive communities and foster professional development, while supporting the business. TAASiA, or Toyota Asian American Society in Alliance, is the BPG for employees of Asian heritage at Toyota.

Now a senior analyst of Project Planning & Management at Toyota Motor North America (TMNA), Tieu has been involved in TAASiA since she first joined the company full-time, almost four years ago. Since January,

she's served on the board as the Marketplace Engagement Chair.

“What’s great about it is you can put in as much time and effort as you want to put in,” she says. “It’s really flexible based on whatever the team member is looking for. TAASiA offers a wide variety of opportunities and ways that members can participate.”

Formed in 2006 when the Toyota headquarters was still located in Torrance, California, TAASiA aims to represent the diverse Asian American cultures and heritages within Toyota through networking opportunities, mentorship programs and community involvement. Like many members, Tieu discovered BPGs by word of mouth. A friend from her co-op program was involved in a different group, Young Professionals, but had volunteered at TAASiA events in the past.

“She told me she had a really great experience planning one of the scholarship events that the group holds in May for Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Month, the API Scholars Event,” she says. “She opened the door for me and from there my interest in TAASiA just took off.”

According to Tieu, Toyota team members usually find the group by recommendation or from TAASiA’s monthly newsletter. That’s where employees can learn about upcoming events and volunteer opportunities. If someone shows interest, Tieu says that the leadership team encourages them to join a committee or volunteer.

“We’re always looking for the future leaders of TAASiA,” she says. “No matter how passionate I am, I’m not going to be in my position forever, right? So we’re always keeping an eye out for who’s next.”



A Year for Growth

As the Marketplace Engagement Chair, Tieu's role involves two prerogatives: business engagement, which mainly involves corporate partnerships, and philanthropy and community involvement. For 2021, Tieu is working on strengthening TAASiA's reach in the local community.

"This year is very much about strategy and setting the foundation," she says. "I'm really passionate about the community and philanthropy piece of it, because I think it's an area where we can really grow and make a difference."

According to Tieu, the group participates in many individual charity events but is looking to have more ongoing relationships with organizations in the Dallas-Fort Worth community. For example, the group plans to expand its AAPI student mentorship program, as well as its partnership with PFLAG, a group that supports the LGBTQ+ community and their families. Both of these groups were part of TAASiA's programming for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month in May.

"We partnered with Spectrum [Toyota's LGBTQ+ BPG] and parents of Toyota to host a one-hour speaker panel event to introduce PFLAG," Tieu says. "It's an organization that provides resources to help parents of LGBTQ+ kids communicate with one another. It's going to be a continuous series, so down the road we'll hopefully have more workshops and things like that."

Like many organizations across the country, TAASiA had to adapt to hosting virtual events. The majority of the group's opportunities relied on big gatherings, like the Lunar New Year celebration and workshops. According to Tieu, the committees worked hard to find creative solutions to keep up participation.

"You have to think outside of the box," Tieu says. "Getting members to participate virtually has been a challenge, but we've been pretty successful so far because we're actively trying to get better. We always want to understand the top challenges our members are facing. Where can we provide more support?"

While the majority of TAASiA's 700 members are in Plano, Texas, the program also has chapters at TMNA's Research and Development Center in Michigan, the North American Parts Center and the Western Region offices in California. Previously, the chapters weren't integrated and didn't join one another's activities, but the virtual environment allowed the group to develop its programming in a way that encourages engagement across the organization.

"In one sense, COVID has brought our community together," she says. "Because people are looking to connect — and now we have more opportunities from other chapters."



Celebrating APAH Month

Another big plan for this year is a speaker series called TAASiA Talks. Kicking off for APAH Month, TAASiA Talks allows any team member from any level in the organization, as well as external members, to speak about a topic they're passionate about. The first in the series is a BPG leaders panel discussion, but after that, Tieu says they're really encouraging anyone interested to sign up to speak. Tieu anticipates that Stop Asian Hate will feature prominently in the inaugural TAASiA Talks.

"Stop Asian Hate has been around for a while now," she says. "Two years or so. But I feel like it wasn't until early this year that maybe we've come to see more of the pain being expressed within the AAPI community."

After the Atlanta shooting in March, the board quickly mobilized to see how they could best support members. TAASiA put together a town hall meeting featuring Toyota Chief Diversity Officer Sandra Phillips Rogers to gather team members in a safe space and hear how the events were impacting their everyday lives.

"That was a prime example of when we had to listen to our membership," she says. "Coming out of that event, we were like, 'This can't be what it takes for us to get together. What are our next steps?' And that helped us create TAASiA Talks and TAASiA Listens."

TAASiA Listens is a series of small group discussions that will provide a safe space for team members to

discuss recent events. While the initial town hall was successful, the board recognized that not everyone is comfortable sharing in a meeting with 600 people, and ongoing, smaller group settings would better help people build relationships.

Tieu emphasizes that while Stop Asian Hate is an important ongoing discussion, APAH Month is first and foremost a celebratory event. Members of TAASiA come from a variety of unique backgrounds, representing many different Asian countries and cultures, and TAASiA's APAH Month programming will primarily focus on education, providing resources and celebrating diversity.

“With APAH Month coming up, we really want to make it about education and highlight diverse backgrounds,” Tieu says. “We know that there's an appetite to learn about the different Asian cultures within the AAPI community, and TAASiA can help by providing the resources and programming to support that.”

“I think education and showing perspective is what really helps in terms of empathy and understanding one another. That's what respect for people is: Having empathy and understanding. Understand that we're all different, but we can stand together.”