

Inclusivity Fuels Toyota's African American Collaborative

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A sense of community, pride and acceptance is what Toyota team members can expect when joining the African American Collaborative (AAC). As pioneers in the space, the AAC is one of the company's first Business Partnering Groups (BPGs) and helped set the stage for explosive growth in these companywide employee-driven networks. Their task was nothing less than to strengthen engagement, inclusion and connection within the workplace and beyond.

When the group launched in 2002 in Erlanger, Kentucky, it was only the second BPG at Toyota. Today there are 13 AAC chapters and counting across the U.S., for a total membership of more than 10,000 Toyota employees throughout North America.

With a stated mission to continuously recruit, develop and retain African American talent while bridging the gap between Black communities and the corporate workplace through community outreach, the AAC is an affinity group that fosters and champions personal and professional growth.

Led by Jovonda Williams, a quality engineering specialist at Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Kentucky (TMMK), who was appointed North American Advisory Council (NAAC) AAC chairperson earlier this spring, the group is dedicated to supporting African Americans at every level—from the talent pipeline and beyond.

“We’re heavy on recruitment with human resources,” says Williams. “One of the biggest conferences that the AAC attends is the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) national convention. In that setting college kids feel more comfortable walking up to the booth because they see, ‘Oh, I can come to this company and not be alone.’ We want to make sure that everyone understands that while you may not see African Americans everywhere you go, we’re here as a resource.”

Cultivating Safe and Supportive Spaces

Williams understands the importance of having a support system in place. Since joining Toyota in 2007 as an engineer in training at Toyota's plant in Georgetown, Kentucky, she has served in various engineering roles. In many cases, Williams has worked in environments where she doesn't see many people who look like her. Today, she is a quality engineering specialist at Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Kentucky (TMMK).

“I’m African American. I’m female. I’m young. I’m an engineer,” says Williams. “And so, I had to ask myself, ‘What do you identify with first?’ I identify first as African American. I think the African American struggle hits a little bit harder than, say, being female or being young. So where do I want to spend my time? Where am I most passionate? Where do I think I can have the most impact? I felt that being a part of the AAC is where I could do that.”

This spring, Williams was able to take that impact to an even higher level, when she was appointed North American Advisory Council (NAAC) AAC chairperson. After joining the group in 2015, Williams actively participated in the AAC for six years, before moving up the ranks of leadership at the BPG. Her passionate involvement and commitment to helping heighten the awareness around African American issues and contributions to society made her a perfect fit for the chair position. But she first needed some convincing — from herself.

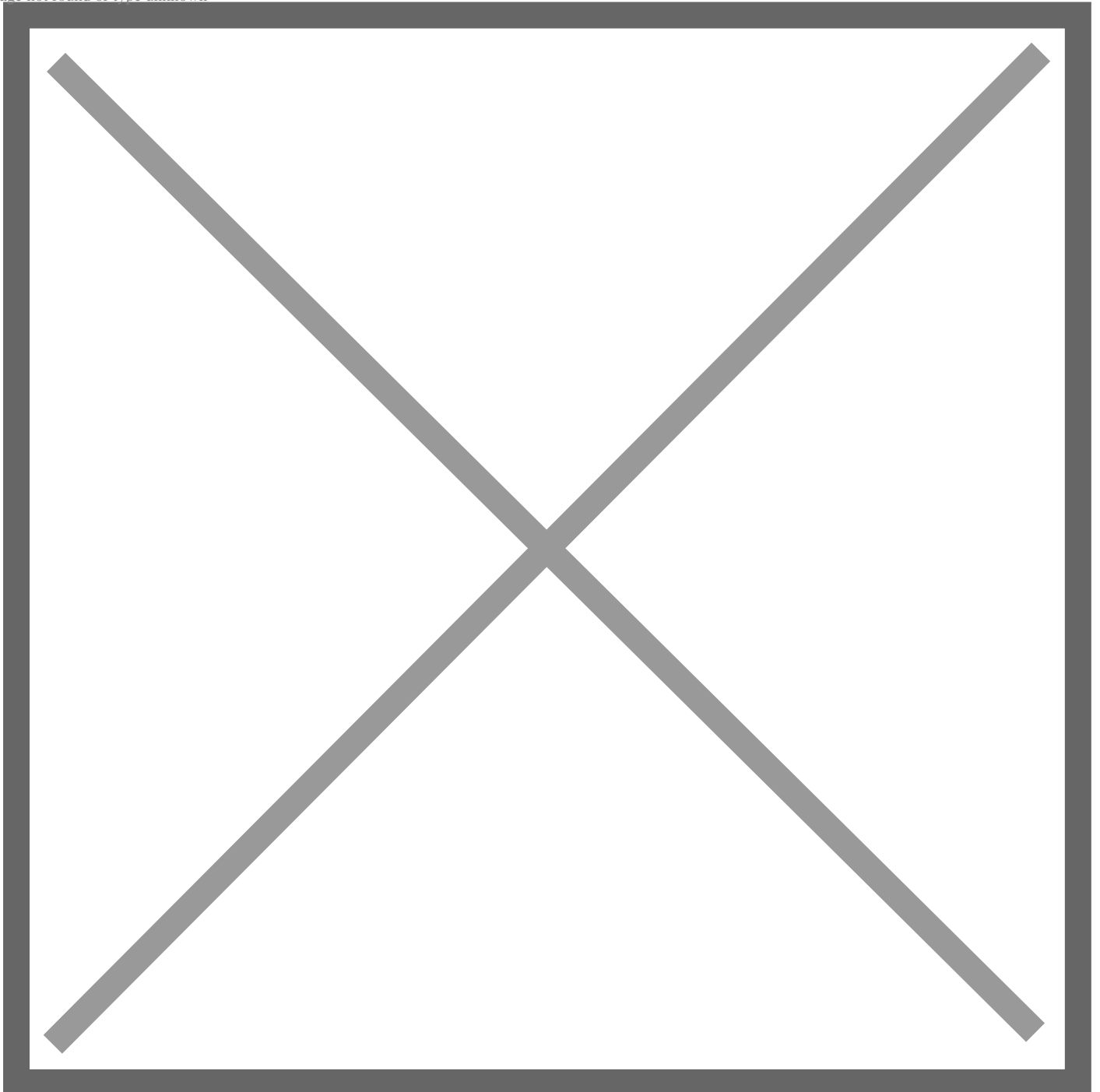
“I was nervous,” she recalls of her new leadership role. “I thought, ‘What did I sign up for? What am I going to do? Am I going to be effective?’ In the end, though, doing the work to develop resources has been amazing.”

While she's still settling into her new position, Williams has her sights set on tackling one of the biggest challenges she believes African Americans face when it comes to the workplace: sponsorship. “I think the biggest issue for African Americans is that there may be a stigma that we aren't ready when it's time to be promoted,” she admits. “In terms of diversity, we see women going to the top. And then we're saying, ‘Hey, but

what about African Americans?’ We can bring a different perspective to the table.”

The group is there to help bring exposure to that perspective. “The AAC’s job is to make sure that we’re ready. So, when it’s time for promotion, when it’s time for development opportunities, when it’s time for rotations, we can go in the room and say, ‘I want you to check out this AAC team member. Trust me, they’re ready.’ I’ve talked to countless people, AAC team members, and they have no idea what sponsorship looks like,” says Williams. “They have mentors, but what’s needed is someone fighting on their behalf.” In other words, a sponsor.

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Driving collaborative efforts

Williams also wants to create a culture of collaboration within the network of affinity groups, explaining, “My vision is to share across borders and collaborate not only within AAC chapters, but also with other BPGs.” “I think that it may not just be African Americans that need to know this. It is good information and doesn’t need to stay with the AAC. Let’s share that with everybody. Everybody needs to know how they can make an impact.” With more than 100 affinity group chapters across Toyota in North America, there’s a lot to share.

And, as an engineer, Williams hopes to incorporate more efficiency into the organization. “I want to make sure that everything the AAC is doing is value added to its members,” she adds. “We don’t want to waste our time, because we have full-time jobs on top of our roles as active group members.” Though streamlining doesn’t mean cutting corners. “I also want to make sure that each chapter has what it needs so we can maintain chapters in 13 different locations and establish chapters where we don’t have them yet,” says Williams.

Ironically, the pandemic has enhanced teamwork and productivity thanks to the widespread use of virtual tools and platforms. In addition to extending BPG membership to contingent and contract workers, Toyota now makes it possible for team members at regional offices too small to support their own chapters, to join larger branches virtually.

This level of inclusion is a testament to the goal of BPGs: cultivating positive environments where mobility for all thrives. It falls under Toyota’s core values, one of which is showing respect for people. Toyota believes engaged team members with diverse perspectives and experiences are crucial to the success of businesses and the communities in which they serve.

Williams is confident that through BPGs like the AAC, Toyota will continue to be a place where employees are encouraged to bring their full selves to work.

“We always want to encourage our team members to be bold,” she says. “We want to ensure that they’re comfortable with speaking their mind.”

Want to learn more about BPGs at Toyota? Read here.

[Employees Drive Inclusion at Toyota Through 100+ Active Resource Chapters Collaborating for Local Change](#)

All photos used within this story were taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.