

Why Susan Elkington and Leah Curry are Encouraging Women in STEM

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When Susan Elkington, president of Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Kentucky (TMMK), got her start in the automotive industry, she had a picture in her head of what a career in manufacturing would look like — then she met Leah Curry, the now-president of Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Indiana (TMMI).

“There weren’t many women in engineering and maintenance, especially at the time,” Elkington says. “I was doing all these things. I was playing golf. I hate golf. It wasn’t until I transferred to Body Weld and Stamping and started working with Leah, one of the few other women in leadership, that I realized I could just be myself.”

Seeing Curry surrounded by her male colleagues in the weld shop — makeup and all — helped Elkington feel like she belonged in her new department. Elkington remembers one day, when the duo were working together, TMMI updated the clothing policy to add more colors, including a pink shirt.

“Leah came to work one day wearing the pink shirt,” Elkington said. “I was like, ‘Oh no, we don’t wear pink in body weld.’ And she said, ‘Oh yes we do.’ Within two weeks, she had all the guys wearing pink.”

Elkington and Curry worked together in the welding shop of TMMI for six years before going their separate ways within Toyota. Though they worked at different plants, the pair continued to be one another’s confidantes and career champions. Today, the women run two of Toyota’s largest automotive plants in the country. Now, Elkington and Curry are focused on encouraging more women to make names for themselves in the automotive industry and explore STEM careers.

“I always say ‘next woman up,’” Curry says. “Where’s the next woman up? The more women we get into these positions, it will make Toyota stronger. As an inclusive work environment, we’re going to understand not only our people better, but also our customers better.”

The Power of Mentorship

Mentorship plays a big role in keeping women in automotive, something that both women understand firsthand. Curry credits Elkington for recognizing her potential early on and encouraging her to apply for open positions, even when she didn’t think she was ready.

“Susan believed in me more than I believed in myself at the time,” Curry says. “When there was an executive position open, she asked me if I was interested. I hadn’t envisioned myself as an executive at all, so she gave me the confidence I needed to see where I could go.”

According to Elkington, it’s a story she sees every day: Women don’t raise their hands to take on new opportunities, not because they don’t want to, but because they assume they aren’t qualified or don’t have enough experience.

“Even within Toyota, we’ve got to continue to support and mentor women,” Elkington says. “This happens over and over again. We have openings for promotions, and I look at the application pool and ask, ‘Why is this person not applying?’ And it’s all about confidence.”

When someone is in your corner, it can make all the difference. For Curry and Elkington, their mentorship — and friendship — has gone both ways over the years, with each pushing the other to take risks.

“As women in this field, we have so much self-doubt,” Elkington says. “So to have someone who can give you those words of wisdom and the confidence to take on new things, that’s invaluable. If you’re not willing to try it, then nobody sees you in roles beyond what you’re doing now. You have to have the courage to take those risks and that’s one of the things Leah has given me — courage.”



Encouraging Women in STEM

But the talent gap spans beyond simply recruiting women into STEM. Misconceptions about manufacturing are a major contributor to the lack of women in automotive, say Curry and Elkington. They believe that many young women don't have a clear idea about what STEM careers actually look like because they are never exposed to them.

“Leah and I are both very strong advocates of STEM education and helping women of diverse backgrounds get into a career they may not have thought about before,” Elkington says. “And that’s not something that’s going to happen naturally. It takes a lot of intentional work.”

Curry and Elkington travel to grade schools and high schools to teach young women and girls about the fun, hands-on features of the job —aspects that some students may not even consider to be STEM. In addition, Toyota gives students tours of the plants and offers an internship program to high school students to help expose young people to the wide range of opportunities available within the industry.

“We have great examples across Toyota of women being successful in so many different areas,” Elkington says. “From marketing to design to production, we can always connect them with somebody.”

Developing the Next Generation of Diverse Leaders

Creating an inclusive work environment isn’t just important because it’s the right thing to do. As Curry says, “it’s also a crucial business priority. Women buy cars, so they have valuable input to contribute to the design and production of those vehicles.”

“We need to be sure we’re getting the best out of all of our members,” says Curry. “We’re a big plant, right? So, if you’re only getting ideas out of 50% of your team members, you’re going to miss out on some game-changing features because a person doesn’t feel comfortable speaking up.”

And those different perspectives will provide impact for a wide range of customers buying each and every product. While Curry takes the time to make sure new hires understand how critical it is for them to share their input, she’s also working with the leadership team to make sure they understand the value of listening to and developing young talent.

“The development of our members is our next generation of leaders, so we have to spend time on it,” Curry says. “We’re doing deliberate development with our high potentials and diverse candidates to make sure we’re giving them the opportunities to shine. You have to talk to people and tell them that they are ready, that they should put in for that position or they’re going to miss the opportunity.”

Over the years, they’ve seen the field change to be more inclusive and open to women, but they’re ready to accelerate that change. Both Curry and Elkington consider helping women succeed in their industry their responsibility, because someone did it for them.

“It’s about all of us succeeding,” Elkington says. “Not one versus the other. We will become stronger and make better changes if we do it together.”

Adds Curry: “If you get more women in levels of leadership, it has a ripple effect. Women need to see it in their field, at their own plants. Because if we can do it, they can do it too.”