Toyota Celebrates Differences Across the Spectrum with Inclusion for LGBTQ+ Employees

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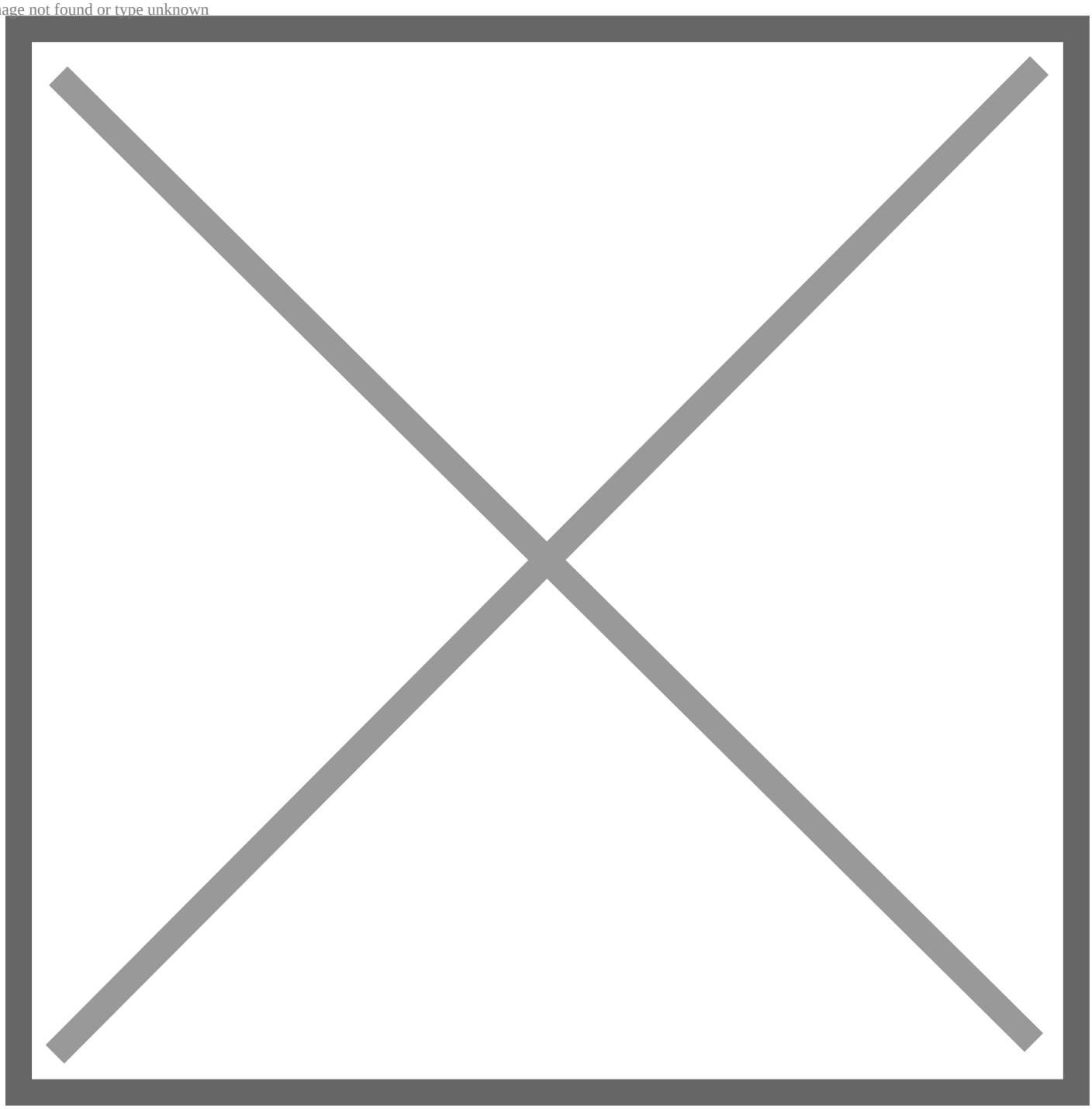


For many LGBTQ+ employees at Toyota, working in a welcoming and inclusive environment that celebrates and promotes individuality is what makes the company feel like a family. In fact, the automaker scored a coveted top 10 spot on Diversity Inc.'s 2021 list of best companies for diversity. Through Spectrum, one of Toyota's Business Partnering Groups (BPGs), LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) team members and their allies have a safe space where they can discuss relevant issues and unique challenges, and get the support they need all year long.

Since launching in 2003, the employee-driven network has remained committed to achieving professional advancement, strengthening business partnerships and improving business results by applying a wide range of skills, talents and passions. It also creates a sense of community and enlarges conversation with executives and the larger workforce.

"Part of our mission is to raise awareness — provide education and support for our LGBTQ+ team members wherever they are at," says Tazia Heyl, a supervisor for Toyota Financial Services (TFS) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Spectrum North America Advisory Council (NAAC) board member and former Spectrum cochair. "We want to help them push through boundaries in their locations and help them understand that they have a safe place within Toyota."

Cultivating a sense of belonging, respect and security is crucial to the success of the group, which currently numbers 11 chapters across the U.S. and Canada. Heyl adds, "We want people to feel comfortable to come to us with hard questions or things that they might feel judged for and have an open dialogue about it."

Promoting Authenticity and Healthy Discourse

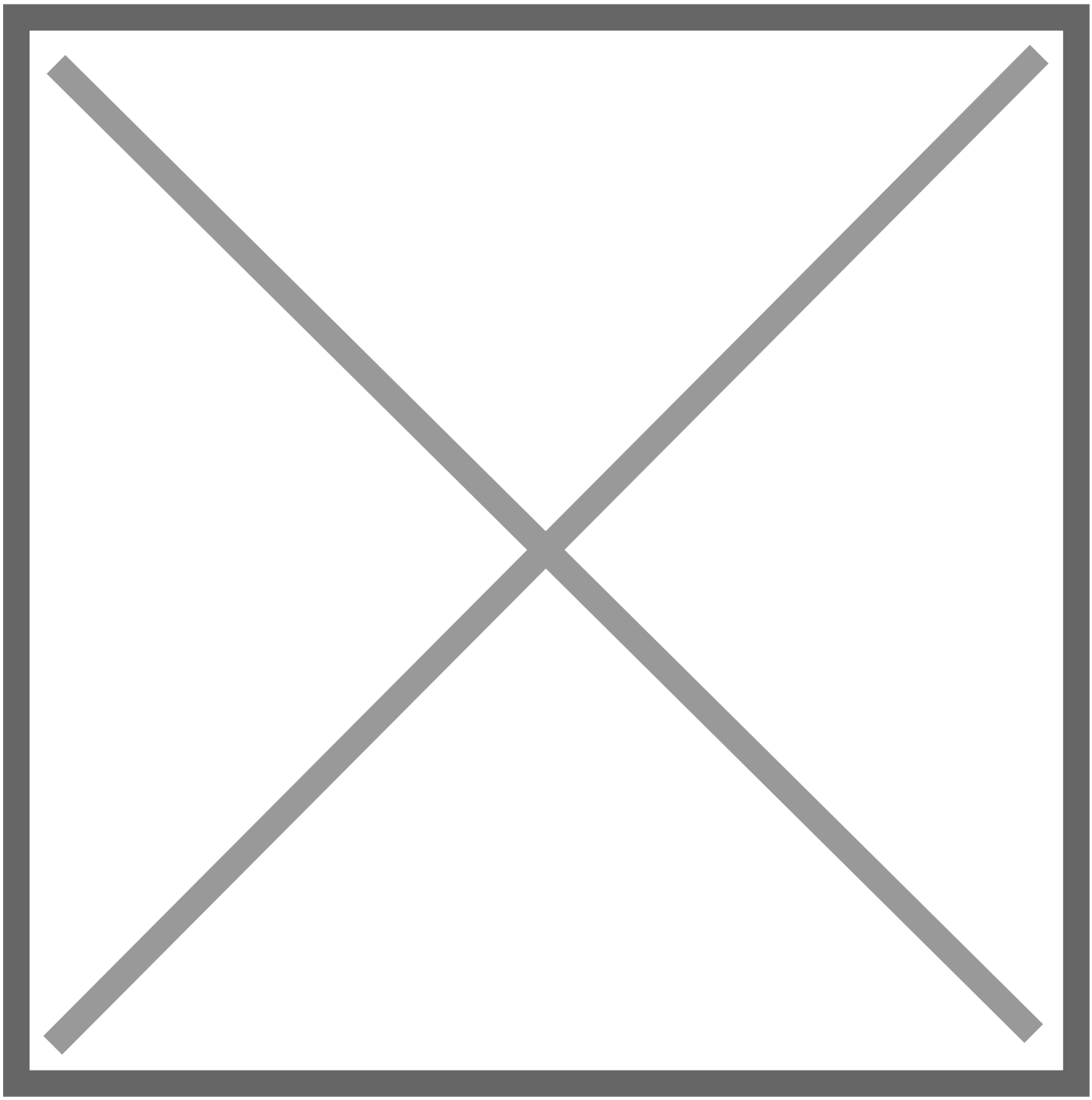
For Kaleb Hall, authenticity is crucial to his sense of self, and full transparency came with what felt like real risks. Hall, quality team leader for Bodyweld pilot at Toyota Motor Manufacturing Mississippi (TMMMS), and a Spectrum NAAC board member, is a transgender male. It took three months for Hall to build up the courage to tell his manager at TMMMS that he was transitioning. But when he finally shared where he was in his process, the support came right away. "Cool," said Hall's manager, who immediately put him in touch with Human Resources to help guide Hall through the transition process.

"The person I saw in the mirror didn't reflect who I was on the inside," he explains. For Hall, it was a journey of self-discovery. "I was always a man on the inside. I wanted my outside body to match that," says Hall.

Two weeks after he transitioned, Hall came to work and found his hard hat with his chosen name on it and two new uniforms freshly embroidered with "Kaleb."

"That kind of thing normally takes six weeks or so. I was in tears. It's one of those moments that reminds you there are good people in the world," he says.

Hall said his experience – encouraged by the positive reactions and support by so many of his colleagues at TMMMS – was a catalyst for him becoming an outspoken person about transgender and other LGBTQ+ topics. "I want to help educate and advocate for those who come out and create a learning process for those who don't understand," Hall said. "We don't understand what we don't know, and that's often what scares us."



Kaleb Hall

Hall’s openness led to his involvement with Spectrum after an encounter with a fellow team member.

“I was walking through the plant one day and was pulled aside by a coworker of mine, who I had no idea even knew I existed,” he recalls. “But because of my visibility and transparency on who I am and what I stand for, they approached me to help them launch Spectrum here in Mississippi. In addition, she asked me to rally the team and try to get the board together to gain the interest of all the team members to get our Spectrum group started, which we did.”

Hall, who's been a Toyota team member for 11 years, credits his success at the company to being true to himself. "When I first started with Toyota, it literally changed my life. I was out. I wasn't hiding who I was, but to be able to work somewhere I knew I was accepted and welcomed and valued just for being me, that was everything. With that, they gave me the opportunity to grow."

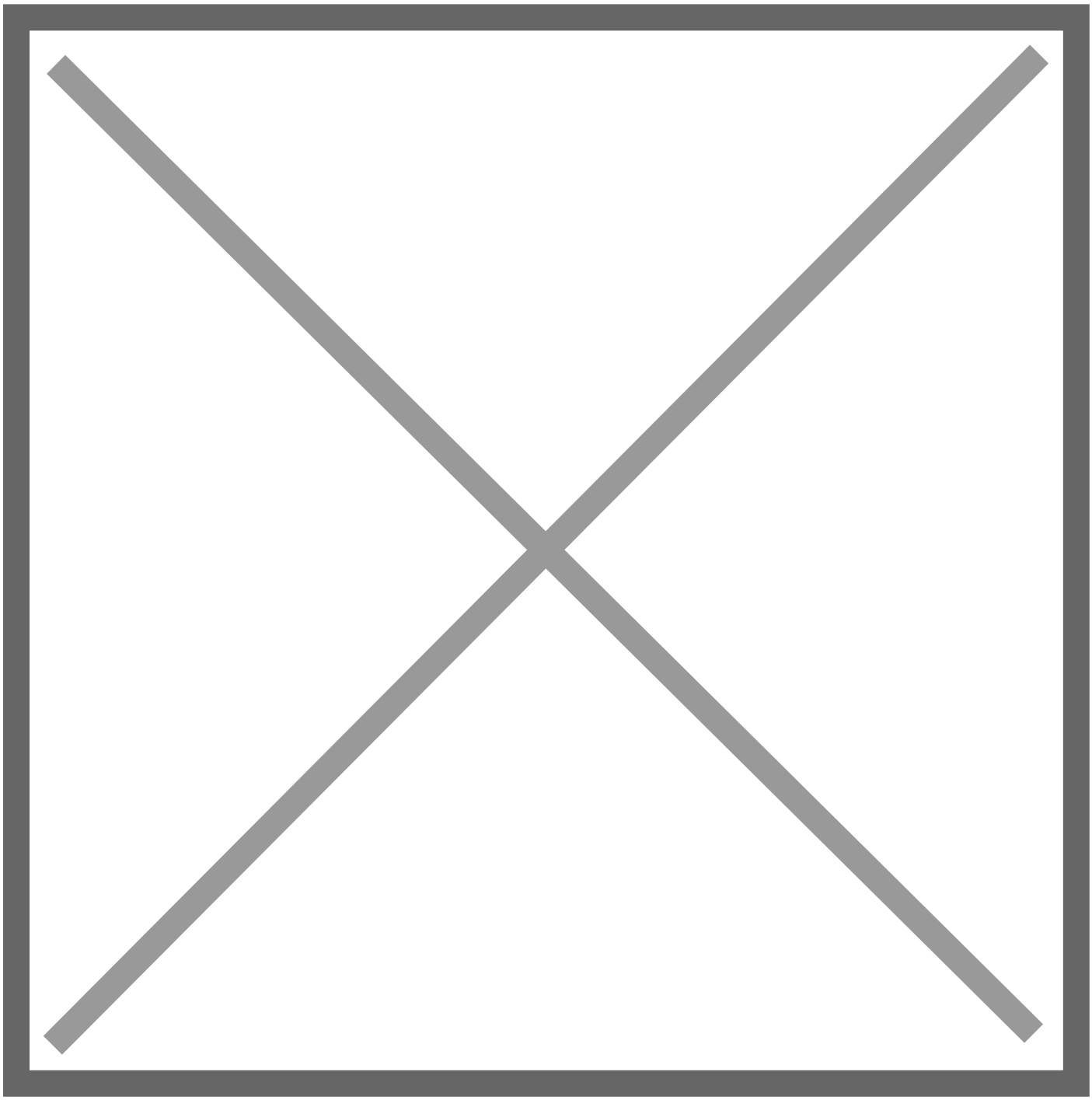
The Spectrum BPG thrives on inspiring and motivating its team members to be themselves, speak up and let their voices be heard. Strong allyship is a key component to developing an atmosphere where team members can feel emboldened to share their experiences, stand in their truth and not feel stifled or alone.

"We want members of the LGBTQ+ community to understand that there are people here that care about them," says Heyl. "There are people here to support them. There are people here to use their voices as a megaphone for our community."

Building Strong Bonds and Allyships

An ally can show up in many supportive ways for marginalized groups, and even small actions can make a difference. For example, something as easy or straightforward as adding preferred gender pronouns to your signature can express allyship and solidarity for the LGBTQ+ community. Spectrum is steadfast in working on implementing self-identification practices across all its chapters.

"I know it seems so very small to have a pronoun in an email, and you're thinking, 'Gosh, how can that make an impact?' But I can tell you that if a recruiter or an HR representative or even somebody sending an email externally includes their pronoun in their email, it's a surefire shining light to any member of the LGBTQ+ community outside of Toyota that says, 'Hey, they get it. They're working to make a difference.'" says Heyl.



Tazia Heyl

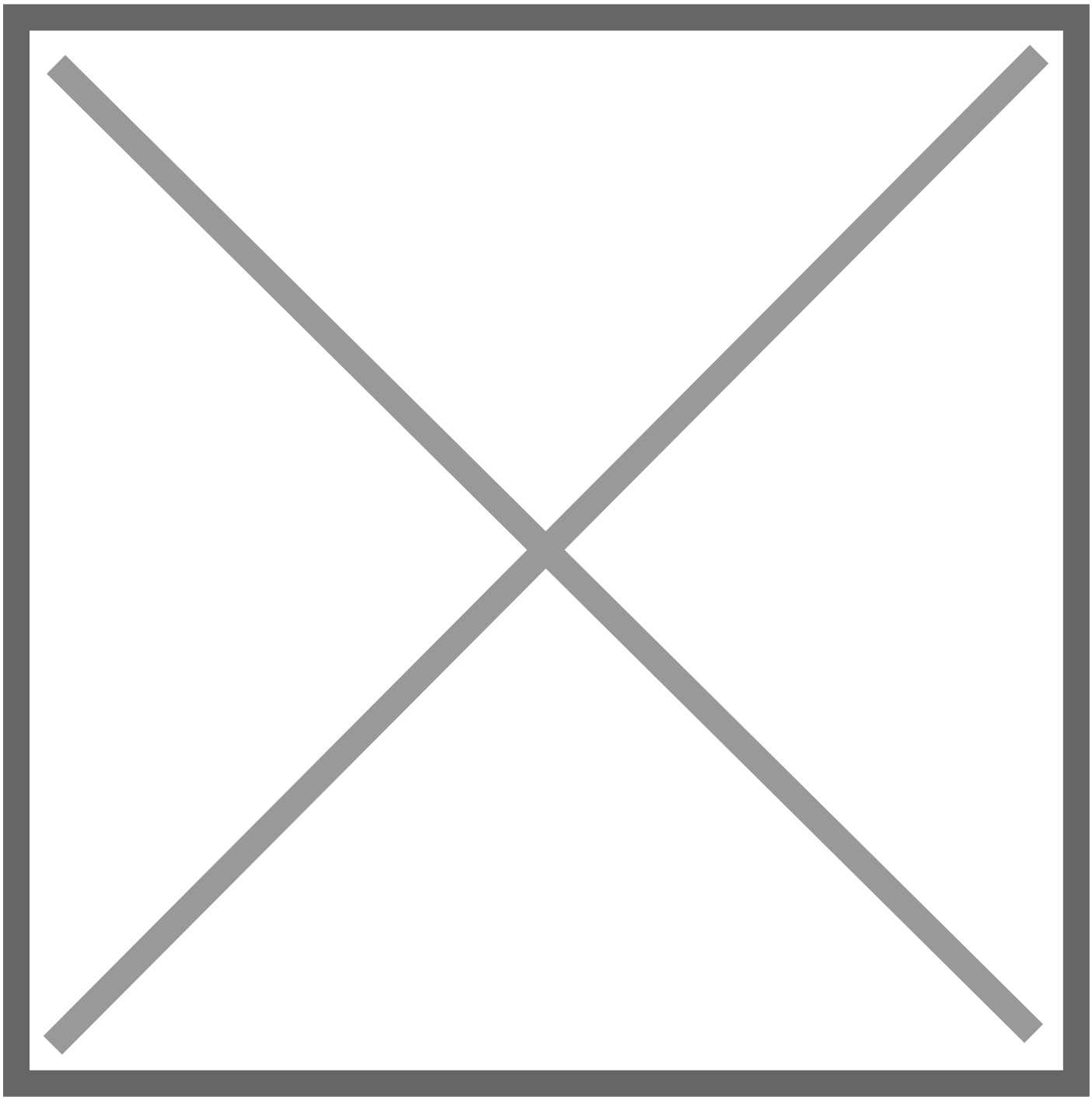
Not only do those supportive actions show solidarity, but they can also spark discussions that lead to teachable moments.

“Including pronouns gives you an opportunity to start or engage in a conversation with someone and possibly capitalize on a learning experience for them,” says Hall. “I travel to many different sites and interact with different team members and management, and so many times they asked me, ‘what do you mean by your pronouns? Why do you have that in your email?’ It opens that dialogue, and it gives me an opportunity to share

with them the diversity and inclusion initiatives that we have here at Toyota and maybe even incite a little bit of fire for them to start something at their site as well. It may seem small, but it's really huge."

A little goes a long way and partnering with allies and other affinities is one of the many ways Spectrum plans to move the organization forward in the year ahead. Intersectionality, specifically, is a primary focus.

"Intersectionality is something we've been working a lot on, especially in the last six months, and something we'll continue over the next year," Heyl explains. "It's important to recognize that there are many different parts of the LGBTQ+ community across many different marginalized groups. We can all work better together if we work to push down those boundaries together."



Driving Positive Initiatives

On the horizon, the group has plans to host informative fireside chats with leaders in the LGBTQ+ community, organize virtual events and participate in prominent panel discussions, in addition to its ongoing retention, recruitment and development efforts. The group is also conducting reverse mentorship programs that reinforce the notion that learning is a two-way street.

“Maybe the mentor is someone on the line or someone doing a lower-job-level type of role and bringing them along, especially as it pertains to LGBTQ+ issues,” Heyl explains. “They get a unique opportunity to provide them things that maybe they didn’t know or maybe things that they forgot.”

Overall, Spectrum’s objective is to continue to be a place where Toyota’s LGBTQ+ employees can feel free to express themselves and embrace their identity, while being accepted and flourishing in a healthy working environment that passionately supports them at every step.

“The ultimate goal is to be the best place to work for all people,” says Hall.