

Reach Latina Evolves from an Act of Allyship

October 06, 2021



When Diana Charbonneau joined Reach Latina, a grassroots development program focused on growing, recognizing and advocating for Latina Toyota employees, she had no idea the impact the group would have on her career.

“Talking to the ladies in this group really encouraged me to broaden my horizons,” says Charbonneau, who recently joined the Toyota Financial Services’ Internal Audit Group as a senior auditor. “The conversations that I’ve had in the group inspired me to make my first rotational move within the company. I don’t know if I would’ve made the move if I hadn’t had this kind of candid support from people who are similar to me, who are my peers, and who are encouraging me.”

Charbonneau’s experience of going from a senior tax analyst to a senior auditor isn’t isolated. It’s one of many examples of why Reach Latina was formed last year. It also shows how Toyota is committed to fostering a diverse and inclusive work environment.

Reaching Back to Drive Careers Forward

Founded by Billie Jo Johnson, general manager of KINTO Link, the original Reach initiative launched in 2018 as an executive-led, grassroots program focused on development, strategic networking and impact for women of color, starting with African American women with the intention of expanding into other diverse segments at

Toyota.



Billie Jo Johnson, founder, Reach

During this time, Johnson had become the first African American woman to reach an executive level at Toyota Financial Services. However, that same year, her son was involved in a tragic accident – making it difficult to navigate her career and personal life. One day, while reflecting on the North American Women’s Conference in which the key message was centered on hurdles that women face while trying to navigate their careers confidently, Johnson was inspired to establish the Reach program and help other women overcome challenges and grow.

“I just thought, I cannot be the only female dealing with this — trying to balance work, trying to balance home life, dealing with situations that were hard to deal with — all at the same time,” she says. “So, as I went through that, I felt like there are probably others in the organization who need me, who can connect with my journey and get the support that they need while they’re on their journey, not having all the answers.”

Sparking a Wave of Change

And she was right. Year after year, the program has grown organically by word of mouth, and approximately 60% of Reach participants have realized career growth, or advancement, since its inception. The program caught the attention of many employees, including Tania Saldana, a Latina and former manager of Mobility Communications at Toyota

During the social justice movement of 2020, Saldana wanted to do more but wasn’t sure where to start. Then, after reading about Johnson in Toyota’s 2019 Diversity & Inclusion report, she got her answer.

“I reached out to her, and I said, ‘I read about your Reach initiative. Have you considered expanding to support and advocate for Latina women at Toyota?’” she recalls. Johnson’s response was swift and supportive. The two joined forces in 2020 to develop Reach Latina, and the rest is history.

Accelerating Careers, Celebrating Heritage

That kind of allyship and collaborative approach demonstrates what Reach and all its branches stand for. Today, Reach Latina boasts nearly a dozen members, including Charbonneau and Laura Martinez, a learning master at Toyota Financial Services Digital Academy. Martinez credits the program for advancing her career at Toyota and allowing her to be vulnerable while honoring her culture.



Diana Charbonneau, senior auditor, Toyota Financial Services' Internal Audit Group

“At first, I felt like I didn’t necessarily need to call out my Hispanic roots to be successful,” she admits. “Reach Latina is a great group of women supporting other women with similar backgrounds and circumstances. We take the filter off and share our struggles, ask for help and trust the group to give good advice and suggestions.”

Listening Ears and Helping Hands

Candid conversations, development and growth are the cornerstones of the program. Reach Latina cultivates a safe space where open dialogue and unfiltered communication flourish. The welcoming environment creates a place where participants can freely express their challenges and successes to help them develop personally and professionally. Unlike other affinity groups, it’s individual-based, where Latinas can share their personal stories and solicit advice and support from other members.

“Reach exists because there was an opportunity and a gap,” says Saldana. “It’s filling the void for people like us who need the community and peer-to-peer mentorship.”

Charbonneau and Martinez understand firsthand the benefits of belonging to a group that offers support and advocacy on a regular basis.



Laura Martinez, learning master, Toyota Financial Services Digital Academy

“Once you’re in an environment where you’ve got other like-minded people that are cheering you on, it’s just an incredible experience,” says Charbonneau.

Martinez, who was recently promoted, adds, “I feel like we lock arms together helping each other from one challenge to the other and then celebrating that challenge the next time we meet.”

That level of passion, enthusiasm and commitment is what makes Reach Latina a free-flowing program that isn’t measured by KPIs or other corporate benchmarks. It encompasses three components: career coaching, mentorship and sponsorship. Reach Latina exemplifies Toyota’s commitment to diversity and inclusion and the belief in equality, respect and inclusivity for all people.

“We all deserve to be heard, to be supported, to have opportunities to grow, to be seen, to be unafraid and to have a voice,” says Johnson. “So, I believe Reach is sitting right on the principles and the values of this organization.”

A Name That Speaks for Itself

The word-of-mouth program’s name isn’t an acronym as many would assume — it’s literal. “I planned that word very intentionally because I wanted it to be accessible to anyone who needed me so that they could reach me,” Johnson explains. “I wanted to reach people who had not been reached before and those who were struggling. I wanted to figure out how I could reach them to keep them encouraged and to advocate for them.”

The program not only reaches people seeking guidance or support, but it also gives them confidence and a new outlook. They also reach out to help each other.

“When I announced my promotion to Reach Latina, someone said, ‘You give us hope,’ and that made me emotional,” Martinez recalls. “The transparency part of it was I wasn’t really sure why we needed a Reach Latina group because Reach was doing well. But, in that moment, I realized that what they saw was hard work and effort – it’s not going to be overlooked. We can be valued for our differences. We have hope.”