

Toyota's New Chief Diversity Officer Tellis Bethel on Respect for All

September 14, 2023

Image not found or type unknown



Making it on DiversityInc's Top 50 Companies for Diversity is a major accomplishment for any company. For Toyota's [Tellis Bethel](#), group vice president, chief Social Innovation officer and the newly appointed chief diversity officer, the recognition is a testament to the company's pillar of Respect for People.

He recently sat down to discuss his new role, Toyota's Driving Possibilities initiative and the company's mobility goals. Bethel spoke candidly about these topics, as well as the importance of taking risks to help drive career growth.

DiversityInc named Toyota as one of the 2023 Top 50 Companies for Diversity. What does that mean to you?

Bethel: All the efforts of our company, individual employees and us as a whole, are not going unnoticed. It's ingrained in our fabric of what we do. Whether it's looking at advancement, metrics, retention stats, how all our employees contribute to one thing, it's great to get the external recognition. It's great when the results justify all the actions — this is who we are overall.

The internal fabric for us is respect for all people, and I think it shows. We started at very modest beginnings of filling out a survey, and trying to demonstrate some of the work we did, almost two decades ago. It's great to see the trajectory Toyota has been on.

It's not just about the end result, though. Do we really feel good about what we're doing? Look at things like the North American Women's Conference (for employees) and our work with Special Olympics. These types of things come together and help Toyota be a beacon within the corporate space.

I can't tell you how many times members of Social Innovation* were out in the communities and were told, "Hey, we've noticed that you've done this. Is there something we can learn from you or take from you?"

So, sharing those best practices and lessons learned — we think that's our overall contribution to society. Not just where we show up in a ranking, but do we feel good about the work and can we pay it forward to our communities?

Tell us about D&I Month at Toyota.

Bethel: It's in the month of August, as we normally celebrate it. And it's a mix of activations, enrichment series and just plain fun. We have a speaker series. We have different contests. Our employees love the gamification of things. And then again, awareness. And so, people from all walks of life, whether it be from sports, people with disabilities, awareness around different cultural differences. And, really, the theme of celebrating how we are more alike than we are different.

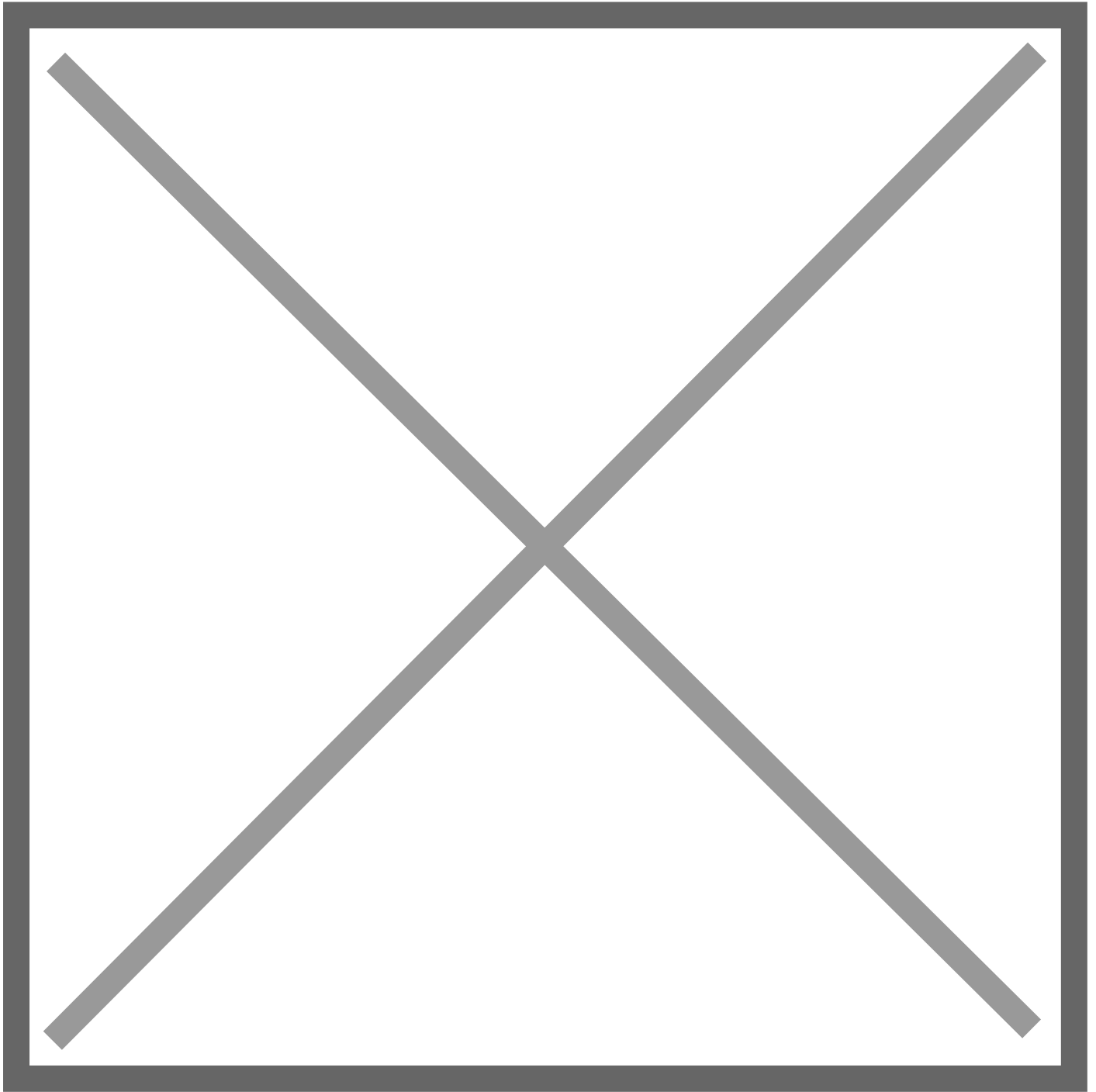


How does Social Innovation help with Toyota's goal of Mobility for All?

Bethel: It's interesting that Mobility for All has become a catchphrase for everything, right? It truly is everyone, not just some people. And so, for Social Innovation, we try to be very intentional and deliberate about where we focus our energy and resources. So, whether that be toward education, strategic investments, something of a traditional philosophy — philanthropy — but we think of it as strategic investments, our diversity and inclusion activities, as well as social mobility and getting people from point A to point B. I think normally we go about our lives and think, "Okay, someone just shows up for school and they're ready to learn." Well, how do they get to

school? Were they fed before? Did they have the appropriate resources so they can be in the right mindset in order to be able to learn and be the sponge of knowledge?

Social Innovation is tasked with understanding the needs of both our employees as well as our external engagements with our partners and communities to figure out where Toyota can best serve.



Tell us about Toyota's Driving Possibilities initiative.

Bethel: Within the company, Driving Possibilities has become synonymous with education, which is a wonderful thing. We're working alongside the school districts to help prepare youth for the careers of tomorrow. I want to make that clear distinction:

We work *side by side* with the school districts, the schools, industry, local and national nonprofits, and the community to make sure that we are more specifically focusing on science, technology, engineering and math — or STEM — type of curriculum for the children who are in these schools. And that's all the way from K through 12. It's a partnership and a holistic collaboration.

How did you get started in the automotive industry?

Bethel: I heard about Toyota and the great reputation of the brand as I was studying companies and trying to figure out where I was going to take my finance background from school. Toyota had a great presence on my campus at the time.

When I visited the facilities in Torrance, California, people weren't just talking about cars and their product. It kind of spoke for itself, but it was the authenticity and the genius of the people.

You start talking to one person, two people, or a few groups, over a couple of days, and you're like, "Wait a minute. I think there's some truth here. This is genuine."

We all have backgrounds that lend themselves to different industries, but as I got into it, I fell in love with it. You think of it as a traditional manufacturer and all our great plants and all the great work our employees do, but there's work at corporate headquarters as well that supports that.

When you're looking at what we're providing as a service, and as we're moving more into becoming a mobility company, actually having a bevy of services in addition to our product — the sky's the limit.

Is there any advice you would share with professionals who might want to follow in your footsteps?

Bethel: Take calculated risks. As you advance throughout life, you don't want to be left with would have, could have, should have.

Perhaps something didn't work out, but at least you know. I think a lot of times the unknown is what really tugs at our heart over the thought, "That didn't work out incredibly well, but maybe I learned something from it."

But understand that sometimes, giving yourself an opportunity to access additional experiences could ultimately lead you to a better path.

That's the beauty of our careers. The unknown is exciting.