

Our Point of View: Walk the Line

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by Steve St. Angelo

I began my automotive career 36 years ago as a production team member at GM's Fisher Body Fleetwood plant in Detroit. My start on the assembly line taught me what quality means and the hard work it takes to achieve it – and it still fundamentally shapes my approach to what I do.

As Toyota's Chief Quality Officer for North America and Chairman of Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Kentucky, Inc. (TMMK) – our largest manufacturing facility outside of Japan – I still make a point of walking the shop floor nearly every day. There's no better way to get a true understanding of what it takes to build a great product than to see it happen up close and talk with the people who build our cars and trucks.

Our 35,000 North American team members are the experts at building quality into our products. Nobody knows their job better or knows better how to improve it – and every one of them has my thanks for the way they're stepping up personally. This year alone, our team members here have come forward with nearly 1,000 ideas to improve quality and safety, many of which we're already implementing.

The quest for continuous improvement is one of the cornerstones of Toyota's manufacturing success – and it's reflected in the more than 70 top safety ratings Toyota, Scion and Lexus products have earned in the past decade from the [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

It's a commitment that goes right to the top of our company, as I heard for myself when our president, Akio Toyoda, called me earlier this year. He asked me to be bold, frank, transparent and very direct in my new quality role because, he told me, Toyota will never compromise the safety of our vehicles. He urged me to “listen to the voices of our customers” and I now talk to Toyota owners directly every day. It gives me a better understanding of what they like and don't like about their vehicles. As we work to serve them better, we're deeply grateful to our customers for their support.

It was important for me to hear Akio Toyoda's words directly from him. He has pledged to make Toyota a more responsive, safety-focused organization. We're following through in a big way across our global operations and here in the U.S. by listening more closely to our customers and responding more quickly to their concerns.

One of my key responsibilities as Chief Quality Officer is to empower our people to ensure an even sharper focus on quality assurance from a customer perspective – from design and vehicle testing through to after-sales service and support.

When I first came to Toyota back in 2005, the executives I worked with instilled in me the guiding principles of the Toyota Production System. What we're doing today throughout our company is refocusing on what the Toyota Production System is all about. One of its guiding principles is genchi genbutsu, which loosely means “go and see for yourself.” It means being a leader who digs in, gets his hands dirty, and makes decisions on the ground, close to the action. I do not believe I can succeed at that just by working in an office and going to meetings. That's why I walk the line.

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