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TOA-USA focuses on building quality products and quality jobs in Mooresville

Bob Whyte
Vice President Operations and Quality



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By Elaine Whitesides

Morgan County Business Leader

When you shipped 19,888,398 pieces to Subaru and 13,113,628 pieces to Toyota in 2015, have more than 1,200 employees, and operate a plant with more than a million square feet under roof, keeping it simple takes on a whole new meaning – and importance. Based on the success and growth TOA-USA has experienced since first coming to Mooresville in the year 2000, Owner Shinichi Iizuka and President Junichiro Kondo and their management team have orchestrated simplicity into a symphony.

TOA-USA, LLC is a supplier of body structure and suspension components to the automotive industry. Those components are produced through three processes: Stamping, Welding, and Electro Deposition Coating. Sounds simple enough, but to produce the high quality parts to meet the defined specifications of the customers takes a tremendous number of qualified people and well-maintained machines, presses, and robots working cooperatively in harmony with each other.

To achieve that, company management is based on LEAN Manufacturing philosophies through Total Productive Maintenance (TPM). Continual improvement and refinement of work is achieved through the reduction and elimination of waste in materials, processes and even the number of steps between work stations, called cells in the facility. “If associates think they have a better process (called Kaizen),” said Vice President of Operations and Quality Bob Whyte, “we review that and may or may not implement. If it’s more efficient and does not adversely affect quality or safety, then it’s a good move.”

Associates are recognized and rewarded for positive contributions and for identifying defects on the floor before they are shipped. The philosophy is that every employee contributes to quality and efficiency.

Quality products manufactured by quality employees

Like many other businesses, TOA-USA employees are very important to the success of the company. Not only does the business bring jobs, but they bring opportunity to residents of the community. When TOA-USA first located in Mooresville, they offered 220 jobs to the county. Now, after eleven expansions, tripling the square footage of the plants, TOA employs more than 1,200 workers and they are building to a workforce of 1,300. The majority of jobs available are for skilled positions like machine, die and facilities maintenance, which are a challenge to fill here as well as it is nationally.

To meet the challenge, TOA works with local staffing agencies Staffmark and Energeo. “We carry a temporary workforce,” Whyte said, “but we want to fill every position, which are all full-time, permanent jobs.”

“We are in a factory situation,” Whyte explained. “Manufacturing is repetitive work. We rotate associates to change up some of the routine and some of the heavier, more physical work.”

Another aspect of TOA employment is that TOA promotes from within and trains employees, which are called associates. TOA maintains that “our basic philosophy of personnel training is to foster growth among all employees together, or in other words, ‘mutual growth.’”

Upon hire, all associates attend TOA School, a five-day pro-



District 60 Representative Peggy Mayfield, TOA CEO Shinichi Iizuka, Governor Mike Pence at expansion ground breaking ceremony

gram, where, in addition to exposure to the TOA Basics – 9 Rules to Live and Work By, associates are schooled about safety on the floor, processes and standard operating procedures for quality. Associates are provided with hands-on training that simulates exactly the work they will be doing on the floor in their work center and where that fits in the larger picture. This allows them to get answers to any questions they have as well as being familiar with the work processes prior to actually beginning to work in the production area.

“It’s important that we have processes,” said Whyte, “and that each process is followed exactly because it is a proven process. If associates deviate, they can make defects and not realize it. We want to make sure that the customer is provided with a quality product.”

“We team up with associates with talent and desire to give them formal training to get them on the same level with experienced workers,” said Whyte. “Right now we have five machine maintenance people going to classes at Vincennes University for 12 to

15-week courses.”

Whyte himself is a product of the philosophy of promoting from within. He was the fourth employee hired by Iizuka when TOA-USA was still an empty field. He had graduated from the University of Michigan and gone into the automotive industry specializing in information management systems and quality control. He located to Indiana in 1988 and moved to Mooresville in 1994. In 2001 he joined TOA-USA. Over the next 15 years he moved up into his current position.

Working at TOA in management is like working at many other companies in that there is a strong connection with the company headquarters. However, in this instance, headquarters is a world away. Communication is a challenge; not just because of the differences in language and culture, but in time. The company employs several translators and interpreters in both Japan and Mooresville to facilitate conversation, but Japan is in another time zone. When it is morning in Mooresville, it is late night there. So Whyte says he works a lot of early mornings with meetings at 6

TOA (USA), LLC

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a.m., which is 7 p.m. there. It's the best time for everyone.

Iizuka has a home in Mooresville where his wife and family lived with him during the first years of TOA-USA. Both his daughters attended Mooresville High School. Whyte explained what an important part Iizuka played in developing the culture and standards at TOA-USA. "He was working here every day from the beginning. He did a lot of the training with the core members of the original team. We met daily and he taught the TOA Basics and how he wanted the plant run."

TOA is a third-generation company, having been established by Iizuka's grandfather in 1942 and starting production after the war in 1947. Iizuka was called back to Japan to take over the entire TOA operation on both sides of the world, but still maintains a home here and continues to spend at least one week every month in Mooresville. It's not uncommon for him to be on the floor meeting and shaking hands with associates, thanking them for their efforts and contributions.

Whyte meets with all staff and associates every Monday to keep the entire plant apprised of what's happening. He said, "We discuss what happened the previous day, the economy. We talk about everything." In addition, Whyte says it is his time to reinforce the TOA Basics and connect with people personally. "When you can keep it simple, it works. The other thing we try to do is keep it visual. We do have different cultures, a diverse workforce, and pictures explain a lot that perhaps words cannot. Pictures are understood. We do it so people understand better."

Speaking of understanding, it is common for people in the local community to think TOA stands for 'Toyota of America,' which is incorrect. Part of the confusion is that TOA provides components to Toyota in Indiana and Kentucky as well as other plants in North America. But TOA, in Japanese, actually means 'east of Asia.'

Quality products in a quality location

TOA provides a lot of the safety and crash protection parts such as the passenger cabins, parts of the roof, bumper beams, and the doghouse (engine compartment) for the Subaru Legacy and Outback to protect the passengers of the vehicle. Both vehicles have high safety ratings from the Insurance Institute of Highway Testing. TOA is proud of the part they play in developing materials that result in greater strength for safety and are lighter to improve gas mileage. Their engineers are part of the development team regarding suspension and chassis parts, which are integral components to the comfort and handling of the vehicles, too.

Not only is there great pride in the products manufactured in the plant, there is a great fondness for the place TOA-USA calls home. Iizuka and Kondo traveled the Midwest looking for a site to build that was within a certain radius of miles from Subaru in Lafayette, Ind. They settled on three good options.

Whyte related the story Iizuka tells about a trip he made to Kroger in Mooresville. All the shopping carts were put away. That demonstrated to him that Mooresville was a good community to live in. He liked the way people treated him at the store and how he was treated by the community leaders showing him properties that were available for the plant. Those experiences, the financial viability, along with the fact that the area reminded him of Ota City, Japan, home of the other TOA plant in Japan, convinced him Mooresville was the best choice.

TOA has been a strong community supporter of Morgan County organizations since their arrival on the scene in 2000. A scholarship is awarded to a Mooresville High School student annually and, Whyte said, "Where we see a need and it works in our budget, we do it. Sometimes it's not a financial donation, like last year we were able to provide 150 turkeys to Churches in Mission."

In addition to contributions, TOA has sponsored a teacher trade program during which three teachers from Mooresville Community schools visit Japan and its schools for about a week to see how education is delivered in Japan as well as the sites and cultures of the home place of TOA.

TOA has been a quiet neighbor for most of its residence in Morgan County. However, Whyte says he is excited to share the TOA story with the community. He said, "There are many opportunities to grow in the facility to make a good living and life. We are bringing up our associates and teach them skilled trades. There is a lot of opportunity.

"We are proud to be investing in employees and the community."



Bob Whyte