Team Toyota: Transplanting the Toyota Culture to the Camry Plant in Kentucky
Terry L. Besser

Since the early 1980s and the arrival of the first Japanese auto assembly transplants, industry executives, union officials, journalists, and researchers across the ideological spectrum have argued the merits of Japanese manufacturing and management practices, their potential contribution to U.S. competitiveness, and whether or not such practices are good or bad for workers.

Sociologist Terry Besser has written a detailed case study of Toyota’s Georgetown, Kentucky plant which manufactures the best-selling Camry. Neither scathing nor laudatory, the book offers a middle-ground assessment of Toyota’s system of production and employee relations. Besser attempts to develop a theory (more a conceptualization) which explains “how Toyota is re-creating its form of management and team culture in its Georgetown plant” (p. 2). For data she employs a variety of company publications, local and national newspaper reports, secondary sources related to Toyota and Japanese management practices, personal observations as an invited guest to company functions, and 36 in-depth interviews with a cross-section of employees. Excluding the voices of workers has been a major shortcoming of industrial sociology in recent years.

The first three chapters provide a foundation for the case study. The author compares and contrasts Western and Japanese management practices. She then discusses the growing scholarship on how the internal organizational features of Japanese firms contribute to company success. First, Ronald Dore’s “welfare corporatism” highlights employee empowerment, job security, job enrichment, and consequent employee commitment and organizational goal achievement. Second, Parker and Slaughter’s “Toyotist” school focuses on “management by stress” and worker exploitation. Third, an engineering-oriented group stresses innovative production technology, attention to detail, and continuous improvement. Finally, a hybrid system, called “lean production,” combines innovations in production techniques with progressive human resources practices.

From these academic debates, Besser turns her attention to Toyota of Japan. Still family-controlled since its inception in 1937, the company is the fifth largest industrial company and the third largest auto producer in the world. Georgetown, Kentucky, about 15 miles from Lexington, is the site of Toyota Motor Manufacturing (TMM) which began producing Camry’s in 1988.

TMM, like other transplants, is nonunion and employs a young, well-educated, and inexperienced work force drawn largely from Kentucky. Although the president of TMM is Japanese, the presence of the Japanese has declined significantly since the plant opened. Still, each department maintains a Japanese coordinator and plantwide there is a small coterie of Japanese trainers.

TMM operates with a flat hierarchy where 67 percent of plant personnel are line workers, 14 percent are team leaders, 4 percent are group leaders, and only 14 percent perform administrative duties. Workdays are controlled by a rigid schedule: “[f]rom 6:30 (a.m.) until the break most team members repeat the same job approximately every sixty seconds. . . . The Toyota goal is constant work (100 percent) with no breathers during the two hours and fifteen minutes between breaks” (p. 40). The pace and intensity of work is no different for managers and specialists. And unlike typical American management practices, TMM’s white-collar personnel do not get any additional benefits or perquisites under its egalitarian culture.
One employee summed up working at TMM as follows: "You'll be expected to kill yourself for Toyota and you'll be paid a decent wage" (p. 47). An office employee echoed this sentiment when she revealed that "it takes a very special type of person to work in the Toyota office environment because of the open office setting — it being so hectic and stressful... A person has to be able to handle the stress, work well under pressure, and be willing to work hard..." (p. 47).

What accounts for Toyota's success in the U.S. and abroad? To answer this question, the author presents a theoretical framework — the concept of "team," defined as "people who work together for the common good" (p. 50). The team "is central to understanding the internal functioning of (TMM)... It is a primary element in the Toyota philosophy, an integral part of workers' daily interactions with each other and with the organization as a whole... It must be regarded as the central theme of Toyota culture..." (p. 49). Using team as a starting point, Besser shows how the Toyota culture is reproduced and tailored to American norms, laws, and values. It is this investigation which comprises the core of the book.

Her conceptualization of "Team Toyota" includes three elements: the work team, the company team (TMM), and the corporate team. The work team is comprised of 4 to 5 production members. Three or four of these teams form a group. Each team and group is headed by a leader. TMM encourages teamwork on the job through interventions which begin prior to team formation. For example, an intensive pre-hire screening process ensures worker compatibility with the system; a week-long orientation stresses teamwork skills, the Toyota philosophy, and various job-specific skills. Team members are afforded a certain degree of job freedom and responsibility for assigned tasks, albeit within a standardized assembly regimen. TMM's equal pay policy and job rotation encourage feelings of equality and cooperation among team members. Through its "Personal Touch" program, which provides money for employee social functions, the push for close-knit work groups extends beyond the workplace.

The essence of the "Company Team," the second major category of her theory, is that "all employees of the organization (TMM) share a common fate, work for the same goal, and put aside differences that arise between individuals and groups of employees... for the benefit of all" (p. 86). There are a number of elements which make up the company team. For example, the staffing process, the reward structure, and the leveling of hierarchical distinctions are supported by a strong human resources (HR) department that ensures consistent implementation of company policies. Each department maintains a HR representative who functions like a union steward and gives employees more power than they would otherwise have.

TMM engages in open, two-way communications. Economic and industry-related information are constantly fed to workers and are designed to highlight common external threats; regular opinion surveys and a hotline attempt to gauge workers' sentiments. Open communications make the relationship between work effort, organizational success, and job security more salient to employees. Finally, by bending the rules to accommodate individual needs, the company signals to employees that they matter and helps to link the ideology of community of fate with organizational goal achievement. However, Besser contends that getting workers to buy into the community of fate hinges on the "rather fragile, amorphous trust" that employees place in TMM.

The "Corporate Team" comprises the entire "family of organizational entities who work cooperatively together and have a sense of belonging together" (p. 111). Such entities include both American and Japanese Toyota facilities, their suppliers, other subsidiaries, and any organization having dealings with corporate Toyota. At TMM, workers become familiar with it in a variety of ways: financial resources extended to TMM; a technological legacy; and Toyota's culture, history, and philosophy.