

## Recall woes challenge lean 'Toyota Way'

Monday, 22 February 2010 08:48 Dr. Timothy Hill [Lean Manufacturing](#)



With Toyota's recent recall woes, Manufacturing AUTOMATION asked its resident Lean manufacturing expert and Lean Insights columnist, Dr. Timothy Hill, to give his view on the troubles facing the company and how it reflects on its Toyota Production System:

The Toyota Way, as espoused by the Toyota Production System, does a great job of bringing continuous improvement (kaizen) to the workplace. It's unfortunate that something of a perfect storm has hit Toyota recently. That trifecta behind the storm is composed of:

- 1) early and infrequent warnings, serving to muddy the "go, no-go" threshold decision over a warranty recall;
- 2) the U.S. government wearing two hats (as the government and part-owner of GM) and perhaps a little schadenfreude throw in; and
- 3) the fault lying with suppliers and not on the Toyota assembly line.

Bear in mind that the numbers of affected vehicles is very low, confounding the threshold issue mentioned above.

Jeffrey Liker, who has written books on the Toyota Way, acknowledged "Toyota has been exemplary at surfacing problems in the factory and stopping production before a crisis was reached."

Some have argued "making the exact same product again and again — what's known as 'quality control' in manufacturing — isn't the same thing at all as ensuring safety." While this is largely true, it only brings culpability when the manufacturer is aware that "making the exact same product again and again" brings forward a known quality problem — think of Ford's Pinto or Explorer. Ford knew about the problems with the "back-fire bomber" and the roll-over issues but continued to build the vehicles.

While it's certainly unfortunate for Toyota to be caught in the current situation, it did the right thing by stopping production and preventing any further mistakes from escalating from production to consumers. Toyota worked closely with CTS (which had a manufacturing facility in Mississauga, Ont.) in to address the (few) sticking accelerator pedals and did not resume sales or production until that fix was in.

Liker went on to mention that "failure to follow all the principles of the Toyota Way led to this crisis. Now the Toyota Way is the only way out of it." I agree completely. Moreover, I recommend that people recall other brave recall and shutdown efforts, such as the Tylenol scare. Once tampering was discovered, product was pulled off the shelves, production was stopped entirely and did not continue until Tylenol could safely sell product again. Was there a large amount of tampered goods? No. Was it important to the TQM (Total Quality Manufacturing) beliefs held by Tylenol to extend quality to the customer? Yes, absolutely.

The real question will be how Toyota positions itself as it recovers from these recalls. I suggest that people think about the Bridgestone/Firestone scandal — how bad it was at the time and how Bridgestone/Firestone survived.

Toyota also needs to continue to extend its kaizen principles to its suppliers. Too much growth might have eroded this effort. Moreover, in the race to meet kaizen objectives, suppliers and Toyota need to think outside the box (really bring their problem solving strengths to bear) and consider the "what if?" questions that appear in the daily lives of their customers.

If a very wet environment led to the few gas pedal issues, why wasn't a very wet environment considered before releasing the final product? We get snow and snow melts. We get rain and a host of other "wet" outside environments. Toyota brought forward great thinking when it test drove the Venza to determine uniquely Canadian driving challenges. They can do it, let's hope they do it in time.

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## Comments

Gary Melenhorst

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I am tired of all the negative towards Toyota. I don't own one but am considering it. At least they man-up to their manufacturing flaws. Unlike General Motors of which I have had several issues that should have been addressed as a recall rather than out of my own pocket. Just my opinion.

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