

Northeast Asia Regional Program



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To date, Naomi Ishii has spent over two decades at Toyota Motor Corporation, primarily in the planning and marketing divisions. Among other things he developed the curriculum for “Toyota Business Practices” while Manager of the Toyota Institute for use in all Toyota affiliates in Japan and around the world. In his current position he oversees mid- to long-term product line planning, including resource management and cost and profit management. On his fellowship he looked at global management systems, emerging environmental technologies related to automobiles, and the balance between environmental concerns and increasing global demand for motor vehicles.

Visits to large multinational corporations such as Boeing, Johnson & Johnson, UTC, Cisco, Microsoft, Volkswagen, NTT Communications and Mitsubishi Corporation gave Mr. Ishii insight into how large companies can maintain competitiveness while avoiding “big company disease”. Mr. Ishii found that the strongest organizations understood how to manage rapid business environmental change. They look for ways to fit their business structure along three axes of business unit, function, and region. Mr. Ishii was also surprised to discover the extent of their emphasis on human development, leadership development for middle managers, and diversity of management style by encouraging “outside the box” thinking.

On the issue of emerging automobile environmental technology, Mr. Ishii concluded that earlier and more comprehensive information sharing between auto industry and suppliers with expertise in cutting edge technology would ultimately expand the opportunity for technological innovation despite the danger of it falling into competitors’ hands. On environmental regulation Mr. Ishii had meetings at organizations such as California Air Resources Board and U.S. Department of Energy. Every country determines its own vehicle regulations for fuel efficiency, emissions and so on, which means automakers must develop a wide range of engines to comply with each country’s individual regulations. Mr. Ishii examined the extent to which the U.S. emphasized pursuing standardizing global regulations and discovered it was not a priority and that the emphasis was more on seeking to harmonize regulations among U.S. agencies.

After walking around the crowded streets of New York for ten days, Mr. Ishii was struck by the tendency of New Yorkers to cross the road at a red light when no traffic appeared to be approaching. In Japan pedestrians would invariably stop at a red signal. Mr. Ishii reflects that whether or not to cross the road on red is an individual judgment. He felt “that this small fact has something in common with the notion of *individual judgment, individual responsibility* which I felt through meeting with various American people. To govern big organizations some rules are necessary in both the U.S. and Japan. But in Japan maybe *following the rule* has become the objective in the organization? Stopping on red is not the real goal but rather making sure it is safe to cross the street should be the objective by using the rule. Rules in organizations should be utilized to accelerate the speed of decision-making while minimizing risk. It should not be utilized to make people stop thinking...I would like to build the strongest organizations balancing the strengths of both the United States and Japan.”

When he returns to Japan, Mr. Ishii plans to redefine objectives in Toyota’s ongoing company-wide reform project based on lessons learned during the fellowship; share lessons with related academies and consulting companies in his network; and follow up with a number of individuals he met on fellowship for possible future collaboration.

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