

MOVE TO IMPROVE CORPORATE CULTURE

Nissan diversity drive seen as invitation to talented women

By YURI KAGEYAMA

ATSUGI, Kanagawa Pref. (AP) Although "diversity" is such a novel and foreign word that it's considered a tongue-twister in Japan, Nissan is determined to promote women and make "die-bah-she-tea," as it's rendered here, a pillar of its image.

The diversity drive comes at a time when sales at Nissan Motor Co. are slipping and it has suffered its first drop in annual profit in seven years. Now it is struggling to draw the global limelight from booming rivals Toyota Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co.



Plant Manager Chiharu Ikahata, 26, stands on the factory floor in Nissan Motor Co.'s plant in Tochigi Prefecture last month. Nissan wants more women like Ikahata to move up in the company. AP PHOTO

Wooing women isn't likely to win too many accolades in a nation where laws against discrimination in employment lack enforcement power or merely carry small fines as penalties, and largely depend on public opinion to sway management into political correctness.

But Nissan's on-site day care, family leave of up to two years and flexible work schedules are helping to attract more women and keep them. Nissan is also spreading the word about diversity at universities and seminars to recruit women.

It's one clear way that Nissan, 44 percent owned by Renault SA of France, can hope to send a unique message as a cross-cultural automaker — and hope to beat Toyota and Honda.

Diversity programs are fairly established at American

automakers. Women make up 27 percent of management at General Motors Corp. but only comprise 1 percent of management at Toyota and 0.4 percent at Honda.

At Nissan, female managers have climbed to 4 percent from 1.6 percent in 2004 under the diversity drive, and the company is targeting 5 percent by next March.

Women make up 10 percent of management overall in Japan — compared with 42.5 percent in the U.S. — but tend to be underrepresented in manufacturing.

"Things are definitely changing," said Kumi Hatsukano, a manager for car body design at Nissan. "But what would be ideal is if we could stop talking about this topic of being a woman or a man altogether."

When Hatsukano, 38, joined Nissan in 1993, she had her share of run-ins with sexual harassment. Male workers gave her unwanted attention and asked personal questions about her love life, especially when she was working late.

Today, she is reaping some of the benefits of the diversity initiative. Her coworkers are understanding when she leaves early at 7 p.m. to pick up her 1-year-old son at the company-run day-care center. Working past midnight had been routine before her maternity leave.

When Chiharu Ikahata, 26, was hired as the first woman on her assembly line in 1999, the women's restroom was so old and dirty that a new one had to be built at her request.

Today she is a plant manager who has studied production methods for two years at a Nissan-run school. She hopes to be a role model for female workers.

Japan — with a culture that encourages women to become meek housekeepers — has lagged behind Western nations in accepting women on the job.

"The obstacles for working women are the long hours prevalent in Japan and the lack of understanding from men," said Kumiko Morizane, a deputy director at the labor ministry. "Women simply can't endure overtime alongside men while giving birth and raising children."

Japanese women lose more than their Western counterparts in a corporate culture that values seniority, rather than

performance, for promotion and pay. Women fear being penalized for taking time off for childbirth, Morizane said.

In Japan, employers are required to give six weeks of family leave before the due date and one year of child-care leave. They also must guarantee a comparable job will be available afterward. But 67 percent of working women quit after giving birth to their first child, according to a government study.

One reason women feel more empowered at Nissan is the unmistakable message from the top executive.

Brazilian-born and French-educated, Chief Executive Carlos Ghosn is determined to make diversity a buzzword, citing the success of the Nissan-Renault alliance, set up in 1999.

"We are creating a corporate culture committed to diversity," he told shareholders recently, "where merit alone opens every door."

Yukiko Yoshimaru, 47, hired two years ago to push the diversity effort spearheaded by Ghosn, said empowering women holds potential in the auto industry.

Nissan research found women are involved in 60 percent of the decision-making when buying a car. Hiring women and supporting their careers add to Nissan's competitive edge, she said.

"If a woman wants to work, then people believe in you, you appreciate that and work hard. That sets off a positive cycle," Yoshimaru said. "But when things go the other direction, it becomes negative."

Adjustments to assembly lines for women — such as lowering stands and keeping parts clean of slippery grease — make the job easier for all workers, said Ikahata, the production worker.

"Male workers appreciate the changes my presence has brought," she said.

Miwa Ishii, 42, marketing manager, said women offer insights into customers.

Reflecting widespread sentiment among working women, Ishii likes to think what she contributes to Nissan is about her skills as a person — not her gender.

But the gradual rise of Japanese women as workers, car-owners and consumers has been critical in pushing Nissan to appreciate the value of female expertise to reach female buyers.

Advertisements for the March compact here star a happy-go-lucky woman who is cheered up by the little things in life, such as chancing upon a series of green lights. Ishii's team has also set up an online store selling colorful knickknacks for the Pino model to appeal to young women.

"Identifying with people's emotions — that's empathy," Ishii said. "In a way, that's what being a woman is all about."

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