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How diversity works: A look at four Michigan companies

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International Automotive Components: 'Treat it like its own business unit'

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GLENN TRIEST

Kenneth Gardner is manager of supplier diversity and business development at International Automotive Components. He also is chairman of the Rochester Hills-based Council of Supplier Diversity Professionals.

International Automotive Components rose from the ashes of two distressed organizations. Billionaire investor Wilbur Ross assembled the deal, bringing together the interior systems division of **Lear Corp.** with the remains of **Collins & Aikman Corp.** to create the North American division of the global IAC group in 2007.

The Southfield-based company found itself in the position of being a global powerhouse with the ability to build its own corporate culture. The first goal: Create a strong diversity supplier initiative for the

About IAC

What it does: Vehicle interiors supplier with clients such as **BMW AG**, **Chrysler Group LLC**, **Ford Motor Co.** and **General Motors Co.**

Founded: 2007 (North American division)

Employees: 18,000 in North America

Annual sales: \$2.5 billion in North America

Headquarters: Southfield

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Leading that initiative is Kenneth Gardner, who came from **Dana Corp.**, where he learned the value of the supply chain the hard way.

"Dana lost a quality award because we didn't have a supplier diversity program in place that demonstrated to a customer that we thought like they thought, that we wanted to do everything that we could possibly do to be a part of their culture," said Gardner, who also chairs the Rochester Hills-based **Council of Supplier Diversity Professionals**. "So they made me the director of minority business development so that wouldn't happen again."

His next challenge: Oversee diversity in a company that has filed for a \$115 million initial public offering.

Crain's asked Gardner about IAC's diversity initiatives.

What is the business case for having diversity in your supply chain?

It's about giving IAC the ability to use every supplier, the best suppliers. We take the supply chain seriously because it's our lifeblood.

What was the impetus for creating these programs?

We had initiatives from our customers, whom we cherished very much, surrounding quality, on-time delivery and supplier diversity. The expectation was there from them, so we knew we needed a supplier diversity initiative for our company.

How do you connect with diverse suppliers?

We have a very strong bench of potential suppliers in Michigan because of the effort the automotive OEMs have put in the past. One of the immediate things we did with them was to go out and find different community-based groups like the **Hispanic Chamber of Commerce** and the **Michigan Minority Supplier Development Council**, which help ethnic minorities. We also joined the **National Women's Business Council**. We treat these councils as a customer. Part of my job is to go to these councils and search for diverse suppliers that have the right footprint.

How do you discuss the case for diversity internally?

We basically tell them for IAC to continue doing business, we have to do a couple of things better than anybody: quality, on-time delivery and supplier diversity. Having a strong and diverse supply chain is the decision that gets you over the hump in obtaining new business as well as keeping our existing customers.

How do you measure the success of IAC's diversity supplier program?

Our president and CEO (James Kamsickas) doesn't want it to be about numbers; he wanted the intent of the program to be the focus. Our intent is to make sure that we do business with as many diverse suppliers as we can. We do it by trying to do as many dollars as we can. You can have one diverse supplier and do a billion dollars of business that's not the best thing for the community.

What advice do you have for other companies implementing supplier diversity programs?

You have to have a dedicated process for supplier diversity. You have to treat it like its own business unit. Supplier diversity, it should touch every operation, every functional part. We educate all employees on the value of diversity.

What trends do you see in supplier diversity?

If you think about it, we're talking about underutilized groups in the United States. Many companies already recognize gays and lesbians as being such a group that has been underutilized. Many companies, they recognize veterans as underutilized. I think you'll see a more concentrated effort in accepting those types of groups.

Diversity supplier program initiated: 2007

Why diversity matters for the company: "Having a strong and diverse supply chain is the decision that gets you over the hump in obtaining new business as well as keeping our existing customers."

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