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2012 Top 10 30-Something: Christopher Smith

Interviews and Profiles



Assistant General Counsel and Head of the Legal Department

Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama, LLC

Age: 39

Proudest Achievement: “It’s a little sentimental, but I wrote an 85-page book filled with advice and quotes — life lessons and things I’ve learned — for my two young daughters.”

Being persistent

Chris Smith joined HMMA, Hyundai’s first manufacturing plant in the United States, in 2006, when the plant was still in its early start-up phase. Partnering with the human resources department and the general counsel, Smith developed the policies and procedures that would govern HMMA and its 2,700 employees. Within three years, he became one of the youngest employees to earn a senior-level position at the company.

From implementing new projects to forming relationships across cultures, Smith’s mantra is patience and persistence. It’s a philosophy that fits with Hyundai’s focus on collectivism over individualism: At HMMA, groups, rather than individual leaders, make all significant decisions. “This is common among Asian companies, and as a result, our leadership approach contradicts the top-down style you might see in many American companies and law firms,” he says. “As assistant general counsel, I’ve learned to embrace that collective decision-making process and to rely upon persuasion rather than coercion or authority.”

In the past few years, Smith has guided the implementation of HMMA’s contract management and electronic legal management systems. He says this was challenging because it called for a paradigm shift: “Before that, each department handled its own contracts, and some departments were reluctant to share contracts even with the legal department. We had to instill the belief that we are here to assist other departments, not try to fault or correct them.” The legal department did an extensive contract audit, developed a contract review and approval policy, and implemented staff training for all departments. “My take-away from the process was that when you’re confronted with systematic issues, sometimes, change has to be very incremental. But have persistence and use building blocks to show management that a certain action needs to be taken.”

Smith works for many Korean executives who are working in the United States. His life experiences have taught him cultural sensitivity and to value diversity: As a child, he spent time living in Germany, grew up in rural Alabama, studied in Europe during law school, worked at a traditional Southern law firm, and now, works at an international company. “I believe people are the same in that they expect to be treated with honesty and respect. Regardless of culture or background, most people appreciate hard work and preparation,” he says. “What would cause a person to bond with others is the same anywhere in the world: It’s having an interest in them, always being respectful and conscientious of their needs. I think it might take a little longer with different cultures, but if you’re persistent about it, those relationships can certainly develop and prosper.”

Smith believes this is true across socioeconomic backgrounds as well. At HMMA, everyone in the company — from the president and CEO to a newly hired production team member — wears a company-issued shirt with the Hyundai logo and the employee’s first name stitched on it. “Wearing ‘team wear’ certainly breaks down communication barriers and strengthens HMMA’s team culture,” says Smith.

Another effort to communicate across functions occurs when HMMA management is assigned jobs on the production line. “We do this so we can understand the needs and issues of the other team members. It’s totally different on the line. There is no 15-minute soda break when you feel like it. But the experience is important because our production team members get to see managers and executives working on the line with them for four hours, and it gives them a chance to communicate with these managers and executives,” says Smith. Smith performed work at several stations in HMMA’s Weld Shop, and he says this experience has helped him better understand the needs and concerns of production team members

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