

Want innovation? Invest in your frontline workers first

RESEARCH BRIEF

A new study of Toyota's global manufacturing plants shows that organizations that genuinely involve frontline employees in problem-solving build the foundation for operational efficiency and innovation over time.

Why it matters

Many organizations treat process improvement and innovation as competing priorities; they are not.

- ▶ Top-down, tool-based improvement programs often encounter resistance from frontline employees without a participative foundation.
- ▶ Frontline employees are uniquely positioned to spot small, hidden warning signs the data misses like equipment defects.
- ▶ Organizations that invest in participative systems at early stages generate the capacity that allows innovation to emerge later.

How we know

A qualitative case study was conducted across 6 Toyota manufacturing plants in the UK, Thailand, Indiana, Mississippi, Kentucky, and West Virginia. The study spanned different stages of implementing Toyota's **3 Pillar Activity**, a shop floor management framework introduced in 2007.

Data was collected between 2019 and 2024 through **54** interviews (lasting 60–180 minutes), in-person shop floor observations involving **136** participants, and archival data across all 6 sites.

Now what?

- ▶ **Audit the degree** to which frontline employees genuinely participate in identifying and solving problems, not just in formal suggestion systems, but in daily routines.
- ▶ **Invest in structured cross-shift or cross-functional sharing** via paired observations and joint problem-solving sessions before rolling out new tools.
- ▶ **Evaluate** improvement initiatives for productivity and sustainability.
- ▶ When introducing digital tools and automation, **work with frontline staff** for problem analysis and improvement rather than bypass their knowledge.

What researchers found

3 implementation stages with each requiring a different and evolving set of roles:

- ▶ **Early:** Key investment is allocating resources to participative systems and joint problem-solving with specialists.
- ▶ **Developing:** Floor staff and specialists jointly improve preventive improvement systems, reducing breakdowns and quality defects.
- ▶ **Mature:** Strong foundation in UK and Thailand allowed specialists to focus on innovation, low-cost automation, and equipment.

What this means

- ▶ **For managers:** Resist quick fixes; research warns they will not be sustainable without participation of frontline employees.
- ▶ **For HR and L&D leaders:** Employee training and cross-functional learning time is not a cost but the precondition for both operational stability and innovation capacity.
- ▶ **For organizations:** Sequence matters. Support and trust must come before stretch goals and innovation drives. Organizations should establish participative systems before trying to achieve high-level performance.

LINK TO THE STUDY

