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GC Impact Player: Toyota Motor North America GC Sandra Phillips Rogers

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As general counsel of one of the country's largest automakers, Sandra Phillips Rogers oversees very busy legal happenings every day, yet she always sets aside time for her passion: making the legal profession more diverse.

At Toyota Motor North America Inc., Rogers has already built a diverse team of lawyers in her legal department. Her quest does not end there: She requires outside law firms to staff her matters with diverse lawyers, and to influence the wider legal profession, she spends a significant amount of time speaking at conferences about her efforts at Toyota.

"As lawyers, we have a responsibility to be good stewards of the profession, and I absolutely and fundamentally believe as a legal profession we have got to be diverse and inclusive for the same reasons it's important to Toyota. I think to be the best lawyers we can be, to deliver the best legal advice we can, to be good representatives and stewards of the community, we have got to reflect the communities in which we work," said Rogers, who also cofounded the University of Texas School of Law's Center for Women in the Law and co-chaired the center's 2017 Women's Power Summit on Law and Leadership, an invitation-only event of very powerful female lawyers.

Rogers' commitment to making the legal profession more diverse and inclusive spans way back, and she simply landed at the right place at Toyota. John Hooper, partner in Reed Smith in New York, said Rogers is nationally recognized for her leadership in diversity and has made an impact for over a decade. Hooper first met Rogers 12 years ago when she worked at Pfizer Inc. and raised diversity to a much higher level. Now he works with Rogers at Toyota as outside counsel on major class action cases. Diversity is a requirement, not a request.

"Toyota is just one of the leaders in diversity in corporate America and a large part of it—at least through the legal division—has been Sandra's good work," he said.

Rogers said that the Japanese ideal of "kaizen," or continuous improvement, provides her motivation. Just as Toyota embraces kaizen, Rogers is always trying to get better and never thinks an effort is "the best."

Growing up in Beaumont, Rogers said her parents taught her the value of hard work, common sense, education, helping others and the Golden Rule—do to others as you'd have them do to you.

She earned her undergraduate degree in broadcast journalism from the University of Texas at Austin in 1988 and earned her law degree from UT's School of Law in 1991.

Rogers started off as a trial lawyer from 1991 to 1993 in Chevron's in-house trial unit. She continued litigating as an associate in Chamberlain, Hrdlicka, White, Williams & Martin in Houston from 1993 to 1995. Her career took a turn when she worked at Shook, Hardy & Bacon from 1995 to 2003. She started as a litigator but became managing partner of the Houston office, gravitating toward the business side of running a law firm. Her transformation into a businesswoman continued when Rogers went in-house at Pfizer in New York City, serving from 2004 to 2008 as the company's senior vice president, associate general counsel and chief litigation counsel. Because the New York lifestyle was not for her, she left Pfizer in 2008 to become a partner in Morgan, Lewis & Bockius in Houston.

Toyota was one of her clients, during a time the company had one of the greatest legal and business challenges ever—the unintended acceleration case.

As Toyota's outside counsel, Rogers provided strategic advice and helped coordinate Toyota's in-house lawyers with many outside firms working on the matter.

Providing strategic guidance has long been one of Rogers' strengths as a lawyer.

"One of the things I always appreciated about Sandra is she would focus very early on what is our ideal result here for the client," said Craig Stanfield, partner in Morgan, Lewis & Bockius in Houston, who worked closely with Rogers on several cases when she worked there.

Rogers' performance as outside counsel for Toyota prompted the company in 2012 to offer her an in-house counsel position in Torrance, California. She was promoted a couple of times, finally landing as general counsel in 2015.

Toyota's labor and employment attorneys have been busy over the past three years as the company merged separate manufacturing and auto sales affiliates into one company and moved its headquarters and employees—including legal staff—to Plano. These lawyers have helped develop new human resources policies, handbooks, training and more.

Rogers said she gets the most excited about tasks that help Toyota achieve its business goals.

"Sometimes that's finding ways to deal successfully with litigation. Sometimes it's helping them think of new business strategies to execute. It could change across the group. When I can feel as close to the business as possible and help them achieve their objective as a lawyer and executive, that's what I'm most excited about," she said.

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