Reuters

By Nora Eckert Reuters.com

Automakers achieve supplier relations milestone during bumpy year

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DETROIT, May 18 (Reuters) — Global automakers improved their relationships with suppliers over the past year, a prominent industry survey found, despite challenges related to tariffs, electric vehicle program writedowns and policy swings.

Ford (F.N), opens new tab, GM (GM.N), opens new tab, Toyota (7203.T), opens new tab, Stellantis (STLAM.MI), opens new tab, Honda (7267.T), opens new tab and Nissan (7201.T), opens new tab all improved their standing with suppliers on Plante Moran's Working Relations Index, a first in the annual study's 26-year history.

The result was a shock for Angela Johnson, principal in Plante Moran's automotive and mobility consulting practice.

"When we first got the results, the first thing we did was triple check," she said.

The data, based on 750 responses from some of the largest automotive suppliers, showed automakers' improved communication and relationship-building efforts earned them increased trust.

Ford and Stellantis, the bottom-ranked carmakers, improved significantly from last year, with Ford helped by increased visibility from its top supplier executive, Johnson said.

Meanwhile, industry leader Toyota extended its lead, reaching 409 points in the index, compared to Stellantis' 163 points, Ford's 223 points, and GM's 318 points.

Johnson said U.S. automakers like Ford are battling to regain lost trust after decades of adversarial relationships.

"These leaders get it. But they inherited a mountain of organizational memory of very hard relationships," Johnson said of Detroit's executives. Automakers like Toyota, however, have prioritized building relationships for decades, she added.

The push for profit that frayed relationships with suppliers in the U.S. still pervades parts of the cultures at Detroit's automakers, she said, and suppliers worry that recent improvements will not be long-lasting.

"For Ford and Stellantis, they're going to have to prove that they can keep this going," she said.

Suppliers saw improved potential for long-term profit among automakers, especially after they wrote off money-losing EV programs, Plante Moran found. Many suppliers sank billions into programs that never materialized and are now trying to recover those losses without replacement business from automakers.

Respondents also credited return-to-office mandates as improving communication with supplier-facing workers.

Detroit's automakers have upped their in-office requirements over the last year, with Stellantis calling most U.S. workers back five days a week, and Ford requiring four days for most salaried workers.

Reporting by Nora Eckert in Detroit; Editing by Mike Colias and Alexander Smith