

# QUICKSTART®

SUMMER 2002 • VOLUME 4, NUMBER 3



Masaru Asahina (above), president of Suzuki's plant in Rome, leads the grand opening festivities by thanking community and state groups for their unwavering support. Gov. Barnes (far left) welcomes Japanese dignitaries to help celebrate the first Eiger ATVs coming off the line (above left).

## Catching the Team Spirit

Suzuki employees relish Quick Start training in Japanese style of teamwork

**O**n a sunny May morning in Rome, Ga., sounds of laughter drift outside the Quick Start mobile classroom, parked on the grounds of Suzuki's assembly plant for the Eiger all-terrain vehicle.

Inside, an instructor is leading Suzuki associates in the class "Working Together,"

teaching them how to achieve synergy and demonstrating that the sum of our efforts is greater than its individual parts. Divided into three groups, the trainees engage in animated interaction as they are quizzed about survival skills in the wilderness. The exercise is designed to instill the team principle from the start, before they set foot on the plant floor.

The training pays off, especially for a Japanese company that brings with it a work culture unfamiliar to Americans. Ask any employee at the Suzuki plant, and they will smile and talk at length about why they

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## Full Throttle

To celebrate the launch of the Eiger ATV, the first all-terrain vehicle made in America by Suzuki, Gov. Roy Barnes heralded the opening of the company's new, 108,350-sq.-ft. plant in a grand-opening dedication on May 31 in Rome.

"This is a great day for Suzuki, the residents of Rome and the citizens of Georgia," Barnes said.

Up to 150 team members will work at the facility when it's fully operational, with 85 percent of employees expected to come from within a 30-mile radius. Suzuki officials also anticipate purchasing more than half of production parts from local suppliers.

The plant is a \$30 million joint

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investment by Brea, Calif.-based American Suzuki Motor Corp. (ASMC), which owns 80 percent, and Japan-based Suzuki Motor Corp. (SMC), which owns 20 percent. At the opening ceremony, special guests from the two firms included ASMC President Rick Suzuki and SMC officials Sokichi Nakano, executive VP; Shunichi Wakuda, senior managing director; and Tsuneo Kobayashi, managing director.

Jackie Rohosky, DTAE assistant commissioner of economic development programs, and R.K. Sehgal, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Industry, Trade and Tourism, attended the event along with other state, county and city officials. Representing the Rome facility — called Suzuki Manufacturing of America Corp. — was Masaru Asahina, president.

In his speech, Asahina reflected on the great strides his company made in only 14 months from groundbreaking to production. Among the organizations he thanked for helping Suzuki achieve this success was Coosa Valley Technical College, which provided office space for Suzuki during plant construction.

“We cannot thank enough Georgia’s famous Quick Start,” Asahina said. “We learned a lot from Quick Start, and we are very pleased with the results. We believe Quick Start is one of the best incentives the state of Georgia has.”

In addition to the Eiger, the plant will produce the Vinson model beginning next year. Processes completed onsite include welding, painting, assembly, packing, storing, shipping and quality control. Assembly-line processes include robotic subassembly of ATV frames; electro-coated treatment of frames; powder-coat painting; and continuous, in-process quality-control inspection.

The United States is the world’s top ATV market, and the Southeast is one of the top U.S. markets. Georgia’s Suzuki plant should help satisfy that demand, with a new vehicle coming off the line every two and a half minutes. 



Gov. Barnes tries out a brand-new Suzuki ATV.

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love the Japanese way of working. Ironically, instead of feeling that their individuality has been compromised, they say they are empowered by the team philosophy.

“We come together in a team as one, and our voices stand out,” says Joy Smith, an assembly technician who has completed the Quick Start training. She was part of the first group, hired in January, that came on board to weld, paint, assemble and ship the Eiger ATVs. The plant, Suzuki’s first in the United States, officially started production May 20.

Brad Clay, one of Smith’s classmates, notes, “Where I worked before, it was every man for himself. Here, you’ve got people you depend on to work with.”

The Suzuki team members express gratitude for the Quick Start training, coordinated through Coosa Valley Technical College. “The last job I had, when I started working they just put me out there on the floor, so I was nervous,” Smith



Gov. Roy Barnes (far right) visits the Suzuki facility in Rome, accompanied by (from left) Sokichi Nakano, SMC executive VP; Craig McDaniel, Coosa Valley Tech president; and Masaru Asahina, Suzuki Manufacturing of America Corp. president.



Already acquainted through Quick Start training, team members work in harmony at the Suzuki plant.

recalls. “But going through Quick Start, I was prepared.”

Another classmate agrees, pointing to the quality of Quick Start instructors. “The teachers were knowledgeable and made you feel at ease,” says LeRoy Dunaway. “By the time we got on the floor, we knew what to expect from the other person. It was easier to work with each other because you understood each other better.”

Trusting one’s co-workers is vital in an assembly line plant, where safety issues can arise. Jeff Ford, safety and training coordinator, has years of safety experience in traditional work environments. He says he has never before witnessed such intensity of participation and willingness to lead in safety team meetings.

“The biggest challenge for me has been believing that a company could be run where the team members have so much freedom to make decisions,” he says. “It’s sometimes



In foreground, from left, are assembly technicians LeRoy Dunaway, Joy Smith and Brad Clay, who were among the first group of Quick Start trainees. Jeff Ford (rear) is Suzuki’s safety and training coordinator.

amazing to think employees have that much say in a business.”

The notion of *Kaizen*, or continuous improvement, is central to the Japanese workplace philosophy. “They look for ways to improve on safety, quality and productivity,” Ford explains. “Team members are encouraged to look for anything we can improve — every facet, program and procedure we have.”

“I like *Kaizen*,” says Clay, “because if we’ve got an idea that will help the team, they will listen to us. It makes the plant better.”


The concept of the five S’s, or 5S, also figures prominently. “Smaller, neater, fewer, shorter, lighter,” Clay reels off the list using English words.

“You make everything as simplified as you can, but you get the job done.”

About 20 Quick Start classes are taught in a range of topics, such as operation of powered industrial trucks, industrial safety, Japanese culture and Lean Manufacturing. Dunaway had worked with a Japanese company before, so he was already familiar with *Kanban*, a Lean Manufacturing technique (see box). “But we never had Quick Start to really show us,” he says. “They showed us here.”

Masaru Asahina, company president, says Suzuki might have faced a challenge in developing new employees’ skills and teaching the teamwork concept. “When we came here, we thought it would be quite difficult for us to train American team members,” he says.

Quick Start offered an ideal solution. “Already Quick Start had established many experiences with Japanese companies,” he says. “They had all the materials in English and developed exciting customized programs specifically for Suzuki.”

Not surprisingly, Asahina attaches great importance to employee training. “To have a successful company,” he says, “team members are key.” 

## What is *Kanban*?

*Kanban* is a system for managing logistics in manufacturing. In this process, parts required for assembly are taken in small batches from storage areas only when they are needed. *Kanban*, which means “visible record” in Japanese, utilizes cards as a means of communication from workstations to storage areas. The cards signal that a certain part is needed and therefore should be moved or produced. In this way, inventory does not build up unnecessarily in warehouses, nor is anything stored in production areas, leading to significant cost savings.

