



Employee Recognition: Leveraging the STEP Ahead Awards to Celebrate Talent

Overview

The Manufacturing Institute hosted a Solution Series event exploring how to craft STEP Ahead Award nominations that turn a leader's achievements into a compelling story.

This session featured:

- **Michelle Minyon**, Manufacturing Chief of Staff at Toyota Motor North America
- **Heidi Groulx**, Talent Manager, Inclusion and Belonging at DENSO
- **Addie Ormsbee**, Director of Director, Food North America Smart Manufacturing Program Leader at Cargill, 2016 STEP Ahead Emerging Leader and a STEP Ahead Awards judge

STEP Ahead Awards: What and Why?

The [STEP Ahead Awards](#) recognize outstanding leaders in manufacturing who are driving impact from the shop floor to the C-suite. Each company can nominate up to 12 individuals for consideration each year. The 145 selected awardees will convene in Washington, D.C. to be recognized through a leadership conference and gala.

The panelists see the Awards as a powerful tool to recognize team members making a difference, encouraging retention while reinforcing their company's people-first culture.

Selecting Nominees

Each company takes a different approach to selecting employees to nominate.

Toyota Motor North America has a large internal committee that reviews and selects all candidates. This team also works together to strengthen nomination content.

DENSO conducts outreach to employee resource groups, HR business partners and other parts of the company to source nominees their internal review committee wouldn't have identified themselves. They also open peer nominations up to anyone through a Microsoft form, providing examples on a SharePoint site for what a strong nomination looks like.

When selecting nominees, **Cargill** focuses primarily on candidates' impact over their day-to-day responsibilities.

Drafting Nominations

Once nominees are selected, Minyon and Groulx start by interviewing them to draw out their stories. On the other hand, Ormsbee starts by asking each nominee to reflect and answer each nomination question themselves, as they know their career best.

Best practices for drafting nominations include:

- **Use the STAR method** to ensure the nominations are story-oriented, yet concise.
- **Avoid adjectives; instead, provide data to show quantitative impact.** Ensure that any included numbers are not confidential within your company.
- **Make your nominees' stories stand out.** Groulx recommends asking yourself, “What would we lose if we removed this person’s contribution from our company?” to surface the most compelling nomination stories.
- **Connect with nominees** to ensure their nomination submissions accurately reflect their career and achievements. Groulx also suggests connecting with their chain of command, especially for nominees who are shy or humble.
- **Celebrate all nominees, whether or not they are ultimately selected.** Ormsbee brings all nominees to Cargill’s headquarters for a workshop, similar to STEP Ahead’s Leadership Development conference in Washington, D.C.
- For nominees who aren’t selected, consider **revising and resubmitting their nominations** the following year. This can give nominees time to make tangible differences that will strengthen their application.

Start Your Nomination

If you know a leader who inspires others and drives real impact, nominate them for the 2027 STEP Ahead Awards! Nominations are open now through Friday, October 2nd.

- See the [nomination form](#) and additional details in the [2027 STEP Ahead Nominations Guide](#) to get started.

Continue Investing in Your Workforce

Want more solutions? Join us at the MI’s [2026 Workforce Summit](#) in Indianapolis, Indiana, October 26–28! This year’s Summit features an exciting and robust agenda focused on the strategies helping manufacturers compete and grow. [Learn more and register today.](#)

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