

GM's New Product Chief: Time To Move Faster, Get Safer

Tom Krisher, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — The new chief of product development at GM holds what is arguably the most important job in the company: coming up with cars and trucks that people want.

There also are a few extra goals on Mary Barra's list: Make the stuff faster and raise its quality.

Barra, a 30-year veteran of General Motors, was named head of global product development on Thursday. She replaces Vice Chairman Tom Stephens who was moved aside after GM's CEO grew unhappy over the speed with which new vehicles reached the market.

She'll look for ways to more efficiently run a giant operation that includes 36,000 people across the globe, she said in an interview with The Associated Press. She also wants vehicles with more compelling exterior designs, the latest technology, and she promises to work with manufacturing and parts supply companies to boost quality.

Barra wouldn't say how much time she'd like to shave from product development, which typically takes four or five years.

With other automakers cranking out new models faster and faster, it's critical for GM to respond with fresh cars and trucks because older models don't sell as well as those with the latest designs and gadgets.

The typical five-year wait for new models probably is too long, but GM could do significant updates in a much shorter period, said Rebecca Lindland, director of automotive research with consulting firm IHS Automotive.

"Everybody is going to be coming to market with products sooner," she said. "With technology being more and more integrated into a vehicle, you can be obsolete before you know it."

New Chairman and CEO Dan Akerson told reporters last week that GM's 2009 bankruptcy put the company a year behind in vehicle development, and he wanted to bring out new cars and trucks faster. He said in a statement that Barra will bring a "fresh perspective" to the critically important job.

Bankruptcy sidetracked new pickup trucks, among GM's top-selling vehicles, and it delayed a replacement for the aging Chevrolet Impala large sedan.

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Barra, 49, has been vice president of global human resources since 2009, helping the company through management turmoil that included four chief executives in less than two years. She also served as a plant manager and held a number of engineering and management posts, even heading internal communications.

Longtime GM executives have been criticized for moving too slowly in the company's rule-heavy culture. Barra said her long career at GM will be an asset.

"I have a rich vehicle background and I know the company," she said. "I know what works. I know what doesn't work."

Barra started at GM in 1980 while attending engineering school.

In her new post, Barra will manage the company's global alliances, such as those in China and Korea. She'll oversee a pipeline of cars and trucks for GM's 11 global brands, including Chevrolet, Buick, GMC and Cadillac in the U.S.

Barra wouldn't talk about specific products. She wants to assess what's in the works and see how new models can be accelerated.

Earlier this week Akerson cleared the spot for Barra by moving Stephens to a new post as chief technology officer. The move was part of a broader management shake-up that included the ouster of GM's OnStar chief and elevation of several marketing executives.

Stephens, a 42-year GM veteran, lost responsibility for product planning in a shake-up last year, but remained in charge of global product development, leading the launches of the Chevrolet Volt rechargeable electric car and the Chevrolet Cruze compact car.

Barra said part of her mandate is to boost quality. GM's reliability has been spotty in the past, but it showed the biggest improvement of any automaker in last year's Consumer Reports magazine survey, thanks to new models. Yet its highest-ranked brand of the 27 listed in the survey was Chevrolet at 17.

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