



Irresistible Force Creates Moveable Object

What is it that's said about the irresistible force?

Anyone encountering an engineer named Yukihiro Yaguchi might just find out first hand, for he's an irresistible force that's created a highly movable object.

Yaguchi is a very convincing, compelling guy, but he's also quiet and self effacing. Once he gets hold of you, you not only can't help but like him, you can't help but want to help him accomplish whatever it is that he's up to.

Plenty of people have learned that lesson, and there's solid evidence to support it. The evidence sits on four fat, sticky tires. It's called the Lexus IS F.

In order to understand the IS F and its genesis, the first thing that you have to understand is that Yaguchi is an enthusiast, a performance hard case who loves to drive fine, responsive equipment.

For the 30 years he's been at Toyota, he's wanted to build a car he wanted to drive, a car he'd love to own. During his tenure at Lexus, Yaguchi has worked on the first and second iterations of the Lexus LS luxury sedan, the turbocharged Toyota Supra and the first Lexus GS sport sedan. But none of those cars, however excellent, scratched his peculiar performance itch.

For the past 15 years, he's been thinking in terms of nothing less than an all-wheel-drive supercar with huge horsepower, racetrack-inspired handling and enormous stopping power.

What he had in mind was a take-no-prisoners premium sport sedan that would offer comfort, sophistication and performance to equal or beat the best of the class from Europe.

Finally, he got tired of waiting. He decided that he'd just go ahead and figure out a way to build it.

Yaguchi was ideally placed to ramrod such a project, as he was working at TMC's Lexus Center in the Brand Strategy department in preparation for the Lexus brand to expand globally.

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Lexus is of course a well-organized company with carefully proscribed procedures for getting things done. But Yaguchi, the irresistible force, turned procedure on its head.

To begin with, in Lexus' careful way, it's not the engineers who make the decisions to design and develop a vehicle. It's the Product Planning Department. The experts there want to be sure that there's actually a market for a proposed vehicle, and that the finished product will fill the needs of that market.

So instead of the Product Planning people going to Yaguchi and saying something like, "Look, Yaguchi-san, we think that the market is ready for a high-performance sport sedan," it was the other way around. Yaguchi pitched his concept to Product Planning. Incredibly, after much convincing, he received Product Planning's approval to proceed.

But just because the project got the green light from Product Planning, that didn't mean that it had resources and budget allocated to it. It didn't. But that wasn't enough to derail Yaguchi. He developed the IS F when he wasn't busy with his Brand Strategy responsibilities, working informally, on the side, beginning in 2004.

In other words, in the best tradition of the factory-based hotrod, Yaguchi recruited his own special "Skunk Works," an under-the-radar operation populated by a team of speed-crazy rogue engineers who, working in their spare time between their regular assignments, developed their own vision for a Lexus performance vehicle.

Most chief engineers, when they are tasked to develop a new Lexus model, typically have between 1,500 and 2,000 people on their development teams. That didn't happen here. Instead, Yaguchi had between 100 and 300 people at any given time on the IS F development team. He designed and built the IS F with a team that was a fraction of the size of the usual engineering and development staffs.

Working outside the confines of Lexus' usual carefully planned corporate program, Yaguchi cherry-picked the very best people, folks he thought might want to have a hand in creating this special car. Because it wasn't possible to get them assigned full-time to his team, he convinced them to contribute their ideas and skills in their spare time, when they weren't working on their regular projects.

This approach didn't just apply to individuals. Yaguchi worked his wiles on whole departments. For example, a corporate subsidiary called Toyota Technocraft, among many of its special projects, builds packages for police cars and also builds the aero kits used on some Toyota models. Yaguchi reasoned that Toyota Technocraft would be perfect to help with the many specialized modifications of the standard Lexus IS that this car would require.

He pitched the idea to the division's leadership, and they went for it. The result is an engineering marvel with special aerodynamics, an 8-speed Sport Direct Shift transmission with paddle shifters and its own special performance profile, Brembo disc brakes that feature huge, 14.2-inch cross-drilled discs and six pistons per caliper up front, 19-inch wheels and a specially tuned suspension system. Indeed, Technocraft's participation in the IS F project marks the first time the division has worked on the design of an entire production car.

But Yaguchi's determination didn't end there. He went so far, in fact, as to take his requests for help outside the company's confines. He knew that the IS F was going to require a really spectacular engine. So he went to Yamaha, which has a history of making engine components for Toyota and Lexus. He didn't go to just anyone, he asked his old friend Mr. Kimura, who worked on Yamaha's Formula One engine program and then general manager of the aftermarket project division, to help out. As a result of that request, Yamaha did most of the development on the IS F's DOHC 5.0L V8, making sure to pack it with more than 416 horsepower, enough to blast the IS F to 60 mph in 4.6 seconds.

Eventually, none of this was done in secret. So well known did the project become, and so legendary was Yaguchi's persuasiveness, that the whole experience came to be known as Yaguchi-Go. In Japanese, today "go" is a suffix referring to a car, but originally it characterized a ship, the equivalent of a vessel making its unstoppable way forward. So this was Yaguchi and his project cutting a swath, and leaving a wake, through Toyota and Lexus. In this way, "Yaguchi-go" constitutes recognition of his leadership of, and ownership of, the IS F project.

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To be certain they got the IS F exactly right, Yaguchi and his team tested the IS F at racetracks that count, at tracks that have challenge and heritage. Those test tracks include the legendary Nurburgring Nordschleife, in Germany's Eifel Mountains; Circuit Paul Ricard, in the South of France; Circuit Zolder, in Belgium; Laguna Seca Raceway, in California; and Fuji Speedway, in Japan.

In fact, Fuji Speedway is the IS F's home circuit and its many turns the inspiration for the F-logo design.

In fact, by the time testing was concluded, there'd never been a Toyota or a Lexus production car that had been so heavily tested at race tracks all around the world.

The result of all this, of course, will be available to the public beginning in early 2008. And that means that Yaguchi can stop thinking about exactly the car he'd most like to drive. He can actually begin driving it....and so can every other enthusiast.

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