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Team concept cuts time

Viper project put productivity to test

Chrysler cut development time for the Dodge Viper to just three years. Here's how:

► Stripping bureaucracy. The workers at the New Mack assembly plant have just one job classification, craftsman, instead of the dozens that often hamstring a factory's productivity. In many plants, work rules prevent workers from performing tasks that aren't part of their job classification.

And Team Viper's 85 members are a sliver of the hundreds that Detroit usually throws at a new-car project. Representatives of all departments were included so that decisions could be made on the spot, without having lengthy consultations or committee meetings or bucking tough calls up to the corner office and waiting for the boss to decide.

Chrysler since has exported that tight team approach to other projects, including its important LH midsize 1993 sedans.

► Letting suppliers design and build parts,

such as the unusual six-speed manual transmission or the complex manifold that distributes fuel to the 10 cylinders. Normally, automakers cook up the specifications for parts, then merely ask suppliers to build them to the company's specs. That siphons engineering time from the automaker. And often, it is the supplier, not the car company, that has the specialized expertise to come up with the best design.

► Using an advanced process, resin-transfer molding, or RTM, to form plastic body panels. The factory tooling can be created and changed more quickly than normal. RTM parts are expected to require just 15 minutes of hand finishing after the molding process, vs. hours for other types of plastic.

► Keeping it simple. Because the car is aimed at the automotive lunatic fringe, Chrysler was able to omit features that mainstream buyers demand. For instance: Cruise control, remote-control mirrors and power seats are not offered. In fact, Chrysler planned no door locks until the government insisted they were a necessary safety item.

— James R. Healey