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Toyota's President Softens on Speaking to Congress

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But the rocky path that Akio Toyoda has tread in the last few weeks reflects the problems that Toyota itself has had getting its bearings in the midst of its recall crisis.

Like Toyota, which initially played down the extent of its defects, Mr. Toyoda seems to have been caught off guard by the extent and severity of the situation.

He was all but hidden from view until he was approached by a Japanese reporter while leaving Davos, Switzerland, a few weeks ago. Soon after, appearing uncertain and struggling with his normally smooth English, Mr. Toyoda tried to rush out of a hastily arranged news conference until journalists insisted he stay to answer more questions.

But now the company and Mr. Toyoda, its president, appear almost eager to share information, even as recall developments escalate.

At a news conference Wednesday in Japan, his third in two weeks, Mr. Toyoda announced more possible defects, this time with steering problems on the Corolla subcompact, one of its best-selling cars.

Hours later, a Transportation Department official confirmed that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration will open a formal investigation into 2009 and 2010 model Corollas. About 500,000 could be involved.

Toyota's response to the crisis — and its handling of other defect issues — will be intensely scrutinized next week, when the first hearings scheduled by three Congressional committees begin.

Until Wednesday, Mr. Toyoda and the company insisted it was not necessary for him to testify and that others, like Yoshimi Inaba, president of Toyota's North American operations, could fill that role for him.

But after persistent questioning, Mr. Toyoda said he "would consider" appearing before Congress if he receives a formal invitation, which none of the committees have issued.

Analysts and public relations experts say that it would be in the company's interest for Mr. Toyoda to make the trip.

"This is a moment when Toyota is going to be in the world's eyes," said Michael Useem, professor of management at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. "It's going to be the most powerful and effective if the C.E.O. does appear."

But there are enormous risks for any chief executive who testifies before Congress, as leaders from Wall Street and Detroit can attest, and that is causing concern within Toyota, people with knowledge of the company's deliberations said Wednesday.

Just 14 months ago, the chief executives of the Detroit automakers endured hours of questions before Congressional committees, along with heated criticism over their use of corporate jets.

In 2000, Jacques Nasser, then chief executive of Ford, and Masatoshi Ono, his counterpart at Japanese tire maker Bridgestone/Firestone, also were questioned by members of Congress after accidents involving exploding tires on the Ford Explorer. Both chief executives left their companies within about a year.

In the hearings next week, the role of N.H.T.S.A., the federal safety agency, is also expected to be addressed, including whether it acted promptly enough on information it received from consumers.

Mr. Inaba is still scheduled to represent the company at the first set of hearings, company officials said Wednesday

They are set for Tuesday, by the House Energy and Commerce Committee and Wednesday, by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. (The energy panel originally planned to meet Thursday, but moved up its hearing.)

Mr. Toyoda could find a more hospitable audience if he were to appear on March 2 at a hearing by the Senate Commerce Committee. Its chairman, John D. Rockefeller IV, Democrat of West Virginia, has known the Toyoda family for decades and has a Toyota plant in his home state.

A spokeswoman for the committee said no decision had been made on whether to invite Mr. Toyoda.

A Toyota spokeswoman, Martha Voss, said Mr. Toyoda “definitely wants to give the committees his full support” and looked forward to meeting with lawmakers when he can come to the United States. “But, for now, Mr. Inaba has been invited and is very well qualified to represent the company,” she said.

Although it would be logical for Toyota to seek a friendlier site, Professor Useem said Mr. Toyoda needed to show the company’s resolve in dealing with its problems, even if the questions turn hostile.

“You want to take on all comers with questions who are legitimate observers, critics and questioners,” he said.

He suggested Mr. Toyoda acknowledge Toyota’s problems, explain why they occurred, detail the repairs the company is making and apologize.

Those are all things Mr. Toyoda has done in Japan, but doing so in the United States, where Toyota is the second-biggest automaker behind G.M., could help reassure the millions of Americans whose cars have been recalled, Professor Useem said.

Long term, Mr. Toyoda is the only person who can turn around a situation that has tarnished Toyota’s reputation for quality and put its credibility in doubt, said Jim Cain, a senior vice president for strategic communications at the Quell Group, a Detroit public relations firm.

Mr. Cain, who worked for Ford when Mr. Nasser testified before Congress, said Mr. Toyoda could bring an army of staff members with him, including Mr. Inaba, who could answer technical questions that went beyond his expertise.

“He’s not going to know the answers to the satisfaction of members of Congress,” Mr. Cain said. “But he is able to commit the full resources of the company to explaining what went wrong and to

try to make the situation right with customers. That would be a very important symbolic message for the company to send.”

Hiroko Tabuchi contributed reporting from Tokyo and Nick Bunkley from Detroit..