Dr. K. Venkatesh Prasad is the Senior Technical Leader for Open Innovation and a member of the Ford Technology Advisory Board. Effective January 1, 2017, he is also Ford’s Global Innovation Implementation Leader, Vehicle Components & Systems Engineering.

Dr. Prasad is known as Ford’s “What’s Next” guy, responsible for influencing both transformative and organic innovation at Ford. He was previously responsible for the research, architecture, standards, and proof-of-concepts development electronics and embedded software systems. His revolutionary thinking of a contemporary vehicle as an inter-networked platform-on-wheels in early 2000 has led to the successful development of the renowned Ford SYNC® system, which has directly impacted Ford’s present vehicle production.

In the early 1960s he was just a small boy in Chennai, India, who was fascinated with electricity. As a precocious five-year-old undeterred by his parents’ heed to not play with wires, Prasad conducted his first experiment with electrons by plugging two wet shoelaces into a 220-volt power outlet.

“That shocking lesson stays etched in my mind today,” he said.

Before joining Ford Motor Company in 1996, Prasad worked as a senior scientist at RICOH Innovations in Menlo Park, Calif., developing automatic “lip reading” as a novel human-machine interface. In addition, he was at Caltech and the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., where he worked on the world’s first telerobotic visual surface inspection system to help design the International Space Station.

Attracted by an open-ended challenge to discover ways to integrate “intelligence” into cars and trucks, Prasad joined Ford to work with a small group of engineers in the development of adaptive headlamp and lane-mark detection technologies.

“When I first met with Ford decision makers, they asked me what I knew about cars and I told them, ‘Not much.’ They said, ‘that’s who we need… we have 15,000 engineers here who know everything about cars and trucks. What we need
is someone from outside our box to help us make our products safer, cleaner and the journey more fun.’ That intrigued me,” said Prasad.

As Ford’s “What’s Next” guy, Prasad in the late 1990s was imagining the vehicle as a software platform where features and services could be beamed in from the outside – without incremental built-in hardware. This was during the time when others were hot to find better ways to build in phones and trunk-mounted six-disc CD changers.

“In early 2000, formats started to change drastically – no longer were mechanical devices necessary to play music, only a piece of software. Everyone started carrying cellphones,” he says. “I envisioned transforming the move-alone vehicle into an inter-networked platform-on-wheels so people could use the devices they already had in their vehicle and reduce the steps needed to do things. Such connectivity required a revolutionary change of thinking.”

That revolutionary mind-set led to the development of Ford SYNC®. Software-based, the voice-activated SYNC system allows Ford and Lincoln vehicle owners to seamlessly connect to their cellphone, MP3 players and a host of other features and services in and through their vehicle – hands-free.

In 2011, Prasad architected OpenXC, the industry’s first open-source hardware and open-source software platform – an “innovator’s toolkit” – which launched in 2013 and today is one of the tools used by Ford employee-innovators to design, test and release products and by researchers and experimenters the world over.

He also co-founded Ford’s startup-lab in 2012 as a 5-person office; a year later it scaled to become Ford’s Research & Innovation Center Palo Alto and today is a 150-person operation.

Personal Insights and Fun Facts:

• Prasad earned a Ph.D. in electrical and computer engineering from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., in 1990, and a master’s degree from Washington State University, Pullman
• He is on the advisory boards of engineering departments at Northwestern University and Michigan State University
• Prasad lives with his wife and daughter in Ann Arbor, Mich., and they enjoy hiking the world – mostly in the wild outdoors