

# PREFACE

Over the years, countless authors have drawn portraits of the “learning organization,” yet few companies have successfully operationalized this concept. Although we’re seeing breakneck progress in science and technology, organizations are generally still managed much as they have been since the 1960s. Why?

I think it’s in part because becoming a learning organization calls for the development of scientific thinking habits that don’t come naturally to us. The problem can be simply summarized as a gap between how we assume we think and how we actually think. Most management approaches assume we are logical and rational and think like scientists. Of course we objectively study, experiment, reflect, learn, and then share what we learn with other scientific thinkers, right?

Nope. Instead, we tend to jump to conclusions, gravitate toward the first solution that’s worked for us in the past or makes the most sense to us, or opt for what feels like common sense. We fail to follow up, check results and adjust, and we don’t build on knowledge that’s been gained deep within the organization.

The implications are that our natural jump-to-conclusions nature may make you, your team and your organization less adaptive, innovative and resilient than you think. And that’s a big problem in the complex, unpredictable conditions of the early 21st century.

## **How Can Your Team Learn to Think and Act More Scientifically?**

The tried and proven approach for learning any new skill is the *deliberate practice of specific behaviors, with feedback from a coach*. Toyota Kata offers a structure for doing just this.

The “Kata” in Toyota Kata are practice routines not unlike those in the martial arts. In this case, I mean practicing scientific thinking behavior patterns on real problems and getting daily coaching feedback, typically from a manager or supervisor acting as a coach. This way, team members can develop a habit of greater scientific thinking over

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time. It starts to become more natural to them, and when enough people think and act this way, the team evolves toward a functioning learning organization. It's a means for mobilizing the creative contribution of everyone in your organization to develop solutions, again and again, that are fit for future situations.

This short book tells you what Toyota Kata is all about and is designed to help anyone thinking about getting into it. The book explains how and why – through the deliberate practice of certain behaviors – Toyota Kata can become a lever for changing the culture of your team into one characterized by navigating more scientifically – and thus more successfully – toward any challenging goal. It is aimed at leaders, managers, supervisors and anyone curious about the growing practice of scientific thinking, continuous improvement and organizational adaptiveness. And if you happen to be involved in lean practices, you'll also gain useful insight into some elements that have been missing from that field too.

Mike Rother developed Toyota Kata. He studied Toyota because it is a uniquely interesting organization to learn from. But the Toyota Kata findings apply to characteristics of the human mindset and behavior in *any* team or organization. While Toyota is a leader in scaling and using scientific thinking to its advantage, I have come to see that anyone can do this if they practice often and regularly.

What are the implications of Toyota Kata for you? It gives you a proven, relatively simple, daily approach that your managers, supervisors and team leaders can use to develop their people into successful navigators of unpredictable paths, in a way that ultimately comes to suit your environment.

I wrote this book to share what I've learned with people who may not be quite ready to deep dive into Mike Rother's more detailed books like *Toyota Kata: Managing People for Improvement, Adaptiveness and Superior Results* and *The Toyota Kata Practice Guide*. This is a primer that can be a step toward your own journey of deep learning.

**Part I**, in addition to explaining the origins, basic concepts and vocabulary of Toyota Kata, explains how to get started and highlights the main differences between Toyota Kata and generally recognized lean practice. But make no mistake, Toyota Kata does not run contrary to lean; it is rather a key, less visible and erstwhile missing part of lean.

**Part II** and its two chapters approach things from a different angle, illustrating how Toyota Kata practice is a countermeasure to the natural human tendency to jump to conclusions and how Toyota Kata can be a gateway to organizational learning for you.

I invite you to think of this book as a personal reflection on Toyota Kata – an approach that is barely a decade old and now starting to appear in the mainstream – whose content lies at the intersection of operations management, strategy, organizational behavior, neuroscience and Big History. Consider this book as one-stop shopping for anyone who wants a quick, succinct overview of the literature and lessons learned on Toyota Kata in a fun and easy-to-read way.

I wish you an insightful and enjoyable read!

Professor Sylvain Landry, PhD  
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### How I Became a Kata Geek

A learning organization is a type of social system that focuses on creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge and skills in order to build on these gains and continually transform itself (Garvin, 1993).

The concept, which goes back at least to the works of Chris Argyris (1977) and coauthor Donald Schön (1978), was later popularized by Peter Senge (1990). Even further back, in the 1950s, American economist Herbert Simon built on the 1930s aviation industry concept of the learning curve for individuals and suggested that the notion of acquiring individual skills can also be applied to organizations (Koenig, 1994).

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Yet here we are decades later and our organizations have made surprisingly little progress in their management practices. It appears that *individual* learning does not spontaneously translate into *organizational* learning. Toyota Kata is about bridging that gap.

My curiosity about the subject was piqued in Quebec City on June 18, 2012, when I attended a meeting where Philippe Deslandes, who was working in continuous improvement at a healthcare organization, gave a talk on Toyota Kata. I recall finding his presentation prescriptive and top down – precisely what continuous improvement was *not* supposed to be. And that intrigued me. I now realize that Toyota Kata is in fact neither prescriptive nor top down, though it may look that way at first.

Philippe invited me to the orthopedic outpatient clinic at the hospital where he and some of his colleagues were practicing the Toyota Kata routines. Over a number of visits to the hospital in 2012 and 2013, I peppered him with questions, but felt I had to be missing something. I simply wasn't sharing his level of enthusiasm. Around the same time, I'd bought the *Toyota Kata* book by Mike Rother and browsed through it. I recognized all the familiar lean concepts and was convinced I understood Toyota Kata. Yet, chatting with Philippe, it seemed like I was still missing a piece of the puzzle.

Then in June 2014, I attended a two-day Toyota Kata workshop at the University of Michigan facilitated by Beth Carrington, a consultant who worked alongside Mike after he conducted his research and began to share his findings. I also met Mike, who was on hand to meet the participants.

Full disclosure: I can't tell you exactly what happened during the workshop. If I could, this book would be shorter! Neither can I tell you exactly what it was I hadn't "gotten" before and what I was getting (or at least thought I was getting) now. There's no elevator speech to describe Toyota Kata. What I can tell you is that from that day forward, I became a bona fide Kata geek.

My growing awareness was a humbling experience that came with this lesson: When learning Toyota Kata, beware not to jump to conclusions! If it were an animal, Toyota Kata would be a platypus. Some of its parts may look familiar, but what it's really about and what's behind it are highly unique. New paradigms are often like that.

Since that time, I have practiced Toyota Kata, interacted with Toyota Kata practitioners around the world, participated in Toyota Kata events, organized a few myself, and made the topic central to my graduate *Operations Strategy and Process Improvement* course at HEC Montréal business school.

I'm proud of the fact that as a professor who's expected to be an "expert" in continuous improvement, I put in the personal practice and effort to learn a new way of thinking. It was still a struggle for me and I admit to having a natural tendency to jump to conclusions. We all do, which is why Toyota Kata can be just as useful for you.

So how *about* you? Read on. This book is about a kind of thinking that leads to effective doing and how to develop such thinking in yourself, your teams and your organization. Toyota Kata might be the catalyst you need to develop a management practice that over time allows you to successfully cope with, and even take advantage of, the uncertainties and complexities that lie ahead.