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About the Toyota Kata research and this website

The research that led to the book *Toyota Kata* ran from 2004-2009. The objective was to gain a deeper understanding of how Toyota manages to achieve continuous improvement, and what it will take to develop that in non-Toyota organizations. The research was driven by two questions:

1. What are the unseen managerial routines and thinking that lie behind Toyota's success with continuous improvement and adaptation?
2. How can other companies develop similar routines and thinking in their organizations?

I began by interviewing Toyota people, but it quickly became apparent that they have difficulty articulating and explaining the patterns of their thinking and routines. I believe this is because such patterns represent the customary way of doing things in an organization and are thus somewhat invisible to those carrying them out. The same is true for our managers in our management system.

So we had to shift to figuring it out ourselves by experimenting in factory and managerial settings. Five companies agreed to provide long-term test beds, and several additional companies became sites for shorter, specific trials. The experimenting involved applying technical and managerial Toyota practices and paying particular attention to what did *not* work as intended, investigating why, adjusting accordingly and trying again. After numerous iterations we began to see patterns of thinking and behavior that are clearly different from our prevailing managerial routines. That evolved into a refined model, which I call the “improvement kata.”

During that six-year investigation process I also periodically met with Toyota-group sites, Toyota suppliers and Toyota employees to present our findings about managerial patterns and ask for comment, which would often influence the character of our next trials. Eventually I began hearing statements like, “*Yes, that’s what we do, although we don’t use those words.*” After publication of *Toyota Kata*, several Toyota employees from around the world have emailed me saying, in effect, “*Thank you for putting words to what we do.*”

That was the process by which we distilled out fundamental but not immediately visible aspects of Toyota's approach, what is behind the curtain so to speak. They are patterns that Toyota visitors, observers, benchmarkers and interviewers will not see at the surface.

The lean community has known for a long time that Toyota does something that makes it more capable of continuously improving than other companies, and more recently the community recognized that the management approach is a key factor. But how Toyota manages from day to day and thereby embeds continuous improvement into and across the organization had not been explained.

What was missing, and the gap that *Toyota Kata* fills, is a clear explanation of daily behavior patterns at Toyota (the improvement kata) and how they are taught to everyone (the coaching kata). By explaining these underlying thinking and behavior routines, *Toyota Kata* helps bring to light the context within which Toyota's lean tools are intended to function.

Most exciting is that the research and resulting book reached a level where we are talking more about psychology in organizations, not Toyota per se. The behavior routines were discovered through research in production settings, but they are a management approach that is applicable in many different organizations, old or new, manufacturing or otherwise.

The research cycle never ends, so there is more to learn. For example, the second question -- *How can other companies develop such routines and thinking in their organizations?* -- continues as a main focus of my investigations. And that's the purpose of this website... to continue sharing what we're learning about how to achieve continuous improvement.

Mike Rother