

# Improvement Kata – A New and Challenging Approach To Business Performance Improvement

## BRIEF

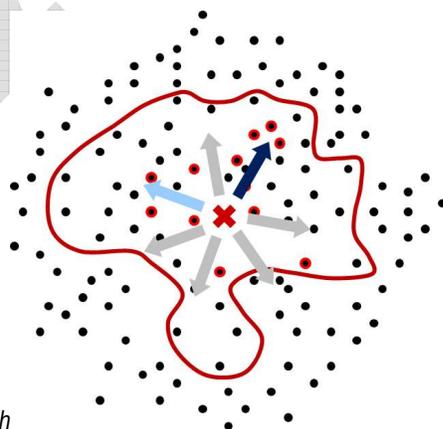
*The Improvement Kata is Toyota's fundamental pattern for learning to improve, adapt and innovate. It is their method of taking them to higher levels of business performance all the while increasing their people's knowledge along the way. Improvement Kata, which includes PDCA, is scientific goal directed work. You are totally driven by where you want to be, not by where you are now. Kata is a Japanese word meaning "way of doing". A kata is a pattern you practice to learn a skill. Genuine and sustainable continuous improvement is a skill that has to be learnt.*

*Improvement Kata challenges traditional improvement thinking ... "no plan will cover everything, and that is OK"!*

## CURRENT APPROACH

In our current "improvement world" we are surrounded by problems, process waste and opportunities for improvement. Based on our knowledge, our experiences, and our bias we see a group, a set of problems / opportunities. We don't see all the opportunities, only the ones we allow ourselves to see. We start solving those problems, why? Because they are familiar to us, they are within our current knowledge limit.

The diagram below (\*) represents the above situation – our current approach. The black dots are all the problems, opportunities and process waste. We are the red cross in the middle, our current knowledge limit is the red line – we only see the problems within the red line. We start working on the red/black dots in the direction of the dark blue arrow. Why in that direction? Because we already know how to address these issues, we are comfortable doing that. We are troubleshooting. Troubleshooting is reacting to abnormalities, trying to counteract random events, something you think you have to do because "things happen".



Picture 1: Current approach

The fundamental problem with the current approach is that your improvement actions may not be aligned to the direction of the business. Your improvement actions may not actually improve quality, productivity or safety performance. It may remove an element of one of the 7 forms of process waste, but there may be no change to bottom line profitability of the business. Thus, the business gained no value from your actions.

### IMPROVEMENT KATA

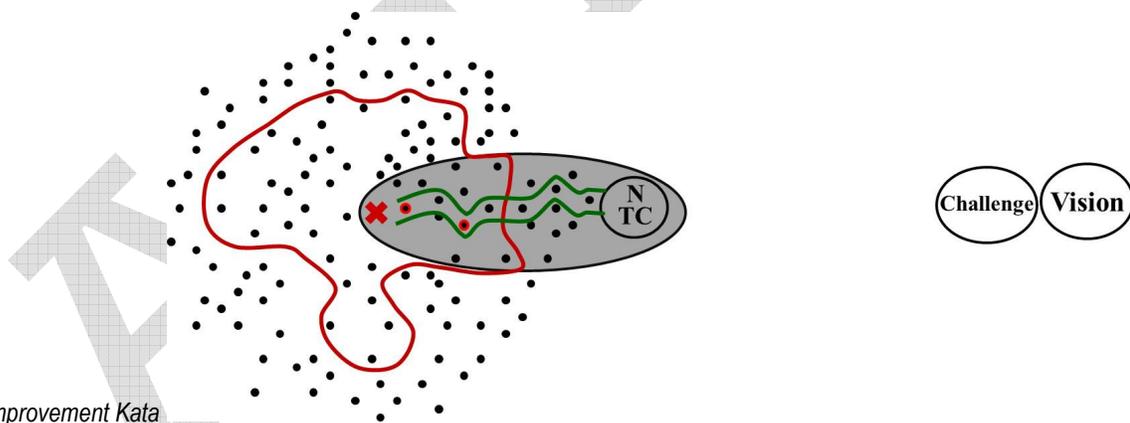
Improvement Kata is a different approach in 2 key ways.

Firstly, to begin with you start not by identifying problems, waste and improvement opportunities. You start by being very very clear on what you WANT. What you WANT must be aligned to overall business objectives. You become totally clear on the desired state, and by when you want to achieve that. You then identify the current situation only in sufficient detail for you to get started, for you to take the first step toward your desired state.

The second major difference in the Improvement Kata approach is that you then start straight away, you take the first step forward toward your desired state. You DO NOT spend days planning how you will get from what you HAVE now, to what you WANT.

Because of this approach, once you get beyond your current knowledge limit, you need a tool to keep you moving toward your desired state. That tool is Edward Deming's PDCA – Plan, Do, Check, Adjust (formerly Act).

The diagram below illustrates Improvement Kata. First you need to be very clear on your desired state, this is the Challenge / Vision on the far right side. Notice the red cross (you) and the black dots (problems, waste, opportunities) are the same as the first diagram. The difference is you start heading toward your desired state by only addressing the black dots that are IN YOUR PATH. These are the obstacles blocking your path to your desired state, these are the ones within the 2 green lines. These are the obstacles you NEED to work on to achieve your desired state. You start striving toward what you WANT. You don't address the others (black dots) around you as long as they are not a risk to the business.



Picture 2: Improvement Kata

Notice that the above “grey zone” takes you beyond your current knowledge limit, the red line. The first black dot beyond the red line within the green lines is unfamiliar to you. How do you address this issue? You use PDCA. Using PDCA will remove that obstacle and reveal the next one all the while moving you toward your desired state. PDCA becomes your “striving tool”.

Source for information: *Mike Rother and Bill Costantino*

Visual Workplace Australasia's work with clients is underpinned by Improvement Kata. Visual Workplace Australasia thanks Mike Rother (author of “Toyota Kata”) and Bill Costantino for their extensive work in detailing the essence of Improvement Kata. Visual Workplace Australasia has developed skills in this method and thank Mike and Bill for that.