IMEC

PRACTICE MAKES IMPROVEMENT.

Why Kata Matters at Every Level in Your Organization

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Welcome & What to Expect

Format

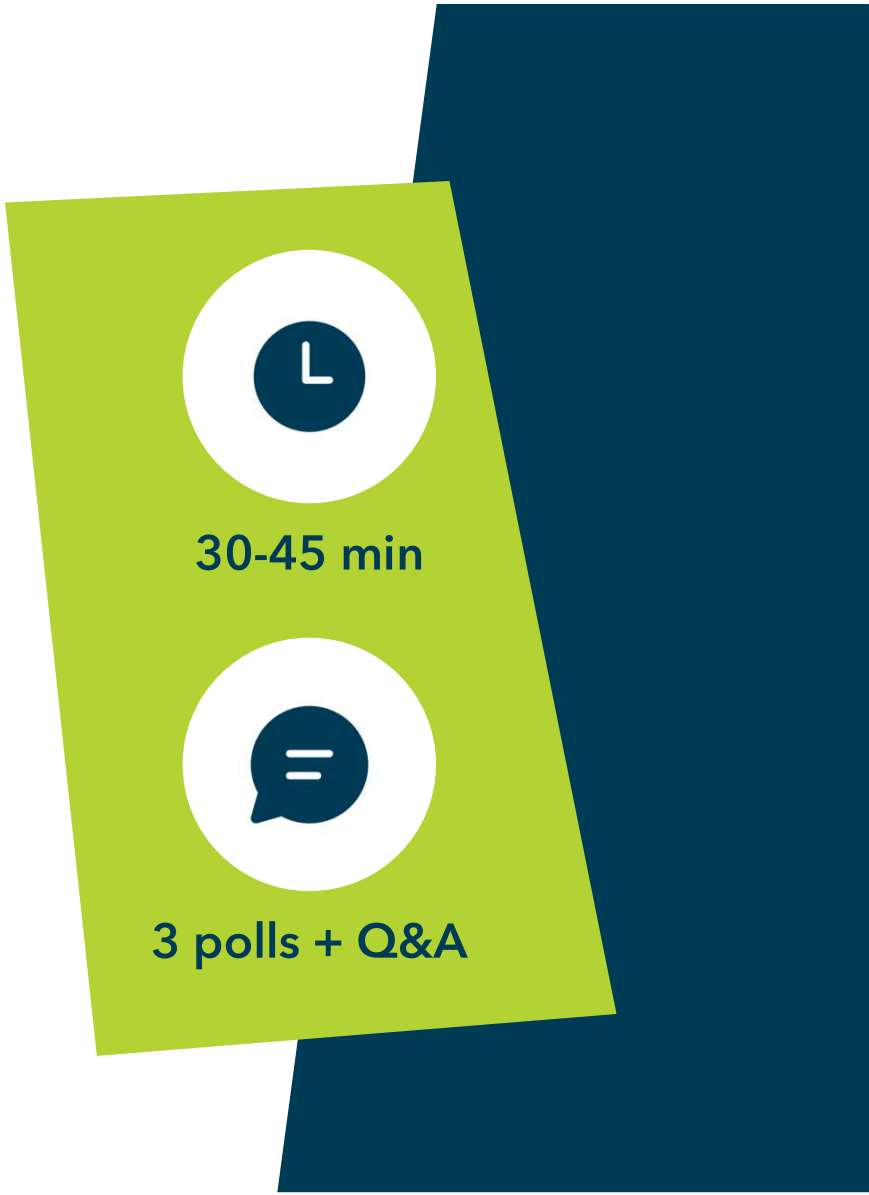
About 30-45 minutes of content with three short polls, then open Q&A. Use chat any time.

You'll Learn

What Kata is, how its two routines work, and how it applies at every level.

You'll Leave With

A simple pattern and a first step you can start practicing this week.



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About Matt



Director of Client Engagement, IMEC

Western Chicagoland suburbs

My Background

- 25+ years in leadership, engineering, and operational excellence
- Started as a machine operator and rose into senior leadership
- Multi-site operations, P&L oversight, and ISO/IATF compliance
- Lean Six Sigma Black Belt; former IMEC Technical Specialist

My Role at IMEC

- Regional Managers and I work side by side with Illinois manufacturers to understand their challenges and opportunities
- A one-stop shop for whatever your business needs
- If we can't do it ourselves, we find someone who can
- Hands-on practitioner perspective that makes improvement stick

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Today's Agenda



- ✓ Why We're Here
- ✓ Mindset & Method
- ✓ The Improvement Kata
- ✓ The Coaching Kata
- ✓ Kata at Every Level
- ✓ Getting Started & Q&A

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Quick Poll: Where Are You on Your Kata Journey?

A

I'm new to Kata - just learning what it is

B

We've tried it, but it hasn't stuck

C

A few teams or areas practice Kata regularly

D

Kata is part of how we work at every level

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Build Problem Solvers

Successful organizations don't just solve problems. They build a culture of problem solvers.



Without a Routine



One-Off Fixes

A few people firefight, lessons stay in their heads, and the same problems keep coming back.



With Kata Practice



Everyday Problem Solving

A structured, repeatable routine lets everyone practice improvement daily and sustain results.

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Why Improvement Efforts Fade



Training Alone

A one-time class builds awareness, but skills fade without repetition on real work.



Projects That End

Gains erode when the effort stops and nobody owns the routine.



Leaders Who Delegate

When leaders only sponsor, teams lack coaching and the habit never forms.

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Kata Is a Mindset and a Method

A Practiced Routine

Kata is a Japanese word for a pattern or routine, practiced repeatedly until good thinking becomes habit.

A Daily Discipline

Problem solving becomes part of everyday work, not a special event or one-time project.

A Shared Culture

When everyone practices the same routines, building problem solvers becomes how the organization works.



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Where Kata Comes From

Mike Rother's research into Toyota's management routines

2004–2009

research period

5

companies as long-term test beds

The Question

What unseen routines lie behind Toyota's improvement, and can other companies learn them?

The Research

A six-year study that ran long-term trials at five companies.

The Finding

Toyota practices and teaches scientific thinking every day, with managers as coaches.

Source: Rother (2009); Rother (2014). See References.

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2004–2009

Years of Rother's research on how Toyota builds improvement habits

18

Industry studies on Toyota Kata, analyzed in the Springer review

Learn more: AME Kata resources, Kata Summit case presentations, and peer-reviewed papers on Kata in manufacturing.

What the Research Says

The evidence for Kata comes from one original study and one review of industry results.

Original Research

Mike Rother's study of Toyota's routines. Rich in insight, but qualitative.

Industry Review

A Springer review found common success factors across the studies.

Sources: Rother (2014); de Souza et al. (2023). See References.

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Skill Comes From Practice

Like a martial artist or a musician, teams get better by repeating a pattern with feedback.



Knowing About It

Training

Explains the concepts and tools, but does not build the habit by itself.





Practicing It

Kata

Repeats a pattern on real work, with coaching, until it becomes second nature.

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Where Kata Happens

Kata is the practice routine. Lean tools are where it plays out, sized to the problem.

Fit the tool.

Keep the pattern.

Huddles

Daily management: a board, a short huddle, and leader routines for everyday issues.

PDCA

Small tests of one change at a time. The engine of every experiment.

A3

One page to think through a problem that needs deeper analysis.

Projects

DMAIC or 8D for complex or recurring quality problems.

Most of what enters Kata is a daily issue, not a full project. Same Kata pattern, sized to the problem.

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What Kata Helps Teams Do

Kata turns improvement into a skill that people build through repetition.

Break It Down

Turn complex challenges into manageable steps.

Practice Daily

Make problem solving a daily discipline, not an event.

Engage Everyone

Involve employees at every level in improvement.

Sustain Results

Use one consistent framework to hold long-term gains.

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The Improvement Kata



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Improvement Kata

A repeatable four-step pattern for moving toward a challenging goal through small, rapid experiments.



Understand the challenge or vision you are working toward.

Go and see. Measure where the process actually is today.

Define the next achievable condition on the path to the goal.

Run small plan-do-check-act cycles to learn what moves you closer.

Then loop back: as you learn, the current state changes and you set the next target.

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Step 1: Direction

Start with a challenge that matters to the organization.

What It Means

- A clear challenge that stretches the team beyond today
- Tied to organizational goals and customer needs
- Set by leaders and understood by the people doing the work

What It Looks Like

- A short challenge statement, such as cutting lead time in half
- A visible chart or board the whole team can see
- Leaders explain why it matters, not how to do it

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Step 2: Current State

Go and see the process as it really works today.

What It Means

- Measure actual performance, not assumptions
- Observe the process first-hand where the work happens
- Use data that is simple, recent, and trusted

What It Looks Like

- Walk the process and time a few cycles
- Capture output, quality, and cycle time on a chart
- Agree on one shared picture of the starting point

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Step 3: Next Target

Define the next achievable condition on the path to the challenge.

What It Means

- A specific target with a date, typically days or weeks away
- Measured in the same terms as the current state
- Small enough to reach, hard enough to learn from

What It Looks Like

- Example: cut changeover from 40 to 30 minutes in two weeks
- Target posted next to the current-state chart
- Reset to a new target once it is reached

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Step 4: Experiment

Learn your way to the target through small, rapid plan-do-check-act cycles.

What It Means

- Identify the obstacles between today and the target
- Work on one obstacle at a time
- Predict the result, try it, and compare

What It Looks Like

- Each experiment fits within a day or a week
- Record the step, the expectation, and what happened
- Surprises are treated as learning, not failure

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Worked Example

An illustrative example from a machining cell.



Make changeovers fast enough to run smaller batches.

Timing shows changeovers average 40 minutes.

Reach 30 minutes within two weeks.

Pre-stage tools at the machine, then re-time the next changeover.

40 min → **30 min**

Average changeover time, with a target within two weeks

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The Coaching Kata



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Two Routines, One Goal

The Improvement Kata is practiced by the learner. The Coaching Kata teaches it and keeps it alive.

The Learner

Improvement Kata

Practices the four-step pattern on a real challenge, one experiment at a time.

The Coach

Coaching Kata

Asks a consistent set of questions to build skill and pass the routine on.

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The Five Coaching Questions

1. What is the target condition?
2. What is the actual condition now?
3. What obstacles are preventing you from reaching the target? Which one are you addressing now?
4. What is your next step? What do you expect?
5. When can we go and see what we have learned from taking that step?

Source: Rother (2009); Rother (2018). See References.

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What Great Coaching Looks Like



Go and See

Coaches watch the work first-hand rather than relying on reports.



Ask, Don't Tell

Questions help learners think for themselves and build their own skill.



Short and Regular

Brief, frequent sessions build the habit better than occasional long reviews.

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Kata at Every Level



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From the Front Line to the Executive Suite

Front Line

Teams practice problem solving on the issues they see first-hand every day.

Managers & Leads

Coach with questions, remove obstacles, and help teams run their next experiment.

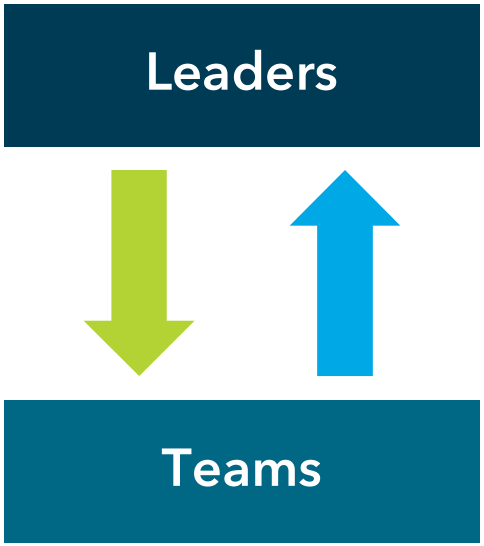
Executive Leaders

Set the direction, align actions to goals, and learn alongside the teams.

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Connecting the Levels

Each level's challenge supports the level above it. Tiered daily management is one way to run this loop.



Direction Down

Executives define the challenge and ask coaching questions of the next level.

Learning Up

Front-line results and obstacles flow back up, so leaders learn what is really happening.

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Quick Poll: Who Drives Improvement Today?

A

A dedicated improvement or CI team

B

Supervisors and managers

C

Front-line employees

D

Everyone, at every level

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Why Kata Stalls

Most stalls trace back to a few predictable causes.

No Time Set Aside	Practice gets crowded out by daily firefighting.
Leaders Sit Out	Without leader coaching, the routine fades.
Targets Too Big	Huge goals hide the next small step.
Skipping the Check	Experiments without reflection do not teach.

Source: de Souza et al. (2023), literature review of 18 industry studies on Toyota Kata (Springer). See References.

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Getting Started

Start small, stay consistent, and let practice build the habit.

Habits That Stick

- Pick one real challenge to work on
- Practice a little every day
- Coach with questions, not answers

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Treating Kata as a one-time training
- Skipping the coaching routine
- Jumping to solutions before understanding the current condition

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Your First 30 Days

Week 1: Choose

Pick one challenge, one team, and one coach. Post the challenge where everyone sees it.

Weeks 2-3: Practice

Document the current state, set a target, and run short experiments with daily coaching at a short team huddle.

Week 4: Reflect

Review what you learned, reset the target, and plan a second team.

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Quick Poll: What Gets in the Way?

A

Not enough time

B

Leadership involvement

C

No clear method or routine

D

Skills and coaching capability

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Kata turns problem solving into a daily habit at every level of your organization.

Break challenges into steps, practice daily, involve everyone, and sustain results. Pick one challenge and run your first experiment this week.

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Questions & Discussion



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References

Sources and further reading for this presentation.

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Plan. Implement. Excel.

Thank You!

Questions, or want to see how Daily Management and other lean tools can help build Kata in your organization? Please reach out.

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