

**The Problem Solving Kata as a Tool
for Culture Change
Building True Lean Organizations**

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CULTURE CHANGE THROUGH PROBLEM
SOLVING KATA: BUILDING TRUE LEAN
ORGANIZATIONS

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Introduction

Some businesses have reduced staff and made resource cuts to survive the global economic downturn, while others have improved business practices and culture. Unfortunately, there is still a difference between successful and less successful businesses in terms of culture adaptability, people management, and process management. In organizations like Toyota, which, in contrast to its rivals, has a mindset of process improvement, culture drives competitive advantage. Other businesses might benefit from Toyota's teachings by changing their routines for behaving and thinking in order to increase staff performance.

In his book *Toyota Kata*, Mike Rother wrote that none outside of the Toyota group of companies has successfully brought systematic continuous improvement into all processes every day and across the organization. Even Toyota's efforts to

spread its approach of continuous improvement to outside suppliers have not met expectations.

Truly, most organizations remain far away from establishing a solid continuous improvement system, and current management behavior rarely leads corporations to do what they should do in terms of both process and people management. Bad habits, behaviors done with little or no conscious thought, continue to affect culture and hold companies back from success.

Recruiting the Right Habits

One of the initial steps for business success is getting the right people on the board with the appropriate skills and attitudes. How companies choose and hire their people reflect their organizational culture. These hires are going to develop new methods of working, invent new products, lead the transformation and build a successful business. They are the company's future leaders.

But do companies really get what they expect from their hiring candidates?

Traditionally, companies demand degrees and certifications to demonstrate expertise, while others prefer to hire based on experience, history and skills. Neither way will work if the organization in question refuses to develop a culture of improvement. Managers hire MBAs and Six Sigma black belts with the mistaken notion that they will transform the business without a transformation of management.

Yet what can a certificate holder do in a system that doesn't engage employees in the continuous improvement cycle, value their ideas and develop them continuously? A closer look at these companies reveals that they don't have a real system capable of utilizing and aligning employee skills and efforts to solve problems and achieve business goals. Your entire professional force can get certified, but if the company culture doesn't allow it, they won't get the chance to practice what they have learned.

And while certificates can prove ability, actual improvement will not occur without a high commitment to self-education and self-development to keep the certificate holder's knowledge up to date, allowing the person to develop better ways of working and practicing. Certificates don't drive performance competency in the practical world.

Josh Kaufman, author of international best-seller *Personal MBA*, wrote that a large body of evidence suggests that what some business schools teach has no connection to what is required for business success.

Unfortunately, according to Kaufman, many business programs have de-emphasized value creation and operations in favor of finance and quantitative analysis.

This extreme focus on financial analysis produces executives who are not capable of improving business performance, driving success and creating value for customers. It doesn't build distinguished leadership.

Reinforced by their MBA education, many executives and managers seek solid financial outcomes, although in many instances they have lost connection with the reality that exists on their organization's front lines. Decision-makers are poorly informed about the actual situation, and decision-making is based on incorrect assumptions and inappropriate targets. They have learned to manage the process via distance using some reported metrics. They have not been taught the culture of improvement.

For example, if managers remain behind the scenes and avoid actual place where the work is done (the gemba), they will not realize what small issues pop up as obstacles