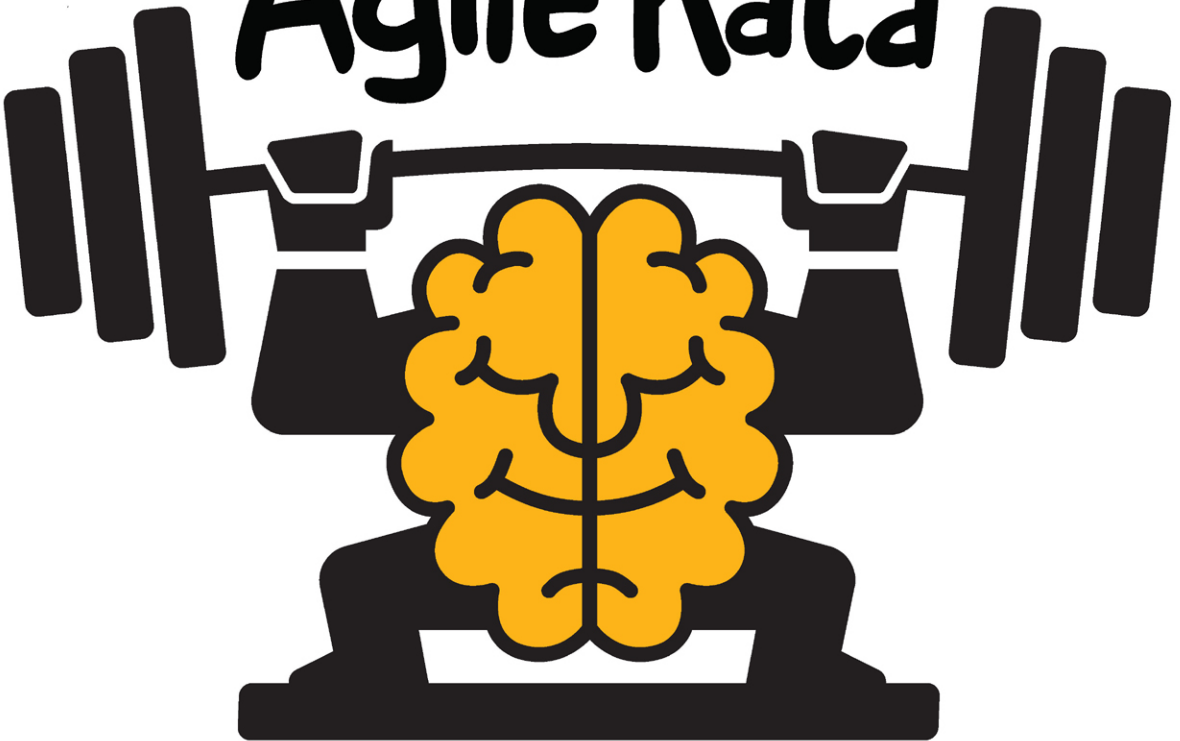


Joe Krebs



Agile Kata



**Patterns and Practices for
Transformative Organizational Agility**



Praise for *Agile Kata*

"Some of the great inventions come from putting seemingly disparate things together. Joe brought together scientific thinking, practiced through Kata, with Agile philosophies and methods and came up with something more powerful than either alone. Read this book and bring Agile to life!"

—Jeffrey Liker, author of *Toyota Way*

"*Agile Kata* draws on Joe Krebs's decades of experience increasing companies' ability to respond to continuous changes in the world and in the market. It's a literal survival guide for companies navigating the uncertainty of a twenty-first century business environment."

—Jeff Gothelf, coauthor of *Who Does What by How Much?*, *Sense & Respond*, and *Lean UX*

"Joe Krebs combines Agile methods with the scientific approach of Kata for continuous improvement in *Agile Kata*. As someone who has applied Toyota Kata in product management, I've seen firsthand how these practices help teams reflect, adjust, and become more effective—just as Agile principles encourage. This book offers practical guidance to help Agile teams do the same, making it an essential read for anyone looking to enhance their Agile practices."

—Melissa Perri, CEO of Product Institute and author of *Escaping the Build Trap*

"The secret to success for business leaders is not in the application of tools but rather the thinking and human capability behind them. In *Agile Kata*, Joe Krebs has created an accessible, practical, and enjoyable leadership book that brings together the disciplines of scientific thinking, grounded in the routines ('kata') of problem-solving and coaching for improvement. *Agile Kata* provides the learning structure for any leader or Agile practitioner seeking to create sustainable impact through innovation and continuous improvement."

—Katie Anderson, author of *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*

"If you're like me, you're a fan of Agile but also a fan of science; you're a fan of patterns but also a fan of experiments; you're a fan of learning but also a fan of joy. If so, you're going to love *Agile Kata*."

—Linda Rising, coauthor of *Fearless Change* and *More Fearless Change*

"Agile practices led us to new ways of working. *Agile Kata* will lead us to new ways of THINKING about new ways of working. In this book, author Joe Krebs takes us down time-honored paths to lead us to a new and joyful destination in our work lives."

—Richard Sheridan, author of *Joy, Inc.: How We Built a Workplace People Love*

Coaching Kata

Improvement Kata, which is introduced in the previous chapter, is a general pattern to potentially improve anything. You can use Improvement Kata for countless things—for example, starting a healthier lifestyle, learning a new language or instrument, or becoming a better athlete.

Performing Improvement Kata by yourself in isolation is not for everybody. Some people need additional motivation to produce an environment of continuous improvement. For example, think about a time in your life when you had a big New Year's resolution, but your energy and focus for keeping it faded away after only a few weeks.

So why not use a coach like so many do in music, learning, arts, or sports? Coaching is such a typical thing in these fields that it's surprising that the business world has also not fully embraced it. People who do take advantage of coaching often quickly learn how powerful it is.

Let's take a look at a different kata that complements Improvement Kata by adding a coaching stance. Appropriately it is called Coaching Kata.

The Coach

Coaching Kata consists of two roles: a coach and a learner. What does this relationship look like? By default, the coach works in a 1:1 relationship with the learner, and ideally they meet for a

short time every day. A rule of thumb is 20 minutes a day, but after the initial stages of setting up a project, the time may be much shorter than that on some days—perhaps even only 5 minutes.

During this time, the learner reflects on their goals, targets, and experiments by examining the content on the storyboard (Figure 3.1). The first goal of the coach is to help the learner apply and practice the Improvement Kata steps. That means the coach has been in the role of a learner before and has experienced Improvement Kata and gained practice with it firsthand.

At Toyota manufacturing, there is a supervisor/subordinate relationship between the learner and the coach, and that relationship is based on their rank or seniority. Later in this book, we break that traditional relationship when we apply the kata mindset for self-organized teams. For now, think of the coach as a person who may or may not have knowledge and experience in the business domain as well as Improvement Kata itself.

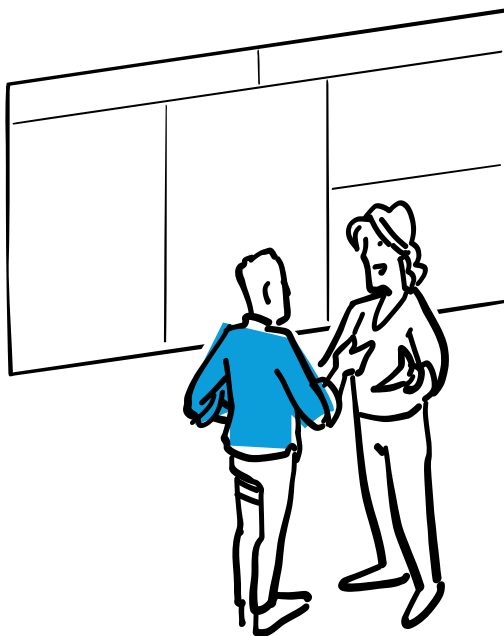


Figure 3.1

Coaching cycle with learner and coach in front of a storyboard

The learner and coach play significantly different roles, but they are both learning in their own ways during the coaching cycle. When a learner admits to not knowing something—an admission that isn't easy to make—those words should trigger a coaching moment. Rather than directing the learner, the coach uses questions to guide them in finding answers. That creates an environment for critical thinking and ownership of problem-solving. At Toyota, failure is seen as an opportunity to learn rather than a situation to be avoided. Where there are problems,

there could be failures. Taiichi Ohno, one of the founding fathers of the production system, said, “Having no problems is the biggest problem of all.”¹

A way the coaching model at Toyota is fundamentally different from others is that coaching is integrated into the workplace. The learner is coached on the job. (It is known as OJD, or on-the-job development.) The saying “If the learner hasn’t learned, then the teacher hasn’t taught” defines nicely who the coach is: a teacher. We will explore these stances more in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 2, I used an example of tennis. Let me take you back to that one more time. If you want to improve your tennis skills, where would you go? A golf or soccer coach? Most likely not, I would assume. Why would anyone seek advice in a sport from somebody who does not know how to play the game? You look for expertise in the sport from someone who knows what they are talking about. In most cases, the coach is expected to be better in the discipline than the learner. In kata, a successful coach/learner relationship requires an experienced coach that coaches the learner in applying Improvement Kata.

So, what is Coaching Kata? It’s a series of targeted, thought-provoking questions that the coach asks the learner during the daily coaching cycle. The coach does not try to solve the problem but helps the learner gain insights and understandings about the current situation.

Not only does Coaching Kata help the learner navigate through Improvement Kata, it helps the coach sharpen their own coaching skills. In a coach/learner relationship, both roles are learning. In situations where the coach has just transitioned from being a learner, there is a starter kata to begin the cycle, and it consists of five questions.

At first, it is recommended you simply read the questions out loud rather than improvising. There is no element of surprise expected by the learner, especially in the beginning of a coaching relationship. This helps the learner stay focused on the most important elements in the beginning. It also helps the coach in transitioning from learner through deliberate practice. As the coach gains experience, they will learn to ask deeper questions and ultimately develop their own coaching method.

The five starter kata questions for the coach are the following:

1. What is the target condition?
2. What is the actual condition now?
3. What are the obstacles you are addressing now?
4. What do you expect from your next step?
5. How quickly can we go and see what we have improved?

When asked, the learner reflects on the information on the storyboard, ideally in front of it. This helps to synchronize the information on the board with what actually happened. Possible discrepancies are fixed on the spot.

1. [TO1988]

As you can tell from these questions, each one brings the learner to a different segment on the storyboard. Technically, you could ask these questions in any order, but if you are new to Coaching Kata, I recommend asking them in the order they're on the storyboard. Once you become more comfortable with the role of kata coach and the questions, you will most likely begin asking follow-up questions. You might even give your own personal spin to any of the five questions. Whatever you do, it's most important to stay away from leading questions.

The Second Coach

Over time, a kata mindset creates an environment for continuous learning, improvement, and growth across an entire organization. This brings up a pressing question about the role of the coach. How does the coach learn, improve, and grow? Who is giving the coach feedback? To address that need, Coaching Kata uses the concept of a so-called second coach. That does not mean a second coach for the learner but a coach for the coach (Figure 3.2).

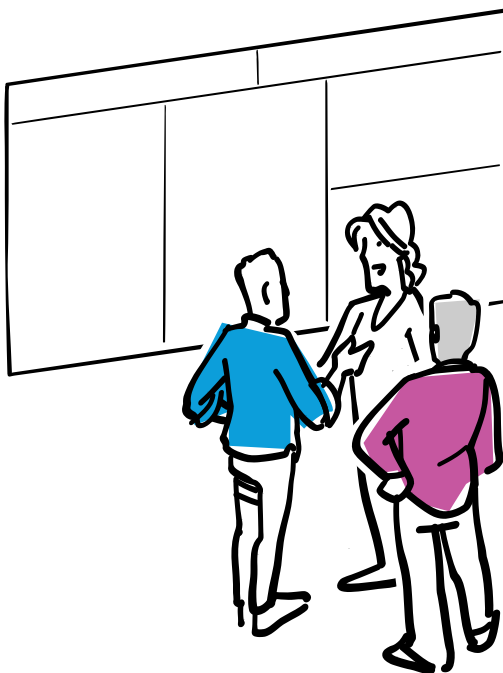


Figure 3.2

Coaching cycle with second coach

The second coach acts as an example of good coaching behaviors and techniques and aids the primary coach in honing their coaching skills and style by demonstrating effective coaching methods and strategies.

The second coach observes the interactions between the learner and the primary coach during coaching sessions and offers the primary coach constructive criticism, points out their strengths, and suggests areas for development. This feedback happens after the coaching cycle between the coach and learner, not while it's happening. The primary coach can improve their coaching techniques and become more successful in directing the learner with the help of this feedback.

Coaching can be difficult, especially for those who are just starting out. The second coach promotes a supportive and helpful coaching environment and provides encouragement to the primary coach. The second coach helps ensure that the coaching procedure adheres to the values and principles of Improvement Kata and Coaching Kata. They also provide feedback about the steps of Improvement Kata, including the experiments and whether the coaching questions were asked in an effective manner.

The coaching relationship is advantageous to the second coach as well. The secondary coach has the chance to expand their coaching abilities by watching the primary coach's interactions with the learner.

When a primary coach is new to Coaching Kata or is coaching complex improvement challenges, the presence of a second coach is especially helpful. It promotes a culture of ongoing learning and improvement among both coaches, while helping to maintain a structured and efficient coaching process.

Learner, coach, and second coach are all roles; they are not permanent positions or assignments. The relationship between the primary coach and the secondary coach might be flipped during a separate or parallel kata. In this case, both coaches would execute the role of a primary coach and secondary coach and mirror each other. This situation can be particularly effective for teams and organizations that are new to the kata mindset by accelerating the adoption of Improvement and Coaching Kata.

Reflection

- As a learner, what qualities are you looking for in a coach to help you be more effective as a learner?
- Can you describe a work situation where you would have benefited from a coach? If so, which one, why, and how?
- What areas of improvements do you see for yourself to become a kata coach?
- How could Improvement Kata steps help you become a better coach?
- Who is a person in your personal or professional environment who could become a second coach for you?
- Describe one small step that you can take to become a second coach to the Kata coaches.



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