

Give Wings to Your Team

The 21st century with all its change and unpredictability also provides us with unparalleled opportunities. Margret Heffernan put it nicely in her 2019 TED talk: “If we foster imagination, inventiveness, and exploration in our teams, we can make any future we want.”

Since there is no roadmap for many of these challenges, the ability to successfully, confidently navigate and explore unknown territory seems to be one of the essential abilities of our time, for individuals, teams, and organizations alike.

As a result, coaching is becoming a core skill for anybody entrusted with a leadership role; coaching to develop people’s navigation skills, a shared mindset of scientific thinking, and establishing a climate that inspires.

That’s what leadership for me is all about. Helping others to grow, so they can successfully build a path where no one has before, in a joint effort to make the future a better one.

Leaders as Coaches

While more and more organizations require leaders to coach their teams, effective coaching is still scarce. Acceptance by team members is often mediocre. The benefit for those team members from coaching is often mediocre, too.

One reason might be this: We often overestimate our ability to coach. This leads us to neglect our need for practice. In one Harvard Business Review study in 2019, about 25% of the participating managers ranked themselves above average while their colleagues ranked them in the bottom third.

Additionally, in many organizations we lack the means for deliberate practice. Giving managers classroom training on coaching and then letting them practice on the job might be too arbitrary and slow. Michael Jordan put it nicely: “You can practice shooting eight hours a day, but if your technique is wrong, then all you become is very good at shooting the wrong way.” In other words, practice doesn’t make perfect; it makes permanent.

Although we might be coaching every day, chances are high that we are not as good as we think, and we are not even getting better at it.

Despite all their training programs, managers often lack the ability to truly coach in a non-directive way. They don’t know how to distribute decision-making to the team and at the same time ensure superior results by developing their team’s adaptiveness and creativity.

As coaches we easily fall into the trap of addressing a team's issue based on our experience. We might give advice and feedback or even orders. While that might create impact in the short term, we will fail to develop team members' skills and a shared meta-skill of scientific thinking within our teams.

Developing the excellent coaching skills that allow you to coach naturally in a highly supportive and motivating way, even when stakes are high, is a challenge. It takes extensive practice.

That is where the Kata Coaching Dojo provides a structured, more effective, and faster approach to develop powerful coaching skills on all levels of an organization.

The Kata Coaching Dojo

Pilots have flight simulators, professional musicians practice in private every day. Where do coaches go to hone their skills? In sports we clearly distinguish between the game and the training court. And there are good reasons for it.



Figure 1 - Game and Practice

No professional athlete tries a new move for the first time in a tournament. Likewise, leaders might be better off not practicing a new approach or specific coaching technique in real-life situations. That would be like trying a new grip on the racket in the Wimbledon final.

Dojo is a Japanese word for the place of martial arts practice. It also translates to 'the place for finding a better way.'

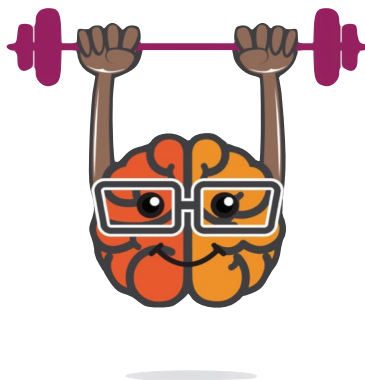
The Kata Coaching Dojo setup allows coaches to repeatedly practice specific situations and responses. The Dojo provides more frequent guided coaching practice than would occur in daily work life. It provides a safe space and sports-like approach with a series of specially designed training exercises and role play in a safe offline environment.

Establishing a permanent Kata Coaching Dojo offers a deliberate way to develop powerful coaching skills at scale and improve the ability of established coaches.

It helps those starting to coach to transfer classroom knowledge into real world mastery through repeated practice, increase coaches' confidence and sets them on the path to build a coaching habit.

In addition, the Kata Dojo setup allows for individual sessions with a single coach or small group struggling with a specific situation. With a sparring partner to help, they can hone their approach for scenarios they find challenging when coaching or communicating with their teams.

Imagine your organization having a permanent training space for managers, supervisors, and team leaders where they can hone their coaching and communication skills. A place for finding a better way.



How does the Kata Coaching Dojo work?

In the Kata Dojo, one person purposefully takes the role of the person being coached, the learner, playing a scripted situation. This offers coaches the opportunity to test and improve their approach with each round.



Figure 8 - Roles in the Dojo

The Kata Coaching Dojo aims at improving the following fields:

1. Using the five phases of the Coaching Kata to structure the conversation.
2. Learning to listen to the answer and observe more precisely.
3. Building a reference for each of the five phases to evaluate the answer.
4. Asking deepening questions to help the other person to reflect on their approach and adjust by themselves, if necessary.

Effective coaching depends on having a reference and hearing and comparing the answer with it. Without a reference, asking questions is arbitrary. Any answer would be acceptable.

In organizations this has a second implication. If coaches have different references, they will coach differently even if they are using the same coaching model and questions. As their evaluation of the answers will differ, so will their reactions. This is not only ineffective for developing a collective scientific mindset but will also confuse those being coached. Above all, different coaching approaches create different behavior patterns and thus, are unlikely to develop a company's culture in a deliberate way.

The Kata Coaching Dojo ensures better learning progress by building on the following pillars:

- **The five phases of the Coaching Kata are used as an underlying pattern for the coaching conversation.** That allows us to practice coaching phase by phase, reducing complexity. Coaches can build their reference for evaluating answers and accumulate coaching tips phase by phase.
- **Practice focuses on patterns rather than individual events.** When coaching we encounter an unlimited number of individual situations. No two coaching conversations are alike. Practicing and preparing for each situation with an individual reaction from the coach, for example with a list of deepening questions, is impossible. We would need to learn and practice an unlimited number of deepening coaching questions to be prepared for every situation.

However, there seem to be underlying patterns in answers and behavior. Facts and data for the actual condition might be outdated or not relevant. Conclusions might be drawn too early or based on assumptions. A proposed next step could be too big, too expensive, or too risky. Although the situation and the exact words used by the learner will be different, the patterns are there every time.

If coaches are able to identify the underlying thinking or behavior pattern, they can address it with a matching coaching approach. Doug Lemov calls this “identifying and practicing micro skills.”

Identifying relevant behavior patterns and developing coaching tips that can be generally used to address a pattern are a powerful way to develop good coaching at scale.

Moreover, we can apply that coaching approach universally, in many different situations.

Use the five phases of the Coaching Kata as an underlying navigation structure for the conversation. Evaluate the answer, find the pattern that needs to be addressed, apply the matching coaching approach and you can coach in a helpful way.

- **Mastery before complexity**

We might think that practicing single phases of a coaching cycle in the Dojo is too far away from reality to provide useful benefit. Quite the opposite is the case. Just like in any other field, mastery is based on practicing underlying micro skills that make up the complete performance. Once we have mastered one micro skill, we can practice the next one. After mastering a second micro skill we can run a combined exercise where we need to apply both micro skills. After that we might stack another micro skill on top and so on until we get close to simulating reality.

Reality is always blended, and we need several micro skills to master a real-life coaching cycle. However, if we start by practicing complex situations that require multiple skills, we will achieve mediocracy rather than mastery.

Mastery of individual micro skills comes before complexity. Then we can combine them in a dedicated way and practice applying them in combination. That's what I call skill stacking.

The Dojo setup allows us to practice individual micro skills as well as deliberately creating situations where a combination of two or more skills is needed. We can purposefully increase the level of difficulty to match a coach's learning curve, just like we would increase the weight on a workout station.

How does the Kata Coaching Dojo help in an Organization?

When organizations start with the Coaching Kata, they often start with a pilot group of coaches that practice Improvement Kata and Coaching Kata by coaching each other. After developing sufficient coaching ability, these first coaches serve to develop the next wave of coaches. The Kata Coaching Dojo provides an excellent way to speed up the learning process of the shepherding group and helps to develop further coaches much faster. Practicing in the Dojo should always be combined with running real-life coaching cycles. A group of coaches could aim for daily real-life coaching cycles and also meet for practice in the Dojo once or twice a week.

Although the Kata Coaching Dojo can also be run in longer sessions, like a half-day course, it usually works best as a short, weekly workout. Just like going to the gym. The short Dojo sessions can be run in person or online.

Installing a Kata Coaching Dojo is a permanent invitation and opportunity for managers, supervisors, and team leaders to hone their coaching and communication skills.

When individual coaches are struggling with a specific situation, replaying the situation in the Dojo offers the possibility to develop and practice a suitable approach.

A Kata Coaching Dojo is also a helpful tool for second coaches developing other coaches.

When observing coaching cycles, a second coach could identify patterns where an individual coach or a group of coaches is struggling. Rather than giving feedback right there, it might be more effective to go to the Dojo and practice these situations.

The idea of the Kata Coaching Dojo goes far beyond a 1:1 coaching conversation or a coaching cycle in front of a storyboard. In which situations would it be helpful to use a coaching approach instead of giving orders? How about when working with A3, in the daily shop floor meetings, or in a huddle meeting? We could learn how to coach in these situations by developing specific Dojo exercises like an A3 Coaching Dojo, a shop floor Management Coaching Dojo, or an Agile Coaching Dojo.

This also applies to creating Coaching Dojos for different professions and the everyday situations they face. There could be Coaching Dojos for nurses and doctors to practice coaching patients or teachers coaching students, project managers or scrum masters coaching teams.

Although we usually run Dojo exercises in a 1:1 setting, that is not a must. You could develop exercises for coaching in a team situation as well. Two or more people play scripted roles and the coach can practice how to coach in such a situation. As this is quite difficult for the coach to handle you might want to use a step-by-step approach so the coach can stack the necessary skills one by one.

Surprising side effects of the Kata Coaching Dojo

Using the five phases of the Coaching Kata as an underlying structure while practicing scripted situations allows for extremely specific feedback. Reflecting and giving feedback after a role play is easier and tends to be more specific with an underlying pattern. In contrast, feedback on a real-life coaching conversation tends to be more general and often lacks focus. In a group, everybody shares different aspects of insight. Getting focused feedback in the Dojo helps the coach practice a specific skill.

Applying the micro skills practiced in the Dojo is not limited to kata coaching cycles. As coaches learn to identify behavior and communication patterns, they can apply the coaching approaches practiced in the Dojo as well as the five phases of the Coaching Kata, in a wide range of situations.

Coaches find it a lot easier to use the Coaching Kata structure in real-life after practicing in the Dojo. Sometimes individuals are hesitant to use the set of starter questions provided by the Coaching Kata. Seeing peers practicing and using the Coaching Kata questions in the Dojo often changes their opinion. Seeing others struggle and practice increases confidence. We are all learning.

When teams of coaches practice in the Dojo, they discuss their individual approaches for coaching in different situations. This helps to build and align their reference as well as to spread best practices as coaching behavior gets more consistent throughout an

organization.

Above all practicing with peers in the Dojo is great fun. It creates a playful yet immersive learning experience.

With the Kata Coaching Dojo, we have a way to develop a coaching approach for a wide range of everyday situations and roles. The Dojo is a remarkably effective way to develop a coaching mindset and coaching skills at scale throughout an organization. Imagine your organization having one.