

CORPORATE TABOOS — VOLUME II

Leadership Failures We All See But No One Fixes

Issue #5

"We Don't Have Time to Train"

— *Why Treating Training as an Expense
Is a Leadership Failure — and How to Build
a Continuous Learning Culture with Deming and Toyota Kata*

The newsletter for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.

The War Story

The statistical process control training had been scheduled four times in eighteen months.

The first time, a customer audit landed on the same week and all available engineers were redirected. The second time, two operators called out sick and the floor supervisor decided it was better to run short-handed than lose the production. The third time, it was actually rescheduled by the training coordinator before anyone in operations had to make the call — a large order had been moved up by two weeks and the timing 'just didn't work.' The fourth time, it happened. Fourteen of the twenty-two people who needed the training attended. The other eight were 'covering critical functions' and would be 'caught up later.'

Later did not arrive.

The plant's SPC program had been initiated two years earlier as part of a quality system upgrade required by a major automotive customer. Charts were posted at every workstation. Control limits were displayed. The visual infrastructure of a functioning SPC program was present and convincing to anyone walking through on an audit.

What was not present was consistent understanding of what the charts meant or what operators were supposed to do when a data point approached a control limit. Some operators had received the original training and applied it correctly. Some had received it and forgotten the portions that weren't reinforced. Some had never received it. And one operator — Marcus, whose workstation produced the highest process variability on the floor — had been hired after the original training cohort and had been taught SPC by the operator he replaced, informally, in thirty minutes on his second day.

Marcus was conscientious and observant. He knew his charts looked different from the others. He had asked his supervisor twice whether that was a problem. Both times his supervisor had said they'd get to it. When the automotive customer's process audit team arrived and reviewed twelve months of Marcus's SPC data, they found forty-seven instances in which out-of-control signals had been present and unaddressed. The corrective action plan that followed cost the plant sixty-two thousand dollars and eleven weeks of intensive remediation.

At the post-audit review, the quality manager said something that belonged on a wall: 'We thought we didn't have time to train. It turns out we didn't have time not to.'

Training deferred is never training saved. The skill gap doesn't wait for a convenient quarter. It compounds — quietly, invisibly, and expensively.

Name the Failure: Training as Expense vs. Training as System

The failure at this plant was not that training was canceled once due to a genuine emergency. It was that training was treated as a discretionary activity — something that happened when

operational demands permitted, which in practice meant it happened inconsistently, incompletely, and always at the bottom of the priority stack.

This is the defining feature of the training-as-expense mindset: training competes with production for the same time and resources, and production wins by default. The logic seems reasonable in the moment — you cannot ship training to a customer, and the immediate cost of not producing is visible and measurable. The cost of not training is deferred, distributed across dozens of small quality gaps and minor errors, and effectively invisible until something like a customer audit forces the accounting.

Training as Expense	Training as System Investment
Scheduled when operations allow; canceled when they don't	Scheduled as a non-negotiable operational requirement with the same protection as safety obligations
Measured by seat-time and completion rates	Measured by demonstrated capability change and performance impact
Managed by HR or training coordinator in isolation from operations	Owned by operations leadership as a core management responsibility
Delivered once; assumed to be retained indefinitely	Delivered, reinforced, practiced, and verified on a defined cycle
Cut first when budgets tighten	Protected as a strategic asset — the alternative cost is calculated and made visible
Evaluated on cost	Evaluated on capability gap and quality risk reduction

Marcus's thirty-minute informal SPC orientation was not an unusual failure of a careless organization. It was the predictable output of a system that treated structured training as something to get around to — and that, in the absence of an explicit requirement to verify capability before deployment, defaulted to the fastest path to production coverage. The gap between Marcus's actual understanding and the understanding the SPC program required was never measured, because the system had no mechanism to measure it.

Deming's 14 Points: Why Training Is Not Optional

W. Edwards Deming's 14 Points for Management are the foundational framework of the quality management movement. Three of the fourteen points address training and development directly — a proportion that reflects Deming's conviction that continuous learning is not a supplement to quality management but a prerequisite for it.

Point 6: Institute Training on the Job

Deming's sixth point is not a recommendation to provide occasional training. It is a requirement to institute training — to build it into the operating system of the organization rather than treating it as an add-on. The specific emphasis on 'on the job' reflects Deming's understanding that theoretical training disconnected from the actual work produces theoretical capability rather than practical capability.

The SPC training that the plant scheduled and rescheduled was theoretical by design: a classroom session, a set of slides, a workbook. The capability required was practical: operators watching live charts, recognizing specific patterns, making real-time decisions about process adjustment. These are different activities. A training program that addresses only the first while assuming transfer to the second will produce Marcus: someone who received instruction but not capability.

Point 13: Institute a Vigorous Program of Education and Self-Improvement

Deming's thirteenth point distinguishes training — the transfer of specific skills for current roles — from education: the broader development of understanding, judgment, and adaptability that enables people to improve their own work and their organization's systems. Both are required. The training-as-expense organization invests minimally in the first and almost nothing in the second.

The practical implication is that learning must be continuous, not episodic. A workforce that received SPC training two years ago and has had no structured reinforcement since then does not have current SPC capability — it has the residue of past SPC training, degraded by time, inconsistent practice, and the absence of feedback on whether understanding was retained and applied correctly.

Point 7: Adopt and Institute Leadership

Deming's seventh point is the one training programs most consistently ignore: the leader's responsibility for the training environment. Deming was explicit that management must understand the work well enough to distinguish between workers who need training and workers who have systemic problems that training cannot fix. A supervisor who tells Marcus 'we'll get to it' when Marcus asks whether his chart patterns are a problem has failed at exactly the leadership responsibility Deming identified: using knowledge of the work to direct appropriate development resources toward the people who need them.

Deming's Perspective on the 'No Time to Train' Problem

Deming was characteristically direct about the training-as-expense mindset: organizations that treat learning as a cost rather than an investment are optimizing for the short term at the expense of the system they depend on. In Deming's framework, a quality system is only as capable as the people operating it — and a people capability that is not maintained is a quality capability that is actively degrading. 'We don't have time to train' is, in Deming's terms, a statement about the organization's willingness to manage its own capability decline.

Toyota Kata: Learning Built Into the Work, Not Added On Top of It

Mike Rother's research into Toyota's management practices identified what he called 'Toyota Kata' — the habitual patterns of thinking and behavior through which Toyota embeds learning into daily operations rather than scheduling it as a separate activity. The Kata framework provides the most practical operational model for the training-as-system approach that Deming described.

Toyota Kata has two primary components: the Improvement Kata and the Coaching Kata. Together they describe a learning system that is inseparable from the work itself.

The Improvement Kata: A Scientific Thinking Routine

The Improvement Kata is a four-stage thinking pattern that Toyota employees practice until it becomes habitual: understand the direction, grasp the current condition, establish the next target condition, and experiment toward the target using PDCA cycles. What makes it a learning system rather than a problem-solving method is the word 'practice' — Toyota Kata are not frameworks applied occasionally to significant problems. They are thinking routines practiced daily on small problems until the pattern of scientific thinking becomes automatic.

Applied to the training gap problem: instead of scheduling an SPC training event once and hoping capability transfers, the Improvement Kata approach would set an explicit target condition for SPC capability (what does a fully capable operator look like, specifically?), measure the current condition for each operator against that target, and run small PDCA experiments to close each individual gap — verifying capability change rather than assuming training completion equals capability.

The Coaching Kata: Learning Through Daily Practice

The Coaching Kata is the management behavior that drives the Improvement Kata. Toyota leaders — from team leaders to plant managers — spend a defined portion of each day coaching their direct reports through the Improvement Kata: asking questions, challenging assumptions, reviewing PDCA cycles, and verifying understanding. This is not a periodic performance review. It is a daily interaction pattern.

The Coaching Kata provides the reinforcement mechanism that most training programs are missing. A single SPC training session produces knowledge that decays. Daily coaching interactions that ask 'what does this chart pattern tell you?' and 'what did you decide to do about it and why?' produce capability that compounds. The operator who has had that conversation fifty times has different SPC capability than the operator who sat through a four-hour class.

The Kata Insight That Changes Everything

Rother's most important observation from his Toyota research: Toyota is not better than other manufacturers because Toyota people are smarter or more disciplined. Toyota is better because Toyota has built learning into the daily management routine in a way that other manufacturers have not. The difference is not talent or culture in the abstract — it is a specific set of leadership behaviors practiced daily that happen to produce continuous capability development as a byproduct of normal management activity. You do not have to find extra time

to implement Toyota Kata. You have to change what you do during the time you already spend with your team.

Building the Training System: Five Structural Requirements

The training-as-system approach is not a training calendar with better content. It is a capability management system with five structural requirements that distinguish it from the training-as-expense model that produced Marcus's situation.

Requirement 1: Capability Standards Before Training Plans

Training programs that are designed without first defining the capability standard they are trying to produce are guessing. The first requirement of a training system is a capability matrix for each critical role: what specific knowledge and skills does this role require, at what level of proficiency, and how will that proficiency be verified?

The capability matrix is not a job description. It is an operational definition of competence — specific enough that two different assessors evaluating the same operator would reach the same conclusion about whether the required capability is present. If the capability standard for SPC operation is 'understands SPC,' the matrix is not complete. If it is 'correctly identifies all eight Western Electric rules for out-of-control signals, with demonstrated accuracy in ten live assessments on their own workstation chart,' the matrix is useful.

Requirement 2: Gap Assessment Before Training Deployment

Training delivered to people who already have the capability is waste. Training delivered to people without first measuring their current capability is guesswork. The second requirement is a gap assessment process that measures current capability against the standard before determining what training each person needs.

This is how Marcus's situation would have been caught. A gap assessment on his workstation — reviewing his SPC charts for evidence of capability, asking him to walk through his decision-making on a recent data point — would have revealed in fifteen minutes that his thirty-minute informal orientation had not produced the capability the role required. The assessment is not punitive. It is diagnostic: the output is a development plan, not a discipline record.

Requirement 3: Capability Verification, Not Completion Tracking

The metric that most training programs use — completion rate — measures attendance, not learning. Fourteen of twenty-two people completing the SPC training is a 64% completion rate. It tells you nothing about whether any of the fourteen who attended can correctly apply SPC decision rules on their workstation under real production conditions.

Replace completion tracking with capability verification: after training, each participant is assessed against the capability standard using a method that reflects real working conditions —

not a multiple-choice quiz but a demonstrated performance in the actual context where the capability is needed. This assessment determines whether the training achieved its purpose, not whether it happened.

Requirement 4: Reinforcement Cycles, Not One-Time Events

Capability acquired in a training event and not reinforced degrades. The research on skill retention is consistent: without practice and feedback, a significant portion of training content is not retrievable after thirty days, and practical capability declines even faster for skills that are applied infrequently or in high-stakes situations.

Design reinforcement into the system explicitly. For each critical capability, define: how frequently will this skill be practiced in normal work, and when practice is infrequent, what structured reinforcement — brief refreshers, coached practice, competency checks — is scheduled to maintain proficiency? The reinforcement schedule is part of the training system, not an afterthought.

Requirement 5: Leadership Development Accountability

Who owns training in your organization? In most organizations, the honest answer is HR or a training coordinator — which means training ownership sits outside of the operational leadership chain and competes for leadership attention rather than receiving it as a core responsibility.

The training system requires that capability development for each team is owned by the team's leader — tracked in their performance review, reflected in their daily management routines, and measured not by whether training was scheduled but by whether capability gaps were closed. This is the Toyota Kata Coaching Kata requirement, applied as a management accountability: the leader's job includes developing the capability of their team, and that development is a visible and measurable output of their leadership.

The PDCA Learning Cycle Applied to Capability Development

The PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Adjust) cycle is the backbone of Toyota's continuous improvement methodology. Applied to capability development, it provides a rigorous structure for managing training as a system rather than an event.

PDCA Stage	In Production Quality	In Capability Development
Plan	Define the target process condition; identify the gap between current and target; design the experiment or change	Define the capability standard for the role; assess current capability gap; design the development intervention (training, coaching, practice, assessment)

PDCA Stage	In Production Quality	In Capability Development
Do	Implement the change or experiment at small scale; observe carefully; collect data	Deliver the training or coaching intervention; observe the learner's application; collect capability evidence
Check	Compare actual results to predicted results; identify what was learned from the experiment	Assess actual capability against the standard; compare to predicted capability change; identify gaps between training design and capability outcome
Adjust	Update the standard work if the change improved the process; refine the approach if results were mixed; abandon the change if it didn't work	Update the training design if gaps remain; provide additional coaching or practice; adjust reinforcement schedule; escalate if capability gap persists despite intervention

The critical step that the plant's SPC training program skipped was Check — verifying whether the training produced the capability it was designed to produce. Without that verification, the cycle could not Adjust, which meant each training delivery reproduced the same gap without anyone knowing it existed until a customer audit made it visible. PDCA applied to training is a closed loop. Training delivered without capability verification is an open loop — and open loops accumulate drift until something external forces a reckoning.

Making the Business Case: The Cost of Not Training

The reason 'we don't have time to train' persists as a leadership position is that the cost of not training is almost never calculated and presented alongside the cost of training. The plant manager who defers SPC training to protect production output has made an implicit trade: short-term production continuity for long-term quality risk. That trade looks reasonable because only one side of it is visible.

Making both sides visible requires calculating the cost of the capability gap — not in abstract terms but in the specific costs that the organization is already paying:

- Defect and rework costs attributable to process steps where operator capability is below standard. In most organizations, this analysis has never been done. The defects are tracked; the capability gap as a cause is not.
- Customer audit findings and corrective action costs attributable to inadequate training and verification. The sixty-two thousand dollar corrective action at this plant was a direct training cost — it just appeared on the ledger twelve months after the training was deferred.
- Onboarding ramp time for new operators who are deployed without verified capability and require extended supervision and rework correction before reaching standard performance.

- Regulatory and certification risk for organizations in industries where operator qualification is a compliance requirement. Training deferred is a compliance exposure that arrives without warning.

The Calculation That Changes the Conversation

For any deferred training decision, run this calculation: What is the estimated cost of the quality gap that the training was designed to close — in defects, rework, customer risk, and audit exposure — per month of deferral? Compare that number to the cost of running the training this month. In almost every case where this calculation is done honestly, the deferred training is more expensive than the training itself. The problem is that the calculation is almost never done — because the cost of not training is invisible until it isn't.

Quick Reference: The Training System Audit

Audit Question	If No — Gap Action
Does every critical role have a defined capability standard specific enough that two assessors would reach the same conclusion about proficiency?	Develop capability matrices before scheduling or conducting training; start with the highest-risk roles
Are capability gaps assessed before training delivery — not assumed from role assignment or tenure?	Add gap assessment to the onboarding and recertification process; make it diagnostic, not punitive
Is capability verified after training through demonstrated performance — not only tracked by completion?	Replace completion metrics with capability verification; define the assessment method before designing the training
Is there a defined reinforcement schedule for all critical capabilities, not just initial delivery?	Map the retention risk for each critical capability; design reinforcement cycles proportional to that risk
Do operational leaders own capability development for their teams as a tracked performance accountability?	Add capability gap closure to the leader's performance criteria; remove training ownership from HR-only responsibility
Has the cost of recent quality failures been analyzed for training gap as a contributing root cause?	Conduct a training gap root cause analysis on the last three significant quality events; calculate the delayed training cost

The Bottom Line

Marcus's forty-seven unaddressed SPC signals cost the plant sixty-two thousand dollars. The original SPC training that would have verified his capability cost approximately eight hundred

dollars in instructor time and materials. The four deferrals that preceded Marcus's hire — and the absence of a gap assessment process when he arrived — cost nothing visible. They cost nothing visible until they cost sixty-two thousand dollars.

The quality manager's post-audit statement was correct and insufficient. 'We didn't have time not to train' is true. It does not, by itself, change the system that made four training deferrals the rational response to operational pressure each time they occurred. Changing that system requires structural changes: capability standards that define what 'trained' means, gap assessments that reveal what's actually missing, verification processes that confirm training worked, reinforcement cycles that maintain what training built, and leadership accountability that treats capability development as an operational requirement rather than a scheduling aspiration.

The organizations that have time to train are not the ones with lighter operational demands. They are the ones that have decided capability development is a requirement, not a preference — and have built the system to manage it accordingly. Deming knew this in 1950. Toyota proved it for fifty years. The plant that deferred four SPC trainings learned it sixty-two thousand dollars at a time.

Every hour not invested in training is an hour borrowed against quality. The interest rate is high, the repayment schedule is unpredictable, and the bill always arrives at the worst possible moment.

Coming Up in Issue #6

Results at Any Cost: The Hidden Leadership Mistake That Destroys Quality Culture — High performers who damage culture, collaboration, or processes still get promoted or bonused. Aligning rewards with Crosby's Prevention Mindset and why what you measure and reward is what your quality system becomes.

Corporate Taboos Vol. II is written for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.

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