
Leadership Lessons From an Olympic Judo Medallist



By [L. Felipe Monteiro](#) , INSEAD

Bronze-winning Flávio Canto has created a network of dojos that is transforming lives in some of Brazil's roughest neighbourhoods.

"A man is the size of his dream." – Fernando Pessoa

These words of the Portuguese [poet](#) greet visitors in a dojo in the slums, or *favelas*, of Rio. Purpose permeates this NGO, created by Olympic judoka Flávio Canto. Central to the mission of [Instituto Reação](#) (Reaction Institute) is the transformation of lives. In business schools, transformation is an oft-used word – especially when we consider [digital](#) or [organisational](#) transformation. But sometimes we need to take a step back and see the bigger picture. For Canto, individual transformation starts with the first step, the first kick, the first fall, the first bit of self-respect.

Canto, who won bronze for Brazil at the 2004 Olympics, is committed to improving the lives of children in precarious communities, pulling them up through the values of his sport. He turned to the world of education to put into practice one of the highest principles of judo, *Jita Kyoei*: mutual benefit. All growth must be shared.

The *favelas* around Rio de Janeiro are **poor, crowded and violent places** to grow up. Canto told me how he lost students from his dojo, and just what this community is up against. The first time he was in a *favela* was when he visited Rocinha, Rio's largest slum, at the age of 25. Initial funding for his NGO came from crowdfunding and sponsorship from about 40 friends and family members.

Instituto Reação works to promote human development and social inclusion, training black belts on and off the mat. Founded by Canto, his coach, Geraldo Bernades, and friends, the NGO promotes true social transformation, using sport as an educational and integrational tool, turning judo from a sport to a way of life in vulnerable regions of Rio de Janeiro. With sponsorship from companies such as IBM and Visa, the NGO offers judo lessons to more than a thousand children, adolescents and young people, working on the principles and values of sport in dojos around Rio and the central city of Cuiabá.

Reaching out

The word “reaction” is an important concept in this VUCA world. Global NGOs need to be able to react quickly, like UNICEF did when it had to **rework its supply lines** into Yemen. Entrepreneurs restart whole businesses or even industries in reaction to a need. Reacting, as we have seen, can lead to a push forward. Consider **Go-Jek**, which started out as a motorcycle-ride hailing app, threading through the dense traffic of Jakarta, but moved into other services, including fintech. There is a resiliency borne from reactions to hurdles, and this is clearly an important part of Instituto Reação.

“The kids, they arrive in Reação through martial arts, judo and jiu-jitsu. We have an educational programme and cognitive skills methodology,” explained Canto. The NGO goes beyond martial arts into transcendental meditation to help the judokas.

Well known in Brazil as a **presenter**, he said, “I don't believe in the hero kind of leadership. I think you have to make everyone feel that they are very important.”

Training for the Olympics and competing at the highest level have taught Canto the importance of getting up off the mat. “Judo is a sport one normally associates with someone throwing someone else, and someone falling. Not many people see the most important part of judo is when you stand up,” he explained.

Canto said, “One of the ideas in judo is that every time you fall, you have to stand up stronger than you were before. You have to learn something from that defeat.” Judo taught him how to lose and, most importantly, how to recover from failure stronger than before.

Olympic lessons are about far more than standing on the podium and watching your flag hang in front of thousands of people in an arena. A key one is understanding that we aren’t going to win all the time; sometimes we lose and we can ask ourselves why. The only way to win all the time is to **avoid risk completely** – the opposite of leadership. The opportunity of failure should not be belittled.

“Every time I had a defeat in judo, I stopped, I breathed, and I realised and I knew that that was a very important moment. What I was going to do at that moment was absolutely up to me,” he said.

“Instituto Reação came from my biggest defeat in judo. I lost the trial to the Olympics in Sydney. I had to do something to give purpose to that difficult moment,” Canto said. “That's when Reação started. If I have a gold medal in my life, that's the one.”

Always training

Although Canto is no longer a professional athlete – his last medal was gold in the 2010 Pan-American Judo Championships – he continues to evolve. With other Brazilian CEOs and leaders, Canto was a participant in **PGA**, a programme for Brazilian leaders run in partnership with Fundação Dom Cabral, aimed at those who face the business challenges of continuity and sustainable growth in volatile, uncertain and complex environments. Including leaders like Canto in a group of CEOs has enormous benefits as **diversity** of thought, of backgrounds, opens up discussions.

Although there is a perceived division between the heads of for-profit firms and non-profits, leaders of these organisations can learn from one another. For example, leaders who make the **connection to others inherent in their purpose** encourage ethical behaviour.

At Reação, Canto fights against what he refers to as “the lack of opportunities at the start line”. From the beginning, children who live in poor areas are at a disadvantage in terms of education and opportunity. When he talks about Olympic lessons, he mentions the difference between changing

the way people feel for a moment while watching the Olympics and changing whole lives – from a momentary feeling of pride, glee, jubilation to a transformed life.

One “fairy tale” transformation has been that of [Rafaela Silva](#). She started judo at Reação when she was eight years old because her parents wanted to make sure she wasn’t involved in street fighting in the Cidade de Deus *favela*, which received global attention in the award-winning film, [City of God](#). She went on to win Olympic gold in 2016 in Brazil; it was the first gold for the host country that year. Canto, who is also a sports television presenter, was there when she won and he spoke about his immense pride in Silva, especially considering all she endured.

Management training, which seems a million miles away from Rio’s *favelas*, can be a [force for good](#). Canto hopes to scale up the number of dojos in Brazil. For him, the transformative mission is obviously at the centre of Instituto Reação. He is encouraged to see how [purpose](#), like performance, is a priority amongst CEOs. This step forward can transform lives.

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