Socratic Struggles
By Robert T. Whipple MBA, CPLP

The Socratic Method uses a series of questions designed as a discovery process for the person who is being questioned. The technique is often used in educational venues to help students learn critical thinking skills. I believe the application of the Socratic Method at work can be a powerful tool if used carefully. It can also backfire if used poorly or with a heavy hand.

An example of a work situation where the so-called Socratic Method might come in handy is a situation where you want to advocate a specific course of action to a superior but you expect significant pushback. Let's picture a situation where you are trying to convince your reluctant boss to approve some off site training which includes travel for you.

The straightforward approach is to: explain the benefits of the training, advocate why this will be helpful to the organization, and ask for permission to travel to the seminar. However, based on your knowledge of the boss in previous encounters, you suspect that he is going to turn you down flat regardless of the promised benefits. In this case, advocating a course of action and arguing your case will likely produce a negative response. Furthermore, once the boss has said no, subsequent attempts to change his mind will only be an annoyance. You are likely to hear “What part of NO didn't you understand?”

Using the Socratic Method means asking the boss questions about his satisfaction with how things currently are. You now stand a better chance of getting a reaction you can then build, with additional questions, into a stream of thought. Continuing to ask leading questions rather than advocating a position allows the boss to discover some of his own thought patterns that can be consistent with what you would have advocated in the first place.

Perhaps your final question in the series might sound like this. “I wonder how, I might be able to get the skills to do what you're suggesting”? After a few seconds of thought, The boss might reply, “Well, you could get some training and bring those skills back to our group.” You might then reply, “That’s a great idea! Would it be okay if I looked into some training options to accomplish that”? Note that you are now in a position to praise the intelligent boss for suggesting something you wanted to do all along. You get what you want, and the boss is your hero rather than a tight-fisted curmudgeon.

Now the boss has mentally committed to having you get some training because the idea was generated by his brain rather than yours. When you come back the next day with a specific proposal to get the training, you're far more likely to have the boss agree to the expenditure than if you had simply advocated the benefits of doing it yourself.

I mentioned at the beginning of this article there is a huge caveat to applying the Socratic Method. It is because the technique is fundamentally manipulative in nature. You have an idea what you are trying to get the boss to verbalize, and you keep asking questions that direct the conversation toward that end. If you are not extremely deft at posing this string of questions, the boss may become highly annoyed and suspicious that you have an ulterior motive for asking your open ended questions. If this is the case, you may be doing more harm than good. Socratic questions must be used with great skill. Let's examine six categories of Socratic questions and suggest a method of application that may help you be successful.

Below is a list showing six different types of Socratic Questions [1]. I think this handy guide is useful because it provides different avenues of logic, so the questions don't all begin to sound the same.

1. **Questions of clarification:**

   To prompt others to explore their questions and prove basic concepts and ideas of arguments Examples: What examples can you provide? What do you mean by…?

2. **Questions that probe assumptions:**

   To query others' beliefs concerning their arguments. Examples: How did you arrive at those assumptions? What if we looked at it this way?

3. **Questions that probe reasons and evidence:**

   To delve deeper into supporting claims others use for their arguments. Examples: How do you know this? What is the cause? Can the evidence be refuted? How?

4. **Questions that probe perspective:**

   To have others query their viewpoints or perspectives; they attempt to look at the argument from another perspective. Examples: What is another way of looking at this? What are strengths and weaknesses of your perspective?

5. **Questions that probe consequences:**

   To identify consequences and determine if they are desirable; use as others develop arguments and logical consequences become foreseeable. Examples: If we follow your argument, what are the consequences? Are the consequences desirable?

6. **Questioning the question:**

   To probe the intent of asking the original question. Examples: Why did you ask the question? To what point are you driving?

A best practice for applying these questions is to mix up the type of question as the conversation unfolds. By applying the specific type of question naturally as the discussion proceeds, it seems more expected and less manipulative.

If your true intent is to naively probe the thoughts that are under the surface in the other person's head, you can gently guide the conversation without detection. In other words, do not try to corner a person into saying something that he or she does not really want to advocate. That is true manipulation, which will invariably backfire. Instead, by using the Socratic Method, help guide the discussion so the person first sees the true benefits from his or her own perspective. The person then becomes an advocate instead of a roadblock.

It occurs to me that using the Socratic Method can be helpful, but it requires skill and practice to apply it successfully in the real world.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He can be reached at bwhipple@leadergrow.com 585-392-7763. Website www.leadergrow.com BLOG www.thetrustambassador.com

Reference:

1. Merritts, D., Walter, R. (2006). *How to use the Socratic method in the classroom.* Retrieved December 26, 2006, from the Carleton College, Starting Point Web site: http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/socratic/fourth.html