

Reducing Conflict 64 The Socratic Method

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



The Socratic Method uses questions designed as a discovery process for the person who is being questioned. This 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.

Application of the Socratic Method

Here is an example of a work situation where the Socratic Method might come in handy. Suppose you want to advocate a specific course of action to a superior, but you expect significant pushback. Picture a situation where you are trying to convince your reluctant boss to approve some travel for you. You want to attend a training class out of state.

The straightforward approach is to: discuss the benefits of the training. Explain why this will be helpful to the organization, and ask for permission to travel.

Based on your knowledge of the boss, you suspect that he is going to turn you down flat. The promised benefits do not impress him. 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?”

Shaping questions

Using the Socratic Method means asking the boss questions about his satisfaction with how things currently are. You stand a better chance of getting a reaction you can then build into a stream of thought. Continuing to ask leading questions allows the boss to discover some of his own thought patterns. He may realize that a specific skill set is missing in his organization.

Here is what your final question in the series might sound like. “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 open the door. “Well, you could get some training and bring those skills back to our group.” You say, “That's a great idea! I will look into some training options to

accomplish that.” You are now in a position to praise the intelligent boss for suggesting something you wanted to do. 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 he came up with the idea. You come back the next day with a specific proposal to get the training. You are far more likely to have the boss agree to the expenditure.

Use the Socratic Method with care

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. You have an idea of what you are trying to get the boss to verbalize. You keep asking questions that direct the conversation toward that end. If you are not extremely deft at posing the questions, the boss may become highly annoyed and suspicious. You have an ulterior motive for asking your open-ended questions. If this is the case, you may be doing more harm than good.

Apply the Socratic Method with skill

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. I think this handy guide is useful because it provides different avenues of logic, so the questions don't all sound the same.

Types of Socratic Questions

1. **Clarify:** 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. **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. **Determine 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. **Gain 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 the strengths and weaknesses of your perspective?
5. **Identify 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. **Question 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.

Consider your intent

If your true intent is to probe subliminal thoughts, 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. Use the Socratic Method to guide the discussion. Let the person see the true benefits from his or her own perspective. The person then becomes an advocate instead of a roadblock.

Conclusion

Using the Socratic Method can be helpful. It requires skill and practice to apply it successfully in the real world.

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