

Socratic Method: The Fastest Path to Development of Critical Thinking Skills and Personal/Professional Effectiveness

By Carol Sanford

A recent study published in the February 2002 Harvard Business Review, found that managerial behavior falls surprising short in terms of performance. Even though managers are overworked and attending to what seem like pressing matters, they frequently are just spinning their wheels. Bruch and Ghoshal, who conducted the study, found that fully 90% of managers across the board squander their time on all sorts of ineffective, non-strategic activities.. A mere 10% of managers are **able to be strategically focused and purposeful, or working in a reflective rather than reactive manner**. The article goes on to classify the types of behavior that leads people away from the desired effective behaviors. They named the effective managers as Purposeful. The focus of this paper is to develop understanding of what you can do to increase purposeful behavior, in yourself, and in helping others do the same.

Thinking strategically and systemically

David Bohm, the philosopher physicist, has said that people are more involved in “thoughting” than thinking. He suggested that people tend have well formed thoughts and ways of thinking about most subjects. When that subject comes up they go through the same thought patterns, which do not lead to new thinking, but rather to what they already

“thought”. To think strategically means that we are looking at a situation unfold, in real time, without layering on our previous interpretations. And truly understanding the dynamics and how they are playing out in this unique situation at this point in time.

Allowing ourselves to be “thinking,” rather than “thoughting,” enables the generation of more relevant and meaningful ideas. This ensures we can determine how to best position an action or intervention to succeed. And if you are working from a systems view, it means doing all that with a greater systems or set of systems in mind and their success. It is a primary process in critical thinking.

However, people are frequently hindered in being productive by their personal characteristics and behavior patterns. Just as thinking follows a pattern leading to the same conclusion, our behavior follows the same patterns leading to the same results. And if these patterns do not lead to purposeful behavior, the behavior that takes into account the whole of the enterprise or organization, then the enterprise does not get the results that are needed and people are not working on or toward the things that make the greatest difference to the whole.

An Ancient Debate over What Works

Pursuing understanding of the differing philosophies and methods of human potential development becomes clearer when examining the Sophists in ancient Greece compared to those of Socrates. This understanding enables us to adopt an approach that can be useful in helping everyone move further along the continuum toward accessing one's purposeful nature and working purposefully in an organization.

The Sophists and Socrates both believed that human excellence could and should be taught as a way of improving human beings and their relationships to one another—and their world. But they had a departure in thinking almost immediately after this opening line of agreement.

The Sophists believed that the way of building character necessary to such an achievement was through a motivational process. In this approach, the teacher (or manager in our case) offered ideas and, through their skill at persuasion and influence, it was possible to teach the highest qualitative characteristics, which through encouragement one would pursue and achieve excellence. This approach is not surprising since the Sophists earned most of their income from teaching the art of rhetoric—persuading and influencing others with eloquent words.

Socrates held that this way of attempting to transfer knowledge, was really only a transfer of opinions. He believed that knowing and understanding, developed through internal processing, was needed for one to become an effective person thereby having the chance of achieving excellence. He argued repeatedly that unless one could:

- develop one's own *well developed reasoning* regarding the meaning and working of ideas and virtues,
- could defend one's idea in a rigorous debate, and
- could test ideas for understanding in one's life—

it was not possible to really acquire these characteristics and therefore not possible to become a person who reflected excellence. Only through deep understanding, which was an inner process, could one gain such knowledge. He believed that only through the nature of examination it took to develop critical thinking skills and reflection to face one's own personal limitations in trying to develop critical thinking, could one develop the inner experience of excellence. As long as one held an opinion that had merely been adopted from others (whether parent, teacher or manager or a leader), it was not possible to actually understand virtue nor was it possible to actually be virtuous.

This difference in philosophy led to differences in method for developing the potential of human beings—i.e. ability to be all that they could be as a person. The Sophists method was one of lecturing to large and small groups on the virtues and the importance of

pursuing them rigorously, seeking to gain commitment to the ideas and their innate value. As great orators they were very inspirational and caused people to feel an aspiration to be more excellent in critical thinking and personal effectiveness.

Socrates, on the other hand, believed that people could only gain this inner experience of excellence and have the ability to present rational argument about one's opinions, though the development of one's own thinking, rather than adopting the thinking of others. This occurred through reflecting on ideas and struggling to ascertain the truth of the argument or thinking from personal exploration and testing. A person could not really be said to understand something if he or she depended on another's authority, instead of their own tested ideas. To turn opinion to knowledge, reflection is needed. Without this we can be easily swayed and brainwashed by the next idea, and have no real center in our understanding to which we can return.

Further, Socrates believed that the continual re-stimulation of the aspiration to be more excellent, without the resulting change in character required, led to an inevitable disillusionment with such possibilities. And character building emerged as one had to face one's ego in the struggle to create understanding about complex subjects, in facing the critique and debate with others, and in examining one's inner limitations as they emerged in this process and seeking to overcome them. Character building was the

essence of the process and could not be built in taking another's ideas, untested and unexamined, as one's own. It would lead to an unexamined life, which in Socrates view, was not worth living.

Socratic Process:

If one can gain knowledge and understanding of excellence only from an inwardly developed reflection, then the teacher or manager must work in a way that not only limits the student's ability and desire to adopt the teacher or manager's ideas, but at the same time in a way that develops the student's thinking. The job of the teacher or manager was to:

- engage the student as a participant in the learning,
- to become active in thinking on their own and for themselves;
- to deny them the comfort of accepting an unexamined opinion;
- to move from passive acceptance to active thinking, from being uncritical to being reflective.

A unidirectional external method cannot achieve this, and so an internal method must be invoked. Socrates had as his objective in this regard to create each person being a master of his own mind and being state. Only the knower, and only true understanding, supported by self-developed reasoning, is firm against mere eloquence, persuasion, or any authority other than that of one's own intelligence.

Socrates adopted a process that relied on five developmental processes, each with the intent of ensuring a particular capacity in the individual that was needed to be a master of

their own mind and to move steadily toward human excellence in their individual case through reaching a higher potential.

1. ***Resisting mechanicalness*** —in order to cause any person to yearn for the continuous pursuit of knowledge, it is important for them not to believe they already *know* or that there is nothing to pursue. In this process, the teacher or manager seeks to destroy false confidence, replace it, at least for a time, with perplexity and an awareness of being at a loss for knowing for sure. It is intended to assist in overcoming thinking that “we already know” and a “closed system of truth”. The level “we know” must always be experienced as moving and as capability of being continuously developed and continuously deepened. We **must resist our mechanicalness about** knowing and our attachment to a viewpoint.

1. **Self-Determining:** this process is about being a midwife with someone in their own development, where one awakens self-awareness, self-reflection, self-critical inquiry which leads to open-ended growth, and unfolding, un-concealment of the essence of each individual. The teacher or manager assists and joins with the process, understanding all the time that it is the process of the employee/student and the teacher or manager is only there bringing their understanding of how to help the process along, but not to be the controller or the judge of the result of the process.

The key is to foster and build an internal locus of control or authority for the person in the learning or follower role.

1. **Rigorous contesting, examining, questioning**, in the development of critical thinking skills one must be able to think about what is critical and to think with exactness and precision to see subtle yet significant differences between alternative thoughts and ideas, particularly in terms of the effects to which they lead. Learning to question accepted opinions, to examine beliefs, to refute dogma, to test information is critical to this process. The intention is to indict ignorance wherever it is seen and to demand an accounting and justification on each student's/employee's part for their thinking. Questions are a process of evoking such internal processes. The questioning is designed to bring into play a rigorous examination, debate, or contesting, not a predetermined answer. This is to shake off the tendency to **borrow ideas**, unexamined, and live with them without experience of their validity.

1. **Levelless learning and development** In order to discourage adoption of the teacher or manager ideas, it is necessary to demonstrate the on-going, never-ending nature of learning. The teacher or manager exhibits the profoundly important belief that one never reaches a pentacle where learning and developing stops, no matter how far they have gone. Through the use of:

- understatement and underplay and working from the irony of seeming to being less than one is in the student's eyes,
- through assuming a non-superior role or expertise,
- through re-experiencing a lack of certainty in understanding, a beginner's mind,
- presenting oneself as a teacher or manager who is still seeking to learn, causes a breakdown of the hierarchy of student/teacher or manager.

2. **Living Ideas** Development is not about answering questions or teaching solutions, but rather it is using questions and alternate concepts, to succeed in producing doubt and an opening to inquiry. Socrates on a frequent basis would negate what was perceived as “finally understood” at the end of a sequence of inquiry so that a student is disrupted from accepting uncritically any opinion that is offered without having tested it on their own and developing their own experience and reasoning. The result is positive, even though the method is negating, because of what happens to the learner's process. It keeps the door from locking behind a new discovery as though one was now complete even on that subject.