Critical Thinking and Socratic Questioning
The need to rephrase, reword and rethink

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Introduction

Socrates believed the best way to learn was to ask questions. His method of questioning can result in identifying new options, uncovering discrepancies before they become too time consuming or costly, or revealing assumptions and biases. It encourages thinking beyond what is apparent. It is essential to creative thinking and can give an edge over competitors. The basis for critical thinking therefore lies in Socratic questioning.

Three elements differentiate Socratic questioning from traditional brainstorming: the questions are methodical, they are restricted to the particular challenge/project/problem at hand, and they are designed to probe for deeper responses and reasoning. A high level of trust between team members is essential, as Socratic questioning examines every assumption individually, and investigates deep within the thinking and believing of each person involved. The questions asked must not be answered quickly, nor should they be taken personally. To do so could cause the process to break down and circumvent sensitive areas.

This paper is broken down into three parts, beginning with the top level of thinking and mental processing. First, we discuss uncovering assumptions and targeting the structural questions to get to the true source of the situation; next we evaluate reasoning ability to disclose gaps or 'surface' thinking. Finally, we explore the your emotions play in critical thinking abilities and the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and Socratic questioning.

Uncovering Assumptions

When looking for solutions or new ideas, the traditional method has been to look at the entire project at the 50,000' view. Socratic questioning disassembles the high-level view into pieces and analyzes each one separately, and investigates the relationship between the pieces.

The following strategies and questions can be used to expose assumptions and discover workable alternatives:

1. OVERALL STRATEGY: This area must be clearly defined and set forth at the beginning of the discussion. Without this strategy plainly stated and understood in everyone's' mind, the remainder of the questions may result in the discussion leading off on different tangents. What is the ultimate goal or the primary purpose? What else needs to be considered? Who are the stakeholders? Are they open and willing, or will they need to be convinced or persuaded? What are their concerns?

2. THEORY AND MODEL: What is the primary idea used in this process or reasoning? How has it been used previously, and with what results? Is this model appropriate for the current issue, or should it be modified? Is re-thinking our basic premise necessary?

3. COMPLETE INFORMATION is the basis for our thoughts and necessary to arrive at valid and accurate conclusions. What is this data based upon? What is the source and how accurate is it? Does it need to be verified through another source? Is this information providing relevant data? Do other experiences or data need to be considered? Are more facts needed?

4. QUESTIONS: One cannot arrive at a justifiable conclusion without asking questions on the questions to insure clarity. How could this question be rephrased to give a different perspective? Is this question the best one to ask to target the root cause? Does this question encompass the positive/negative/logical/emotional aspects? Is there a legal, ethical or moral implication involved?

5. INFERENCES AND ASSUMPTIONS: Those facts we believe are common knowledge can provide critical information or cause surprises. What do we take at face value? Can we validate or verify our statements? What portions have we not explicitly clarified? What do we look at in its entirety without questioning the individual parts?

6. IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS/CONSEQUENCES: How was this conclusion reached Is there another conclusion that can be reached given the available information? "When we do this, the result will be ….." is that acceptable? Have we walked backwards from the conclusion to the premise to uncover additional information?

7. VIEWPOINTS AND PERSPECTIVES: Have we looked at this issue from every stakeholder perspective? What are the positives and negatives of each position? What view do we settle for? How can this situation be looked at differently – an angle that has not been considered? Should our information be re-framed?

Not all questions will be applicable to every situation. Some people make take offense to these questions because they force a deeper level of analysis at the concept phase of the project, not at later stages. This process aids in piecing together disjointed thoughts, insuring a smoother implementation.

Reasoning and Thinking

Behind Socratic questioning is the ability to analyze the path of one's thinking or reasoning.

Reasoning is a high intensity, cognitive thought process. It is logical and objective. It is also a linearly thinking method, inspecting the questions that are asked to insure, in a laser-like manner, that the true cause is being addressed. Anything less than the purest focus and conversations will dance around the issue without a firm, clear resolution. The two categories of questions below can assist in your pursuit to target the key elements of your challenge:

1. FOCUS:

   a. Simplicity: Can you rephrase your thought? Can you state it in one sentence, or in less than 15 words? Would a good example be …..? Do you have an example that better exemplifies your point? When the issue can be illustrated by a specific instance that everyone understands, clarity and simplicity is achieved.

   b. Exactness: Have all words been specifically defined? Does the example leave no room for assumptions or extraneous assertions? The greater the detail understood and expressed, the more precise and exact the idea.

   c. Certainty: Have the facts been proven by a trusted and reliable source? Is there newer data that should be considered? Have dissenting views been explored? The more accurate and pin-pointed the data, the greater the chance of addressing the core issue.

2. SIGNIFICANCE

   a. Application: How do the evidence and questions link to the issue? What importance do the points have in relation to the issue? If they are extraneous, can they be rethought to connect to the issue? The stronger the relationship between the questions and the issue, the more focused the answers and the clearer the path.

   b. Range: Have all issues and perspectives been assessed and considered? Have we included dissenting views? Have we considered a full range of views and given evidence to negate any views? What would our oppositions' or competitors' position on this be? Expanding the focus to include all angles, then narrowing it, will help insure that unexpected events will be held to a minimum.

   Integrating the above categories of questions with the process of revealing assumptions will provide a much richer, more comprehensible discussion. These questions will keep team members directing their attention to the specific elements and on the processing systems required for clear analysis of the situation.

The Emotional Key

Do your emotions have a role in the successful implementation of your Socratic questioning planning process? Yes they do. What influence do they play in your Socratic questioning and critical thinking processes? Consider this: Your emotions drive your thoughts, your perceptions, and your actions. Emotions are reactionary responses to an event. The more emotional the event, the clearer and longer the brain remembers the event and the feeling that immediately followed it. These memories develop into patterned information, categorized and stored in the emotional brain. In present day situations, the brain identifies similar patterns, associates those patterns with stored memories, and causes you to act or react accordingly.

Emotions occur before rational thought. This brain, reacting to danger and threats, is instinctive. When left unchecked, these reactions can be detrimental or cause harmful results. These perceived threats can undermine the benefits and value of Socratic questions. In order for this line of questioning to be effective, the rational brain – the conscious thinking brain – must remain in control.

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This brain is considered the executive brain – maintaining structure and order, allocating resources, keeping a focus on the immediate environment and responding appropriately.

When emotions bring about action (the fight/flight/freeze/fright survival reaction), rational thinking is hindered. Since the mind cannot hold two thoughts simultaneously, the more primitive thought will prevail. If one's thoughts involve pride (not wanting to appear foolish), reputation (contributions are irrelevant), credibility (this information is in the area of expertise) or power (needing to take a firm, hard stand), these barriers will prohibit the big picture view necessary to reap the benefits of Socratic questioning.

Emotions can support and reinforce Socratic questioning and can lead to collaboration. The manner in which the questions are asked – voice tone and pitch, and facial expressions – conveys a request to develop and share, or can demand assent and compliance. Empathy when asking for clarification or with probing questions can demonstrate encouragement. Even the expression of anger, when appropriate, can focus the team towards a common goal.

Emotions can also undermine and destroy the Socratic questioning process. Frustration at the pace either of the process or the team members' responses can cause others to withdraw and not participate. Lack of compassion or understanding can begin to erode another's self-confidence and perceived value to the group. Abruptness when responding to ideas, or ignoring well-meaning suggestions can reinforce the leader's attitude towards the person or the process.

The Individual Experience Influence
It is the interpretation of events that causes the emotional response. The same situation can bring up completely separate memories and, as such, create different situations.

For example:
In a brainstorming session, VP Sean sat at the end of the table, leaning towards the committee, and asked questions to zero in on the issue. He alternated between tapping his pen on the table and hurriedly scribbling notes. Upon seeing this, Ed slid his chair back, crossed his arms over his chest and remained silent throughout the meeting. Rick, on the other hand, could hardly contain his enthusiasm and contributed valuable information to advance the discussion. At the end of the meeting, Sean thanked everyone and stroke out. Ed grumbled and crept out the door towards his office; Rick congratulated everyone on a great discussion and was the last to leave the room.

Both Ed and Rick had different experiences with a boss like Sean sitting in meetings. Sean's pen tapping unconsciously reminded Ed of a prior manager who also tapped his pen on the table. That signified that the manager was becoming angry and a lashing-out was forthcoming. Rick, on the other hand, had a manager who would tap his pen when good ideas were generated and developed, and that indicated that he was pleased with the discussion. Exact same situation, two distinct perceptions which generated two completely separate responses from team members.

Conclusion

Many of these questions are not explored in everyday business decisions. By using these and other similar questions, your current decision-making process will enable you to resolve implied challenges and pursue alternatives based on the true nature of the situation.

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