2018

4E's Socratic Model: A grounded theory for managing team creativity in an organisational context

Philip Dennett
Appendices

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Preface

This book is designed as a companion to the book Creative Leadership Techniques (Dennett, 2015) and is aimed at facilitators looking to use the 4E's Socratic Model as a tool for encouraging creativity in teams. The Model (pictured below) has been developed through application in a range of organisations all of whom found it to be an effective methodology.
Preparation

Once a discussion is under way it is easy for people to stray off topic and accept as truth statements made by others (particularly if they reinforce their own beliefs). This stifles creativity and critical thinking but can be avoided by taking a Socratic approach to managing the discussion using the 4E’s model described above.

To conduct a Socratic dialogue it is important to remember that the process is much more than a simple question and answer technique, instead it can be likened to an interrogation aimed at uncovering the truth. The key to this interrogation is that participants must come to their own conclusions as a result of questioning rather than being given conclusions ready made.

**Step 1: Agreement about the topic**

Prior to the commencement of a session using the Model, it is important to get agreement from participants about the topic to be discussed and the desired outcome. For example,

“This workshop is to discuss the core competencies of the organisation to confirm what they are and how they should be expressed to our customers.”

As a leader you may be used to deciding the topic yourself, however people are much more engaged and contribute at a higher level if they are part of the decision-making process. Start instead with a goal and then let the group decide the right question to address in order to achieve it. If the goal is expressed clearly enough and it is something that is important to the organisation you will find that a consensus is not hard to achieve.

**Step 2: Avoiding “group think”**

Socrates ensured a group was operating effectively (e.g. not being dominated by individuals and encouraging full participation); and he leveraged the roles and positions taken up by various participants. If the discussion is dominated by one, or a few participants, it discourages the input of less confident individuals and often results in “group think” where people just go along with things. The danger of this is that any resulting consensus isn’t solidly agreed to (so people won’t be committed to the outcome) and also that no new thinking emerges which defeats the purpose of the whole process.

Be prepared to take control of the discussion by ensuring everyone has a chance to speak. I usually start by asking each person in turn what their thoughts are before allowing people to bring in counter arguments. Where possible, I will make sure I don’t start with the most dominant member of the group as people are often unduly influenced by them. I will also
bring people into the conversation (ongoing throughout the discussion) who have not contributed much. When I judge that a point has been made I will summarise and then ask someone else to expand or provide an alternate view. This stops any one person’s view from dominating.

**Step 3: Question planning**

What type of question works best? Where should I start? To begin, it helps to understand people’s different levels of cognition as a complex question asked too early could easily confuse participants and frustrate the discussion. Bloom* identified six levels of cognition (which have been incorporated into the Model):

- Knowledge – what, where, when, why, who
- Comprehension – explain, compare, give examples
- Application – consider, solve, apply (to a new situation)
- Analysis – what are the pros and cons? What is missing?
- Synthesis – what are the links between….. and …..?
- Evaluation – defend your choice, justify.

Begin the questioning process by uncovering what people currently know and what they believe to be true (Bloom’s knowledge and comprehension stages).

Once this information is clear you can move on to discussing the application of it and analyse the pros and cons as well as synthesise the knowledge by asking devil’s advocate type questions.

To assist, prepare a list of sample questions that could be applied to each stage. I always have a copy of the worksheet (see over) on the table so a quick glance can guide me in what to ask next.
### 4Es Socratic Model Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Question types</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explore</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Establish a sense of a shared common goal by beginning with a dialogue to establish agreement on the question itself. Focus on engendering a desire to produce a practical outcome that will improve the likelihood of an idea being implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do we currently believe about the issue?</td>
<td>what, where, when, why, who. Comprehension explain, compare, give examples.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine</td>
<td>Application</td>
<td>During the examination encourage personal story telling which will help to develop a collective consciousness. It is also a way to help members of the group to drop their defenses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What evidence supports that belief?</td>
<td>consider, solve, apply (to a new situation). Analysis what are the pros and cons? What is missing?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>Positive feedback is another tool that can lead to increased group efficacy and is particularly important when seeking conflicting views. Focus on separating ideas expressed from the individual expressing them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What conflicting views are there?</td>
<td>what are the links between... and ....? Evaluation defend your choice, justify.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elect</td>
<td>Decision and resolution</td>
<td>Collective consciousness (and ultimately creativity) can evolve from a sense that contributions are group ones rather than personal ones. Enhance this sense by a process of summing up at relevant points in a dialogue to show how new knowledge or understanding has evolved from the contributions of individuals to form a collective opinion. This is particularly important during this final stage where you need buy-in to a group agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where does this dialogue lead us?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Many discussions stall because facilitators jump too quickly from what is known to more abstract concepts. By understanding the stages of cognition you can progressively work through each by asking appropriate questions.

Finally, be aware of the impression you create as a facilitator.¹

1. Watch out for non-verbal communication which can point to a disconnect between what people are saying and what they are thinking.

2. Avoid questions that are likely to result in Yes/No answers as they can shut down a discussion prematurely. They also act as a line in the sand which people are often reluctant to cross.

3. Beware of showing favor for a particular line of thinking as this too can result in people with conflicting views speaking up.

4. As a facilitator, you should be careful of dominating the conversation by giving people the ‘right’ answer. Teams are much more likely to be committed to a solution if they have arrived at it themselves. Your job is to be a guide in this process.

Step 4: Exploration stage

The Model can be broken down into 4 steps:

- Explore (knowledge, comprehension)
- Examine (application, analysis)
- Evaluate (synthesis, evaluation)
- Elect (decision, resolution)

The first three steps are questioning steps that can be mapped to Bloom’s cognition levels (in brackets above) and the final step is where a decision on subsequent actions is reached.

As a starting point I suggest that you use the process of unpacking to explore statements. Paul and Elder¹¹ suggest that statements made are rarely complete and that they should be viewed as a series of interconnected thoughts. Start your exploration by breaking the connections so that individual elements are identified, similar to individual pieces of a puzzle that can then be analysed and reassembled in different ways.

Consider the following statement:

“Please provide a brief background of your organisation and its products/services provided with a particular emphasis on the relevance of them to this request for tender”

This can be unpacked into the following individual pieces:

- brief background
- organisation
- products and services
- relevance to request

This provides a structure for your exploration. Start with asking what participants understand about each part of the statement. This provides a specific focus for the second examination stage.

⁴²²’s Socratic Model: Facilitator’s Guide © Philip Dennis 2015
Step 5: Examination stage

There are 3 basic types of question which form the backbone of the Model:

- Concrete – asking about facts, for example “How many customers…?” “What timeframe…?”
- Abstract – asking for analysis or conclusions, for example “Which option is more suitable and why?”
- Creative – reorganizing what is known into new combinations or recognizing patterns, for example “What is likely to happen if we…?”

Once you have unpacked a statement conduct the examination stage as a brainstorming session where the aim is to expose ideas and concepts without argument and therefore concentrate on posing concrete questions to expose facts and more abstract questions to uncover opinions.

Applying this to the case above we could start with questions that explore the facts:

- Consider in the context of this request, what is meant by brief?
- Which products/services can be applied to the situation?
- What information about the organisation can be applied?

Step 6: Evaluation stage

During the evaluation stage start by questioning the facts to expose any contrary opinions as during your examination the facts will have been stated without hearing them. This will call for more creative questions to identify new combinations or linkages. For example, in the case above:

- What are the benefits to the client of working with an organisation with the capabilities we have described?
- How can we order these capabilities to create the right emphasis to sell that story?
- For each capability which elements from the RFT are relevant?

Step 7: Election stage

The final step is to bring the discussion to a conclusion by identifying specific subsequent steps. With simple issues you may already have reached an end point but it is more likely that further work will be required. The next step for the case above is the assignment of tasks to specific team members:

- Analyst to quantify specific benefits
- Writers to draft initial statements (after analyst information obtained)
- Team to reconvene to discuss draft statement.

The election stage shouldn’t be hurried as it is the stepping off point for any follow-up work that needs to be undertaken. Make sure that the tasks that are assigned are quantifiable so during the next session you can identify where someone has been successful and/or what is required to improve the result.

Tasks should also be examined against your goals – is each task a valid one in terms of its contribution to the final goal? If not, then go back and review.

This validation process also means people are much more likely to be committed to the task assigned to them as they can see the value of its contribution toward achieving the goal.

References


Creative Leadership Techniques

Philip Dennett

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Preface

The purpose of this book is to describe the apparent disconnect between profit-seeking behavior in organisations and creativity by identifying the antecedents of creativity in an organizational context; exploring its incidence in a real-life setting and proposing a model, based on a Socratic Dialogue, for harnessing it in managerial practice.

Edith Penrose\(^1\), in espousing her theory of growth of the firm, introduces the concept of creativity in management when she points out that a firm’s failure to grow is “often attributed to demand conditions rather than to the limited nature of entrepreneurial resources”. Schumpeter\(^2\) goes further when he says that the process of “creative destruction” (new ideas/ways destroying old ones to create value) is at the heart of Capitalism.

How is it then that Corporations today are traditionally organized around a hierarchy divided loosely into Senior Management, Middle Management, and Workers? Worth or value is determined by the person in the superordinate role which results in the stifling of innovative behavior\(^3\).

So where are these elements of entrepreneurial resource and creative destruction (that Penrose, Schumpeter and others discuss) in the modern firm? Where is the championing of decision-making that encourages trial and error?

Writing from a socio-cultural perspective, Sawyer\(^4\) maintains that in a corporate environment creativity is a function of both people (employees) and the structures and practices that they perform under;
which, according to Florida⁶ should include 3 values:

- Individuality – “resist traditional group-oriented norms”
- Meritocracy – “The creative class favors hard work, challenge and stimulation.”
- Diversity and Openness – the creative class “favor organisations and environments in which they feel that anyone can fit in and can get ahead.”

This stance is corroborated by Amabile⁴ who describes the ideal environment for encouraging creativity as: “a sense of positive challenge in the work; work teams that are collaborative, diversely skilled, and idea-focused; freedom in carrying out the work; supervisors who encourage the development of new ideas; top management that supports innovation through a clearly articulated creativity-encouraging vision and through appropriate recognition for creative work; mechanisms for developing new ideas; and norms of actively sharing ideas across the organization.”

Gratton⁷ sums up the discussion on the value of creativity when she says “The role of leader will be less about controlling and commanding, and more about igniting energy and enabling groups to volunteer and emerge. What we need are more Socratic leaders.”

If we consider Florida’s 3 values in corporate Australia today, are they engrained in management practice or just terms that sound good in a corporate mission statement? The question then is: can we maximize the creativity in our teams and provide an environment in which creativity will flourish through a process of creative leadership?
Further Reading

Chapter 1

What is creativity?

“But I'm not very creative” is a statement I've often heard, but when you ask the same person what they think creativity is, they respond with “artistic” abilities like singing, drawing or writing. While it's true not everyone has those talents it is possible for almost everyone to be more creative in the way they think and solve problems.

If you think of creativity as creating anything new or novel there are endless possibilities for creativity within organisations and teams – from new processes to new products and anything in between. Often the most successful creations come from combining existing elements in different ways; for example Apple's ipad that combined elements of the computer with elements of the smartphone.

Amabile1, in discussing the social psychology of creativity, proposes a framework for conceptualising creativity that consists of domain-relevant skills; creativity-relevant skills and task motivation. This framework suggests that creativity is not something that happens in isolation but is the product of an individual's outlook, experience and environment. In order to benefit from creativity then, an organisation must create an environment conducive to creative thought and action. Or, as Amabile says “creativity requires a confluence of all components; creativity should be highest when an intrinsically motivated person with high domain expertise and high skill in creative thinking works in an environment high in supports for creativity”2.

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What are the traits Amabile's intrinsically motivated person should possess to maximize their creative potential? A review of literature in the area identifies five key traits relevant to creative action:

- self-direction/proactivity
- knowledge and experience
- risk-taking propensity
- social competence and
- resiliency.

**Self Direction/proactivity**

Writing from a neuro-scientific perspective, Rock and Schwartz⁴, identify the importance of self-direction in developing insights (creativity): “For insights to be useful they need to be generated from within, not given to individuals as conclusions. It is true for several reasons. First, people will experience the adrenaline-like rush of insight only if they go through the process of making the connections themselves.”

If creative insights stem from individual proactivity in making new connections it is not surprising that there is growing consensus amongst academics that proactivity is a critical driver of organizational effectiveness⁴.

**Knowledge and Experience**

Without specific knowledge or experience the proactive or self-directed person will be restricted in their ability to conceive and act on new ideas⁵. According to Ford⁶ “Accumulated experiences lead individuals to develop interpretive schema, preferences, expectations, and knowledge related to specific domains of behavior.” (p1117). Ford includes knowledge and ability as one of three major influences that either facilitate or constrain
creativity (the others being sensemaking and motivation).

From an organizational perspective then, creativity depends not only on the individual but also on the structures that organize them.

**Risk-taking behavior**

Creativity, according to Florida, requires “self-assurance and the ability to take risks.” Risk features prominently in lists of personal qualities identified by researchers as an antecedent to creativity. However, in order for risk to be productive there must be organizational encouragement and tolerance.

**Social Competence**

The interactionist model of creative behavior first described by Woodman and Schoenfeldt confirms that creativity in an organizational context is characterized by individuals working together in a social context. The importance of this social element was illustrated in research conducted amongst research scientists by Amabile and Gryskiewicz, who found that highly creative scientists had good social skills that enabled them to communicate better and have a stronger rapport with other team members compared with scientists who were less creative.

**Resiliency**

There is general agreement that resiliency and perseverance are important in the development of creative solutions. According to Ford, perseverance comes from an individual’s sense-making process which attributes meaning to specific information and then dictates a certain action, even in the face of ambiguity. The resulting perseverance is therefore logical rather than being based on pure doggedness.
Of the five traits highlighted above, self-direction is the one that should be fostered in all individuals for a truly creative team to emerge, as a disinterested individual will not actively participate in the questioning process designed to stimulate critical thinking. From an organisational perspective the task of the manager should be to create an environment where employees feel engaged by identifying the conditions under which creativity will flourish. The following chapter considers those conditions.

Further Reading


Chapter 2

Organisational Barriers to Creativity

From an organizational perspective what are the conditions under which creativity might flourish? Amabile & Gryskiewicz\(^1\) identify them as:

- Freedom – “Freedom in deciding what to do or, more frequently, how to do one’s work; a sense of control over one’s work and ideas; a freedom from having to meet someone else’s constraints; a generally open atmosphere.”

- Encouragement – “Management enthusiasm and support for new ideas and new ways of doing things; an absence of destructive criticism and excessive fear of evaluation.”

- Resource and time – “Access to appropriate resources, including facilities, information, funds, and people; sufficient time to solve problems in new ways.

- Recognition – “Appropriate, constructive feedback on one’s work, along with appropriate recognition and rewards.”

- Challenge – “A sense of challenge arising from the nature of the problem, a sense of pressure arising from outside competition or realistic time urgency.”

However, in practice, the reality is that proactive behavior in organisations is often discouraged\(^2\). They attribute this to the over-controlling effects of rigid company structures and instead advocate a management approach that encourages freedom to pursue broad organisational goals in “fruitful, creative, innovative ways.”\(^2\)

Creative Leadership Techniques © Philip Dennett 2015
While it is generally agreed (as discussed earlier) that creativity can improve business outcomes, the traditional management model “is built on a monocentric, hierarchically structured authority chain.”

Creed expands on this theme by identifying five categories of organizational norms/rituals where traditional management and creativity are in conflict:

- Innovation - Conservatism: scale to assess tolerance of risk-taking
- Imprecision - Precision: rigid systems and processes vs more ad hoc approach
- Relationship orientation – Task orientation: collegial/people driven approach vs goal/performance driven
- Calmness - Aggression: individualistic, driven and competitive vs group, calm and sharing load
- Growth – Stability: fast-paced, high growth emphasis vs slow and steady planned management

The second descriptor on each scale is consistent with Cummings view of a traditional organization, whereas the first descriptor represents a creative approach to management. Thus creativity is the antithesis of a traditional hierarchical management structure.

So, given that the culture of an organization can have a negative effect on creativity, how does a manager elicit creativity from team members?

Woodman, Sawyer and Griffin say that while an organisation’s characteristics create the context, organizational creativity is a function of both context and the creativity of groups within that organization.
Andriopoulos identifies those contextual influences as a combination of:

- Organizational climate
- Leadership style
- Organisational culture
- Resources and skills
- Structure and systems.

Your challenge as a leader (of an organization or a group within that organization) – is to create an environment where uncertainty and risk are tolerated and personal consequences in a creative environment are positive.

Further Reading


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Chapter 3

Approaches to Creative Thinking

Many creative thinking techniques attempt to impose rigid structures upon what is essentially an unstructured and often messy process. People talk of a “lightbulb” moment where a new idea just pops into the mind, but usually this is a result of considerable conscious application over a period of time followed by unconscious processing. Hence you might wake up in the morning with a solution to a problem you’ve been considering for some time.

However, without any structure at all, an individual or group may get stuck at the initial idea stage and not follow any through to a logical conclusion. In facilitating many strategy sessions in a wide variety of organisations, I’ve used various elements from the techniques discussed below to help expose a range of ideas that can then be categorized and developed further.

Divergent thinking

Guilford in discussing creativity testing, identified a number of elements that can be applied to a divergent thinking process:

The first is fluency. The objective here is to explore the consequences or implications of a stated idea. This will quite quickly identify ideas that have any fatal flaws and help give clarity to good ideas that may not be clearly formed as originally suggested.

Often suggested ideas are very similar so to truly cover a topic it is important to generate as much novelty as possible. I find using a mind

Creative Leadership Techniques © Philip Dennett 2015
map useful as with it you can quickly group ideas around nodes where each new node focuses on a novel response.

A group discussion can stall when participants become very fixed on a specific concept, often defending it even when it is not logical to do so. To avoid this try to encourage flexibility by asking proposers to name at least one major negative before they become fixed on naming all the positives.

As Guilford says on page 453, “Many inventions have been in the nature of a transformation of an existing object into one of different design, function, or use.” Therefore, if the group is comfortable with the ideas that have been generated, the next task is to attempt to reorganize them in different wholes. In doing so you may find that concept A adapted to include some elements of concepts B and C, might produce a superior solution.

And finally, comes the task of critical evaluation. What ideas are realistic given the constraints that are applicable to the situation? Of those ideas which one or one(s) are likely to produce the best outcomes? Given two best possible solutions, which one is the simplest, with the least constituent elements (less to go wrong)?

**Brainstorming**

Advertising executive, Alex Osborn\(^2\) created Brainstorming as a technique in the 1950’s and it has been widely used ever since. According to Osborn, a brainstorming session should be guided by 4 rules:

- Quantity – through quantity comes quality
- Hold criticism – don’t interrupt the flow
Welcome the unusual – encourages divergent thinking
Look for associations – combine and improve

Over the years there have been a number of studies conducted that conclude the technique has flaws, mainly around the issue of “groupthink” which can inhibit divergent thoughts and discourage people from disagreeing with the group. Other authors have suggested improvements to add structure to a brainstorming session. Two well-known techniques are discussed below.

**SCAMPER**

Educator Bob Eberle proposed this mnemonic as a way of generating ideas to improve an existing concept. This can be used with Osborn’s 4th rule about looking for associations.

SCAMPER stands for:

- Substitute.
- Combine.
- Adapt.
- Modify.
- Put to another use.
- Eliminate.
- Reverse.

The idea is to develop a set of questions relevant to each word and then pose them to your group as part of the evaluation phase of a brainstorming session.

**Six thinking hats**

Edward deBono’s Six Thinking Hats is a tool to encourage people to adopt different perspectives when considering a question or issue. This
tool can be used either individually or in a group where participants don one of the six hats in turn. Each hat represents a different approach to thinking. The hats are:

- Blue – to consider goals and objectives.
- Red hat – collecting opinions and feelings.
- Yellow – developing positive “reasons why” something might work.
- Green – creative and imaginative thinking.
- White – developing information, facts and knowledge; and
- Black – critical thinking about the any proposed solution.

While it is important to adopt only one hat at a time, the order is dependent on the situation and it is common to move back and forth between different hats.

While each of the techniques discussed above have merits, as a leader I was interested in developing a management process as an overarching approach to the development of a positive climate for creativity and innovation in teams. The next chapter proposes a model based on taking a Socratic approach to leadership which I’ve successfully piloted with a range of organisations and situations.

Creative Leadership Techniques © Philip Dennett 2015
Further reading

Chapter 4

A Socratic approach to leadership

In today’s hypercompetitive business environment there is an air of constant change as companies scurry to catch up to, or retain relativity with, their respective competitors. Often they must achieve this with fewer resources. The speed of this change means that companies “must become learning organizations; places in which everyone learns to do things better in an age of uncertainty.” That raises the question about the best way to achieve this. While the authors mention a number of different approaches, they highlight the Socratic Method as being one of the best options.

Socrates famous Method is explained by Kachaner and Deimler as the “practice of asking the ‘right’ questions to stimulate thinking.” They say that companies should spend more time “articulating the questions their strategy should address,” concluding that “when they do, teams come back not only with the answer but also with a higher level of understanding and ownership of the chosen course.”

Skordoulis & Dawson agree, saying that “The Socratic dialogue is particularly suited to organizations and companies that are in a process of change, in which basic norms, values and goals need to be challenged and explicitly communicated if the organization is keen to promote alignment across all levels.”

Socrates’ directed questioning technique is particularly useful because it is applicable in both leadership and follower roles which Tucker identifies in the table below, adding applications to each:

Creative Leadership Techniques © Philip Dennett 2015
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Critical thinking and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>Intellectual development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Follower buy-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follower</td>
<td>Probe reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>Open dialogue and feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, if managers are to utilise the Socratic Method in promoting creativity in their teams, they must first understand how to effectively harness creativity to produce innovations that will lead to competitive advantage. While it has been demonstrated that employee creativity is of benefit to an organisation\(^6\) and is a necessary step in gaining a competitive advantage\(^6\) ideas alone “are necessary but not sufficient condition for opportunities to emerge.”\(^7\)

Amabile\(^8\), in discussing the social psychology of creativity, proposes a framework for conceptualising creativity that consists of domain-relevant skills; creativity-relevant skills and task motivation. This framework suggests that creativity is not something that happens in isolation but is the product of an individual’s outlook, experience and environment. In order to benefit from creativity then, an organisation must create an environment conducive to creative thought and action. Or, as Amabile says “creativity requires a confluence of all components; creativity should be highest when an intrinsically motivated person with high domain expertise and high skill in creative thinking works in an environment high in supports for creativity.”\(^9\)
4 E’s Socratic Model

**Explore** (knowledge & comprehension)
What do we currently believe about the issue?

**Examine** (application & analysis)
What evidence supports that belief?

**Evaluate** (synthesis & evaluation)
What conflicting views are there?

**Elect** (decision & resolution)
Where does this dialogue lead us?
4E's Socratic Model

Socrates began a dialogue with an exploration of an issue to get agreement on the question to be discussed. This is an important first step as it produces a buy-in from participants. In a number of groups where the model (above) was tested this process took some time but allowed the group to quickly focus on the issue in the subsequent discussion.

Following this, through the process of Elenchus, Socrates examined the issue by posing questions about participants’ beliefs relevant to the issue and questioned people to evaluate their beliefs by playing the devil’s advocate.

The final part of the dialogue is for the group to elect a future course. This has the effect of concluding the dialogue with a consensus.

Proof of concept

Workshops using the Model were conducted with teams in seven organisations. In the first organization the model was tested to ensure it was understandable and workable in real life. As an illustration, the table below provides a summary of one team’s results of the process broken down into the 4 steps.

Creative Leadership Techniques © Philip Dennett 2015
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Question</th>
<th>What are the distinct competencies we have over our competitors?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exploration</strong></td>
<td>People driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What do we currently believe about the issue?</em></td>
<td>Not “cookie cutter”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insightful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not “platform” reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create actionable insights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deliver (offer actions) on insights: “deliver the intelligence”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examination</strong></td>
<td>Feedback from existing clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What evidence supports that belief?</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>Competencies not recognized in feedback from tender submissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>What conflicting views are there?</em></td>
<td>Many competitors can make the same claims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Election</strong></td>
<td>Documenting examples of competencies in action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Where does this dialogue lead us?</em></td>
<td>Creation of an operating Methodology.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this session the group tackled a question that had been concerning the company for some time. They were routinely asked in business pitches to provide a list of competencies and they were stuck on how to describe them. All of the descriptors they used were generic and therefore not able to create a unique position for the company.

Once they were happy with the original list of competencies a series of ‘how’ questions were asked, for example:

• “What do you mean by [specific term]?”
• “Give us an example of how you would go about that?”
• “What are the benefits to the client from this approach?”

Following this discussion the group was able to compile a list of 5 competencies that could be documented in ‘action’ terms:

• Principals take an active part in jobs
• Work with clients in implementation phase
• Appeal to multiple audiences through customizing reports and other communications to audience
• Credibility allows access to Board level
• Flat structure enables work to proceed under duress (deadlines, access).

One of the issues that arose was they routinely talked about their operating methodology as being a core competency but they had never been able to document that clearly. The group was asked to recall a recent project and describe in detail how they talked it from original briefing to conclusion. Key words from that description were noted and placed in an ordered process.
This process was then debated and agreed upon:

1. Senior management meet at design stage to ensure proposal is both appropriate and outcomes focused.
2. Team chosen based on job type and complexity (internal and external)
3. Proposed program and timeline presented to client.
4. Client input to approve or amend.
5. Instrument design phase.
6. Client signoff for program.
7. Establishment phase (subject recruitment, instrument setup)
8. Pilot phase (for “sensitive” projects)
9. Conduct program
10. Client progress reporting (agreed intervals and forms)
11. Reporting phase (multiple levels including physical, written and workshops as required)

Following the successful test, teams from six additional organisations were chosen to work with. Team size ranged from seven members to three and the organisations were a mix of profit and non-profit.

In each pilot organisation, at the end of the workshop a consensus was reached which supported the use of the 4E’s Socratic Model as an effective tool for managing group interactions.

The associated written questionnaires provided a benchmark of each team’s self-reported creativity and a number of themes emerged from comments made as to their perceptions of the process. These are discussed below.
Open dialogue

This was the most commonly mentioned theme individually and across groups. Participants mentioning this felt that the process had resulted in an open and honest exchange of views which overcame negative aspects of the existing group dynamic and encouraged people to speak up:

“I believe this methodology will allow outcomes to be achieved more quickly and also to be more inclusive i.e. a way to encourage the quieter less experienced members of the team to feel confident enough to contribute.”

Support from senior management

All the participants in one group commented that they didn’t see the process making any difference even though the session produced a positive outcome. Rather than being a reflection of the validity of the model, it was related to their feeling that the organisation’s culture didn’t encourage creativity. Interestingly this group’s self reported creativity index was similar to the other groups and individuals within that group all reported high levels of creative self-efficacy. This reinforces the need for people to feel that their input has the support of senior management which was also supported by the findings in two other organisations. In one group this reflected their feeling of a lack of support for creativity from senior management in spite of the fact that it was encouraged by their team leader. The other group felt that a shift in management culture was required: “I think unfortunately the management structure in my organisation is not conducive to a frank and honest exchange of ideas.”

In each case it was clear that for the 4E’s Socratic model to work it had to be both supported and driven by senior management.
Accountability

This theme related to a feeling that using the 4E’s Socratic model had resulted in some quantifiable outcomes that were both specific and realistic. In a briefing prior to the session with one group, members were particularly concerned with unrealistic and vague expectations from senior management. However, after the session, which also included some senior managers, there was general consensus that this approach resolved those issues.

Risk tolerance

This theme was mentioned in two groups. Participants said that knowing they had the support of their manager would encourage them to be more creative as there would be a higher degree of risk tolerance.

Positive culture

This theme came from one group and was mentioned by all participants. They felt strongly that if management used the Socratic model as an integral part of their way of managing that it would have a positive effect on the overall culture of the organization: “Yes I feel that the work culture would change from one in which innovation is regarded with suspicion into one which rewards unconventional and new thinking.”

This organization was very hierarchical and there was a feeling there was a strong disconnect between management and staff.
External facilitator

While this theme was only mentioned by one person in one group it was interesting in that no-one else felt that having an external facilitator was necessary – even the ones where there were current issues between management and staff. In fact a member of another group expressed the opposite view, that an external facilitator would not be able to effect change.

Summary

The 4E's Socratic model proved to be an effective way of encouraging creativity (opening dialogue, providing accountability, positive culture) in teams, however to actually work in practice it would require leadership and commitment from senior management so that it becomes a part of the organisation’s culture.

This was borne out in a subsequent email from the manager of the fourth group who advised that they had incorporated the model into their management system: “We have spent this week following up on actions from our meeting and have introduced this concept across other areas of our business and are very happy and impressed by the results we were able to achieve.”
Further reading

Chapter 5

Questioning techniques

Once a discussion is under way it is easy for people to stray off topic and accept as truth statements made by others (particularly if they reinforce their own beliefs). This can be avoided by taking a Socratic approach to managing the discussion using the 4E’s model described in the previous chapter. In this chapter we will examine specific questioning strategies for each level. To conduct a Socratic dialogue it is important to remember that the process is much more than a simple question and answer technique, instead it can be likened to an interrogation aimed at uncovering the truth¹. The key to this interrogation is that participants must come to their own conclusions as a result of questioning rather than being given conclusions ready made.

Socrates used questions to:

• probe into statements that are made;
• explore relationships between ideas, and
• play the devil’s advocate to challenge beliefs.

In addition he ensured the group was operating effectively (e.g. not being dominated by individuals and encouraging full participation); and he leveraged the roles and positions taken up by various participants.²

Of course, this sounds easy in theory but much more difficult in practice. What type of question works best? Where should I start? To begin, it helps to understand people’s different levels of cognition as a complex question asked too early could easily confuse participants and frustrate...

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the discussion.

Levels of cognition

Bloom\textsuperscript{1} identified six levels of cognition (which have been incorporated into the Model):

- Knowledge – what, where, when, why, who
- Comprehension – explain, compare, give examples
- Application – consider, solve, apply (to a new situation)
- Analysis – what are the pros and cons? What is missing?
- Synthesis – what are the links between…. and …..?
- Evaluation – defend your choice, justify.

Begin the questioning process by uncovering what people currently know and what they believe to be true (Bloom’s knowledge and comprehension stages).

Once this information is clear you can move on to discussing the application of it and analyse the pros and cons as well as synthesise the knowledge by asking Devil’s Advocate type questions.

Many discussions stall because facilitators jump too quickly from what is known to more abstract concepts. By understanding the stages of cognition you can progressively work through each by asking appropriate questions.

Questioning: applying the 4E’s Socratic Model

The Model can be broken down into 4 steps:

- Explore (knowledge, comprehension)
- Examine (application, analysis)
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- Evaluate (synthesis, evaluation)
- Elect (decision, resolution)

The first three steps are questioning steps that can be mapped to Bloom’s cognition levels (in brackets above) and the final step is where a decision on subsequent actions is reached.

We will examine each step in turn:

**Explore**

As a starting point I suggest that you use the process of unpacking to explore statements. Paul and Elder suggest that statements made are rarely complete and that they should be viewed as a series of interconnected thoughts. Start your exploration by breaking the connections so that individual elements are identified, similar to individual pieces of a puzzle that can then be analysed and reassembled in different ways.

The case study below provides an example of this process in action.

**Case**

This statement came from a request for tender that a bid team were examining during a tender response strategy meeting:

"Please provide a brief background of your organisation and its products/services provided with a particular emphasis on the relevance of them to this RFT."

The bid team unpacked the statement into the following individual pieces:

- brief background
- organisation

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- products and services
- relevance to RFT

**Examine**

There are 3 basic types of question⁵ which form the backbone of the Model:

- Concrete – asking about facts, for example “How many customers…?”
  “What timeframe…?”
- Abstract – asking for analysis or conclusions, for example “Which option is more suitable and why?”
- Creative – reorganizing what is known into new combinations or recognizing patterns, for example “What is likely to happen if we…?”

Once you have unpacked a statement conduct the examination stage as a brainstorming session where the aim is to expose ideas and concepts without argument and therefore concentrate on posing concrete questions to expose facts and abstract questions to uncover opinions. Applying this to the case above we could start with questions that explore the facts:

- Consider in the context of this request, what is meant by brief?
- Which products/services can be applied to the situation?
- What information about the organisation can be applied?

**Evaluate**

During the evaluation stage start by questioning the facts to expose any contrary opinions as during your examination the facts will have been stated without hearing any contrary opinions. This will call for more creative questions to identify new combinations or linkages. For example, in the case above:

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• What are the benefits to the client of working with an organisation with the capabilities we have described?
• How can we order those capabilities to create the right emphasis to tell that story?
• For each capability which elements from the RFT are relevant?

Elect

The final step is to bring the discussion to a conclusion by identifying specific subsequent steps. With simple issues you may already have reached an end point but it is more likely that more work will be required. The next step for the case above was the assignment of tasks to specific team members:

• Analyst to quantify specific benefits
• Writers to draft initial statements (after analyst information obtained)
• Team to reconvene to discuss draft statement.

Some final Do's and Dont's

Based on the work of Boswell I have outlined a number of principles that are useful for questioning:

1. Have a list of questions prepared ahead of time. This will make it easier to keep the flow going in a meeting and also help to ensure the questions are clear and relevant to the topic.

2. Watch out for non-verbal communication which can point to a disconnect between what people are saying and what they are thinking.
3. Avoid questions that are likely to result in Yes/No answers as they can shut down a discussion prematurely. They also act as a line in the sand which people are often reluctant to cross.

4. Beware of showing favor for a particular line of thinking as this too can result in people with conflicting views speaking up.

5. As a manager you should be careful of dominating the conversation by giving people the "right" answer. Teams are much more likely to be committed to a solution if they have arrived at it themselves. Your job is to be a guide in this process.

Further reading


