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

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Chapter 5: Discussion

This study produced the grounded theory of the 4E's Socratic Model as a means of encouraging creativity in an organisational context. The use of a Model is a legitimate approach to theory building in a qualitative context and serves as an aid to interpretation and the building of new knowledge (Briggs, 2007) and therefore is particularly relevant in this study.

At each stage of the data gathering a series of memos were written to record insights gained and to interpret phenomena that came from my observations as a facilitator and written insights from participants.

This chapter represents the evaluation and election stages of the Model.

5.1   Theory Building Process

According to Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) a grounded theory is a result of a cyclical process involving data, emerging theory and validation against extant literature; however, it is also important to demonstrate rigour throughout this process. Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2012) suggest developing a data structure that distils first order concepts into second order themes followed by aggregate dimensions.

Having gathered all the raw data, open coding was used to interpret the comments made by participants. Based on this coding, ten first order concepts emerged, which were distilled into second order themes producing three aggregate dimensions (as shown in Figure 5.1):

Figure 5.1.

Data structure based on Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2012).

1st Order Concepts	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
Open and honest exchange of views	Eliminate politics	
Offset negative dynamics	Change in social dynamic	Group Flow
Encouraged people to speak up	Empowerment	
Lack of encouragement	External catalyst	
Multiple approvals required	Hierarchical structure	Leadership engagement in creative processes
No senior management buy-in	Process champion	
No commitment to change	Creative culture	
Specific goals	Topic agreement	
Focused discussion	Acting in concert	Group accountability
Project planning	Defined outcomes	

5.2   Aggregate Dimensions

5.2.1 Group flow

Creativity is dependent on the relationship between the creator(s) and their position in the social system in which it takes place (Bourdieu, 1996). Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer (1995) agree, saying that organisational creativity is a function of group rather than individual creative processes. At the core of this is social interaction that starts with an open and honest exchange of views.

The concept of open dialogue was mentioned by four groups and is closely linked to producing a realistic/feasible outcome. In all the sessions I encouraged every member of the group to participate. The value of this participation was reflected in comments like: *"Yes, we were able to have a more open and constructive conversation, which helped us to nail down what we wanted to do and what was realistic/feasible."* As the comment illustrates, this was particularly important to make the more junior members of the group feel engaged and able to participate without fear. This open and honest exchange of views overcame negative aspects of the existing group dynamic and encouraged people to speak up, as reflected in the following comment: *"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."*

A number of authors suggest that a sense of creative self-efficacy is a catalyst for creative behaviour (Diliello & Houghton, 2006; Lim & Choi, 2009) and that it can be enhanced by a positive environment (Chong & Ma, 2010; Lim & Choi, 2009). In the questionnaire, scores for questions relating to self-efficacy ranged from 0.7 – 0.87 across all participants, which in itself suggested that there may be differences in outcomes as a result. This was highlighted during the session with the second organisation, in which there was a wide disparity between individuals in terms of creative efficacy and also a feeling that the process didn't have organisational support.

However, by establishing group ownership of the process by opening with a discussion of the question under consideration, deficits in efficacy and support were overcome, resulting in a sense of group flow. The resulting collective consciousness (described in the 5th stage of theory development) helped to overcome the effects of

any deficits in creative self-efficacy, which suggested that a positive environment itself is a catalyst for creative behaviour (Bissola et al., 2014), irrespective of individual creativity.

Apart from a debate on the question itself, this sense of collective consciousness or flow came from two different aspects of the 4E's Socratic methodology: firstly, by drawing out existing knowledge systematically through directing concrete questions about knowledge and comprehension to each participant; and secondly, by mandating that during this process the views expressed went unchallenged. This resulted in all participants identifying as group members rather than as individuals and removed the politics that is often a characteristic of group interactions. This is consistent with Remenyi and Griffiths' (2007) presentation of two illustrative case studies of a Socratic Dialogue in action, using them to suggest an approach that should be taken to conduct such a dialogue. They suggest that the following are important: honest views; no judgemental approaches; clear and simple expression; no dominating individuals; and the need for a facilitator to keep the dialogue on track. However they neglect to provide a detailed model of how such a discussion should be run, saying only that the facilitator should be "skilled, energetic and hard-working" (p163).

The first exploration stage of the model overcomes this deficit by producing a system for a facilitator to follow and is consistent with Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer's (1995) and McIntyre's (2013) views that success is system- rather than idea-driven and should describe the actors, their interaction and any forces acting on them.

Another element that is important in a systematic approach is the questioning process itself. Many popular creative thinking techniques focus on producing new

ideas (for example Alex Osborn's (1953) Brainstorming concept). The problem with these is often the issue of group-think (Gobble, 2014), which can inhibit divergent thoughts and discourage people from disagreeing with the group.

The 4E's Socratic Model overcomes this by using an hourglass approach to questioning (Figure 5.2). This combines both convergent and divergent thinking, starting broadly to expose all existing knowledge and then converging to a state of consensus before diverging again to produce a creative outcome. The positive effect associated with this approach bears out Goldschmidt's (2016) assertion that both forms of thinking are necessary in creativity and that the ability to switch between them when required is a hallmark of creativity. It also maintains flow by systematically examining the issue and avoiding the lack of focus that is common in creative brainstorming.

EXISTING KNOWLEDGE
CONCRETE
QUESTIONING

SYNTHESIS
ABSTRACT
QUESTIONING

CREATIVE
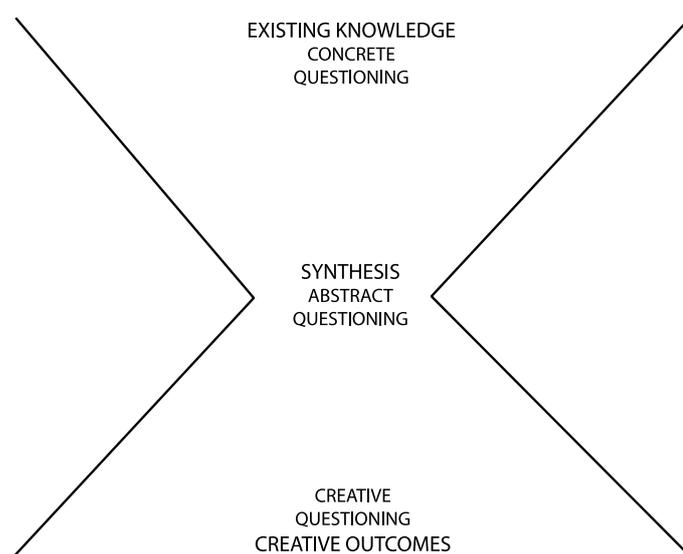QUESTIONING
CREATIVE OUTCOMES

Figure 5.2: *Questioning process.*

In maintaining a state of group flow, members acted as a single entity, thus providing an important linkage between each step of the process. This enabled

smooth transitions between the steps and helped transform the Socratic process into a system for producing creative outcomes.

5.2.2 Leadership engagement in creative processes

The experience with each organisation studied proved the value of using a Socratic dialogue as a team management tool but also showed that a rigid hierarchical organisation is a barrier to creativity. One participant summed this up clearly by saying, "While I view myself as creative I have limited confidence in trying new things due to the lack of support for innovation in my organisation. The approach taken in the session would be most effective in this organisation if it was driven from the top. With tolerance and support I believe I could be much more creative in the work environment and that the culture would also be much more positive." This is consistent with the findings of Choi et al. (2009) and Hon et al. (2011), both of whom suggested that a supportive management mediates negative environmental influences.

In a similar vein, five of the eight participants in the second organisation studied reported that they would not change their responses to the creativity index questions as a result of the session. One participant identified organisational rigidity as a barrier to change, and two participants felt that the process would be effective as a change agent if senior management were facilitating change via this process. While the workshop session concluded with agreement on future direction, we didn't get agreement on specific timeframes or responsibilities.

This suggests that it is easy for deadlines to be missed if there is no champion of the process. In working with the process in a company it is important to ensure that there is an internal champion who can take the place of the facilitator to ensure

progress doesn't stall. The process must also be sold to senior management so that it may be viewed as an effective management tool.

During the session the group made it clear that while they had confidence in both their creativity and the support of their team manager there was a sense that they were wasting their time due to the bureaucratic nature of the organisation and the conservative nature of senior management. It seems that it is not enough to have the support of a team manager – it is also important to have this process recognised as a legitimate part of the overall management philosophy. To facilitate this, a guide to the process with evidence supporting its use was produced to support a business case to help gain acceptance in situations where the process is instituted departmentally.

The role of a leader (of an organisation or a group within that organisation) is to create an environment where uncertainty and risk are tolerated and personal consequences in a creative environment are positive. Andriopoulus (2001, p. 834) identifies the relevant contextual influences relating to this as a combination of organisational climate and culture, leadership style, resources and skills, structure and systems. However, it is the leader who controls all of those influences and therefore needs to be actively involved in creative processes.

In a practical sense, the support of senior management can be shown by including management representatives in the process to demonstrate it. In a briefing prior to one of sessions, a conflict between the management team and the Board (in a not-for-profit organisation) in terms of expectations being unrealistic was highlighted. The session, which included the Board Chairman, provided a structure whereby everyone felt comfortable that they would be accountable for the outcomes agreed. This came from having present, in the same session, all the people who had opinions about and were affected by the topic under discussion. The neutrality

provided by the Socratic process removed personalities from the debate and enabled both sides of the conflict to see the other side's point of view, which prompted one person to say, *"This process enabled an open dialogue in which thoughts and ideas could be tabled and challenged. The outcome was better than expected! Having buy-in from all participants was important - this guided the discussion to keep on track (historically a challenge for us). Using this process would definitely help immediate supervisors/Board to understand internal resource challenges."*

Previously there was a general feeling of unwillingness to take risks; however, the airing of all the relevant issues with all stakeholders present meant that there was an increased willingness to both take and accept risk. This situation emphasizes the need for a neutral facilitator (whether that be an internal or external person) to ensure personalities are not bought into the discussion.

Despite a willingness to be creative, an unsupportive environment will potentially negate it, as one member of the final group pointed out: *"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. I think unfortunately the management structure in my organisation is not conducive to a frank and honest exchange of ideas. I wish it were."*

To assist in overcoming management reluctance a number of participants expressed the need to have a resource that could be used by managers to seed the Socratic approach within their organisations. The resulting publication of *Creative Leadership Techniques* (see Appendix 2) proved effective in meeting this need.

In addition to the need for management buy-in, the issue of corporate culture itself was raised. All the participants in one group (CO2) mentioned that implementation of the 4E's Socratic methodology would not in itself cause a change

in their creative behaviour despite it producing a valid creative outcome. Rather than being a reflection of the validity of the process, this was related to their feeling that the organisation's culture didn't encourage creativity, in spite of the fact that it was encouraged by their team leader. This feeling wasn't related to a lack of creative confidence as this group's self-reported creativity index was consistent with the other groups, and individuals reported high levels of creative self-efficacy.

The same issue arose in other group (CO7), who 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."* Members of this group felt strongly that if management used the Socratic model as an integral part of their way of managing, it would have a positive effect on the overall culture of the organisation: *"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 organisation was very hierarchical and there was a feeling there was a strong disconnect between management and staff.

In both cases it was clear that for the Socratic model to work as a management technique, it had to be both supported and driven by senior management. Bateman and Crant (1999) suggest that the solution to this problem is to create a climate that encourages proactivity (a behaviour that is too often discouraged in a hierarchical organisation). This assertion is the result of a number of empirical investigations that linked a proactive culture with both the number and frequency of innovations. Of course, having a proactive bias exposes an organisation to risk, which is why both direct management support and a creative culture are necessary to mediate negative influences (Choi et al., 2009; Hon et al., 2011).

The Socratic Model as a management tool therefore needs to be championed by leaders within the organisation in order for it to be successful, and be supported by appropriate resources and processes. While in each of the cases in this study the workshops were conducted successfully, without a positive context the Socratic approach alone is not sufficient to offset an ongoing negative environment.

5.2.3 Accountability

Group accountability was mentioned in Group CO6, whose members consisted of representatives from different divisions of the company, some of which were in conflict with others, despite each division relying on the others to be successful. This triggered stage 5 of theory development, which established group ownership as an important precursor to a successful process.

This dimension was also mentioned in two other groups (CO3 and CO5) and related to a feeling that using the Socratic model had resulted in some quantifiable outcomes that were both specific and realistic. Group CO3, in a briefing prior to the session, were particularly concerned with unrealistic and vague expectations from senior management. However, after the session, which included the senior managers, there was general consensus that this approach resolved those issues.

As predicted in the literature, tolerance got in the way of groups acting in concert. It manifested itself when some participants became frustrated with the dialogue when their views were challenged and illustrated the value of having a strong facilitator. As facilitator my goal was to ensure everyone was committed to the relevant team processes by agreeing to both the question being addressed and the outcome expectation. This commitment helped overcome issues of personality and was consistent with the findings of O'Neill and Allen (2011) relating to team level personality.

5.3   Implementing the 4E's Socratic Model

The preceding section discussed the dimensions that emerged during fieldwork. Some of these informed the ongoing development of the model itself (discussed in Chapter 4) while the remainder related to issues with implementing the model as a management process within an organisation. These issues are listed in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3.
Implementation issues

Issue
The need to embed the model as part of the culture of an organisation.
Using a neutral facilitator (either internal or external) to direct the dialogue.
Having measurable outcomes and assigned responsibilities so that momentum can continue throughout the life of a project.
Provide supporting collateral to legitimise the process and provide a guide for its implementation.

5.3.1 Supporting collateral

A resource in the form of an e-book (see Appendix 1) was written to provide a guide to managers and to help them produce a business case for the introduction of the 4E's Socratic Model into their organisations.

The objectives for testing the Creative Leadership Resource were to determine whether the Resource could provide a self-directed guide to implementing the 4E's Socratic Model in a corporate team environment, and to acquire information to improve the clarity and workability of the Resource.

Proof of Concept Pilot

The pilot was conducted in a workshop context with three senior managers from different organisations. Each participant was a leader of operational teams in their organisations and participants were self-selected via a LinkedIn request to 307 connections.

The workshop lasted for 90 minutes and consisted of working through a PowerPoint-based presentation that explained the concept of Creative Leadership and introduced the 4E's Socratic Model. The resource itself was sent to participants before the session to enable them to review it. The session was divided into five sections following the structure of the resource discussing each chapter in turn.

Participants were asked to provide feedback at each stage of the presentation and also to discuss the validity of the Model as a management tool suitable for implementation.

Figure 5.3.

Key outcomes

Section	Comment
Disconnect between creative thinking and the corporate environment	Agreement with the necessity for creativity and innovation but at a loss as to how best to manage it.
Approaches to creative thinking	Familiar with each of the tools but few positive outcomes when used. The phenomenon of "group think" was mentioned as one of the biggest issues and hard to overcome.
4E's Socratic Model	Feedback that the Model was easy to

	understand and that it provided a good framework for developing a creative team environment; but recognition that the key to making it work would be the ability of the leader to manage it.
Levels of cognition	Feedback that these provide a learning framework that encompasses the range of human ability and an ideal structure on which to base questions.
Discussion	It was felt that the Model overcame the previously identified problem of "group think". It was felt that creative thinking tools were often used to stimulate thinking, which was stage 3 (evaluation) of the 4E's Model and that without the earlier stage of exposing what is known, was the cause of both "group think" and a lack of engagement by some team members.
	Each of the managers agreed that the Model would provide an effective framework for managing creativity in their teams.

Reflection

Apart from general agreement that the Model was a useful tool and easy to work with, the most interesting element of the discussion was the level of frustration participants felt with traditional creative thinking tools they had worked with and that were mentioned in the resource. The biggest issue highlighted during the discussion was that of "group think", where brainstorming-type sessions are often dominated by

confident, opinionated individuals. Participants felt that the 4E's Socratic Model was a tool that could overcome this.

On reflecting further on this concept of "group think", which seemed to arise as a result of the group discussing without effective guidance, I wondered if it had anything to do with a distinction between a dialogue and a discussion. In examining the literature on this point I found support for such a distinction from Bolten (2001) who maintains that it is common in a discussion for participants to try to convince others, whereas in a dialogue the goal is to investigate, which requires an understanding of all perspectives. This reinforces the establishment of a hierarchy in questioning to ensure a dialogue ensues and a consensus is reached. It is also supported by Belonax (1980) who, in an educational context, suggests the integration of the Socratic method with Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives so that questions can be posed in a hierarchical way that correspond with the levels of cognition as identified by Bloom.

Fishman (1985) maintains that the goal of the Socratic method is a search for truth, whereas the questioning process is a tool to help arrive at the truth. In the process, he says the participants should gain self-knowledge rather than see it as a vehicle for self-expression. This supports Bolten's (2001) distinction between a dialogue and a discussion. A dialogue is likely to result in self-knowledge as the process forces participants to question their own beliefs as well as those of others.

This search for the truth, via a hierarchical questioning process that moves from the concrete to the abstract, results in a consensus gained through the Socratic dialogue that comes through the self-realization of participants rather than the expertise of one or more participants. This results in genuine learning (Golding, 2011).

5.4 Theory Development

At the end of each workshop conducted during the data gathering phase, memos were created to record the findings and insights gained as a result of them. This process has been summarised in Figure 5.4 below:

Figure 5.4.

Stages of theory development

Stage	Findings	Insight gained
Process validation – company 1 (CO1)	Encouraged empowerment, inclusion and creativity	Validation of process
CO2	Success requires senior management buy-in	Create a resource to assist in building a business case to obtain senior management support for the process
CO3	Engagement of senior management in workshop removed disconnect between senior management and operational staff	Identify member of senior management to champion the implementation of the process. This can be supported through the development of the resource discussed above
CO4	The process helps cement team	Facilitator should focus on team building as part

	relationships, which will create a positive working environment	of the second "evidence" stage to help create a greater level of tolerance between team members during the "argument" stage
CO5	Engagement by all participants	Facilitator should be neutral (always) but in the event of entrenched conflict an external facilitator could be considered
CO6	Created a non-threatening environment	Focusing on engendering flow to integrate each stage of the process
CO7	Increased self-direction of teams	The process can be used to stimulate bottom-up change

5.4.1 Model evolution

During the course of the research the model was empirically grounded against the concepts that were developed, based on the findings. This process meets one of the key criteria for evaluating a grounded theory as proposed by Corbin and Strauss (1990). This resulted in four additional elements being incorporated into the model. These were:

1. A preamble to the first stage – conducting a discussion and formally getting the agreement of the group on the question itself. This is supported by both the literature and the findings of this research.

2. Progression of questions – from concrete to abstract to creative. This was incorporated as a second dimension in the model.

3. Cognition – proceed on a hierarchical basis from knowledge-based questions to evaluative questions to aid cognition during the process.

4. Flow – foster a collective consciousness by fostering a sense of flow.

Following this process, the final model was validated via a workshop consisting involving three managers who hadn't been part of the original research. The workshop presented a facilitator's guide, the aim of which was to provide a step-by-step outline of the process as a guide for conducting a session using the 4E's Socratic Model. Following the workshop there was agreement that the guide made it easy for anyone taking on the role of a facilitator to prepare and conduct a session with little or no prior experience.

5.5   Validation of Final Model

To determine the validity of the final Model and supporting collateral, I organised a workshop with a bid team in an organisation, who were trying to develop a bid strategy for a request for tender (RFT). This was a typical project for this organisation and was part of day-to-day operations. The process used is discussed below:

5.5.1 Explore

As a starting point I used an unpacking process designed to explore statements that are made. This forced participants to focus on the elements of the question itself and was a good way to break the ice. It also restricted questions to concrete enquiries that didn't allow people to expand on any subjective opinions they may have had.

Paul and Elder (2006) suggest that statements made are rarely complete and that they should be viewed as a series of interconnected thoughts. Exploration began by breaking the connections in the RFT so that individual elements were identified, similar to individual pieces of a puzzle that can then be analysed and reassembled in different ways. The relevant part of the request stated:

"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 team unpacked the statement into the following individual pieces:

- brief background

- organisation

- products and services

- relevance to RFT

5.5.2 Examine

Having unpacked the statement, the examination stage was conducted as a brainstorming session where the aim was to expose ideas and concepts without argument and therefore concentrate on posing concrete questions to expose facts and abstract questions to uncover opinions. Examples of questions used were:

• In the context of this request, what is meant by brief?

• Which products/services are relevant?

• What information about the organisation is appropriate?

5.5.3 Evaluate

The evaluation stage started by questioning the facts to expose any contrary opinions, because during the examination the facts were stated without hearing any contrary opinions. This called for more creative questions to identify new combinations or linkages:

- 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?

5.5.4 Elect

The final step was to bring the discussion to a conclusion by identifying specific subsequent steps. In this case the next step was the assignment of tasks to specific team members:

- Analyst to quantify specific benefits

- Writers to draft initial statements (after analyst information obtained)

The final action was to set a time when the team would reconvene to discuss the draft statement.

5.5.5 Discussion

The addition of the two extra layers in the model made it much easier to stay focused as the facilitator. Firstly, in terms of preparation, it forced me to consider not only the questions I might ask but also ones that were the at the appropriate level in both type and cognition. Secondly, having a visual of the model (See Figure 4.17: 4E's Socratic model facilitator's worksheet) in front of me during the discussion

gave me a guide for the type of question required at different times in order to stimulate discussion or tease out linkages in the evaluation stage that resulted in more creative thought.

In discussion after the session, participants expressed surprise at how quickly they were able to come to a conclusion that they felt gave critical direction to their response to the RFT. This was something I also noticed and was surprised to note later that the total time taken was just over 60 minutes compared with similar sessions during the initial data gathering stage that lasted over 90 minutes.

5.6   Chapter Summary

The 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.

Having established the robustness of the Socratic model, the second part of the study focused on giving managers the tools to implement the model in their own organisations. This was done by delivering a one-day training workshop to a number of managers from different organisations and measuring their confidence in and likelihood of rolling it out in their organisations.

It must be noted that these findings are based on successful outcomes in a variety of situations, but all using an external facilitator. This was done to concentrate on the applicability of the model itself and remove any bias that might have come from using different facilitators.