



THE SOCRATIC METHOD

**A Simple Tool for
More Effective
Management &
Communication**

**A SPECIAL REPORT
By Dr. Jim Dyke
The Boss Doctor™**



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The Socratic Method— The Power of Questions to Communicate and Connect

Introduction

Socrates was a master educator who was renowned for his ability to teach by simply posing questions to his students. As a result, they were forced to think, analyze, and consider rather than look to Socrates for easy answers and uncontested direction. In short, they acquired the valuable skill of critical thinking.

I teach my executive coaching clients the same technique as a way to gently and tactfully develop their team members; collaborate more effectively across the organization; and diplomatically leverage the wisdom of their boss and other higher-ups.

This compilation of previously published content outlines *The Socratic Method* with enough detail (and examples) to enable the reader to acquire and apply this communication tool and become more engaging, influential, and persuasive. Each section will expand the concept and spotlight practical ways to apply the method, starting with the introductory definition of six different types of questions:

6 Kinds of Questions

Socrates used six different types of questions, designed to accomplish different ends:

To clarify concepts.

How does this relate to the topic at hand? Can you provide an example?

To surface assumptions.

What are you taking for granted as being true? What else might explain this?

To draw out rationale and evidence.

Why do you think this is so? What evidence are you basing this on?

To identify viewpoints and perspectives.

How might our customers feel about this? What might our employees think?

To consider implications and consequences.

How might this affect our sales? What will this cost?

To explore the question itself.

*How do you feel about my asking that question? What did you hear when I asked you that question?
Is there another question I should be asking?*

Effective questioning brings insight, which fuels curiosity, which cultivates wisdom.

Chip Bell



Helpful Pointers

Proper word choice is essential, but even more critical is the right tone of voice and physical accompaniments—facial expressions; stance; and gestures. The key is to avoid any appearance of being confrontational.

Here are some additional tips...

Keep it short. Use simple, straightforward language in short sentences.

Be specific, but open-ended. Your question should invite a thoughtful exposition rather than a simple “yes” or “no” response.

WEAK: Have you considered extending the deadline?

BETTER: What actions have you considered taking, to mitigate the situation?

Hide your bias. If you telegraph your point-of-view it may limit the other person’s response.

BAD: Wasn’t that presentation terrible?

BETTER: What did you think of that presentation?

NOTE: This is different when you are correcting a subordinate—I’ll demonstrate this in the next section!

Push gently past evasion. If you sense reluctance on the respondent’s part, repeat your question in an earnest, non-accusatory tone.

Never interrupt except to clarify. Let the person respond and share their thoughts. Resist the temptation to interrupt with corrections, defenses, or explanations. Those can be handled with additional questions after their remarks... e.g.

Correction: *What if I told you that you were given the wrong information?*

Defense: *How would you view this if it turns out they were just following a procedure?*

Explanation: *Suppose the forecasts were overly-optimistic; how might that change your view?*

Test for clarity. Paraphrase their response to be sure you have understood them correctly. Use wording like this to preface your paraphrase:

Just to make sure I understood you clearly, you said...

*The art and science of asking questions
Is the source of all knowledge. Thomas Berger*

Using the Method with Subordinates

This is a given: Your subordinates are the key to your success—because you do not succeed until your team succeeds. *The Socratic Method* gives you a valuable tool for building collaboration with your team AND for correcting problems with individual team members.

COLLABORATION. The easiest way to collaborate with subordinates is to engage them in the day-to-day functions of the team. And the simplest and most powerful way to engage subordinates is by using this simple question: ***What do you think?***

The key is to ask it *authentically*. And that requires the leader to then listen to the responses—attentively and non-judgmentally—in a way that demonstrates respect and open-mindedness. Here’s a tip: When the subordinate is finished sharing their thoughts, a helpful response on the part of the leader is simply:

Thank you for sharing that—I really appreciate it.

Here are some other questions that are sure to elicit valuable input from a team member:

How can we make this easier/better/faster/smarter/cheaper/safer?

What are your thoughts on...?

If you were in charge, what would YOU do?

What do you like about this idea? What do you NOT like about this idea?

What am I missing? What am I not seeing? What am I not understanding?

I believe leaders should be a questioning machine, rather than an answering machine. Saji Ijiemi

CORRECTION. One of the most critical managerial skills is the ability to effectively address problems with a subordinate’s performance, attendance, or behavior. Most leaders see this as an exercise in confrontation, in which the leader must become the “bad guy.” I teach my management students to adopt a more positive mindset and view themselves as the “Knight in Shining Armor” who has come to help the subordinate address the problem and become a success.

The Socratic Method enables supervisors to pursue correction more positively and professionally. Here’s how...

Soften **confrontation** with the polite request:

Help me understand...

Invite **creative thinking** and **ownership** with the question:

What do you think might work better?

Suggest **alternatives** gently with the simple query:

What do you think might happen if...?

Introduce a **broader perspective** with the questions:

What do you think other people’s concerns are about this?

How do you think other people might view this?

Teach **critical thinking** by asking:

What do you think the impact might be if...?

Using the Method with Other Leaders in the Organization

One of the biggest challenges to executive success is the demand for effective collaboration with colleagues and higher-ups. This is where *The Socratic Method* has its most valuable application.

The key phrase to engage other leaders and invite their input is the simple request:

Help me understand...

This straightforward invitation enables a leader to gather information; increase understanding; and clarify another person's point-of-view.

Help me understand...

...why this is important to you.
...why this is a priority.
...the reasoning behind your decision.
...how we can accomplish that.
...why this is a problem for you.
...what it takes to accomplish this.
...what I can do to help.

Questions wake people up. They prompt new ideas. They show people new places, new ways of doing things. Michael Marquardt

Other key phrases help a leader to deal with potential difficulties...

Seek advice or input non-judgmentally. Preface your idea with a simple phrase:

I've been thinking...

Be sure to communicate openness instead of bias or dogmatism. Say it like this:

I like this idea, but I'm open to suggestions.

Now request their input with straightforward requests:

What am I overlooking?

What other approaches do you think might work better?

What do you think I might do differently or better?

What additional measures do you think I could take?

Soften conflict or confrontation with questions instead of direct statements:

BAD: *That's going to kill our bottom-line!*

BETTER: *What do you think the impact will be on our bottom-line?*

BAD: *Customers are going to HATE this!!!*

BETTER: *How do you think our customers will respond to this?*

When dealing with forceful and direct conflict, don't react emotionally—instead use a deflecting question that invites dialogue and prompts the other person to elaborate.

For example, when someone tells you, "That's a terrible idea." Respond with a simple request:

That's interesting. Tell me more.

If someone baits you with a statement like: "You have no idea what you're talking about." Respond this way:

That's interesting. Tell me why you would say that.

Qualities of Effective Questions

Some questions are better than others!

Make sure you ask the kind of questions that will promote helpful responses. The following practical ideas come from James Van Fleet's excellent book, *21 Days to Unlimited Power with People*.

A good question...

...**includes purpose**—it is not intended to be a challenge or attack. Here are some BAD examples:

Who do you think you are?

What makes you think you're so smart?

Where do you get off thinking you can get away with that?

A good question has a **clear purpose**:

*To gather **information**: What will it take to accomplish that?*

*To identify **reasoning**: What was the rationale behind that decision?*

*To surface **motive**: What prompted you to move in that direction?*

*To gain **clarity**: What factors led you to that conclusion?*

*To explore **other viewpoints**: How does Legal feel about this?*

*To expand **thinking**: What else might account for this problem?*

*To engage **collaboration**: How will you get Sales to support this?*

...demonstrates **understanding**...

*...of the **situation**: We know what affects our sales...how will this help?*

*...of the **speaker**: Given your concern for morale, what other alternatives did you consider?*

...concerns only one point—**has a single, clear focus**.

*...asks for a **definite answer**.*

It's not a **leading question**: *What on earth made you think we would want that?*

It's not a **rhetorical question**: *Who would possibly agree to that?*

A good question moves the conversation forward in a **constructive direction**:

What do you think might have worked better?

What other alternatives did you consider?

What are your concerns?

How can I help?

I think it's very important to have a feedback loop, where you're constantly thinking about what you've done and how you could be doing it better. I think that's the single best piece of advice: constantly think about how you could be doing things better and questioning yourself. Elon Musk

...discourages guessing.

Many public speakers and corporate trainers are often guilty of asking their audience to guess the “correct” answer. This approach actually discourages audience participation!

BAD: What do you think is the most common cause of this problem?

BETTER: What are some possible causes of this problem?

...asks **WHY**—which is designed to gain better understanding.

Why is that a problem for you?

Why can't we do that?

Why do we do it THAT way?

Why does that require more time?

Why is this approach more expensive?

To sum it all up—use questions that will help...

...invite open conversation

...encourage critical thinking

...promote greater creativity

...create better understanding

...build positive relationships

...support effective collaboration



In Conclusion...

The Socratic Method is a simple approach, but a deceptively impactful communication device. Use this ancient approach and you will immediately raise your communication skills to the next level. Even more important—you will also take your *leadership ability* to the next level by becoming more engaging, influential, and persuasive!

We have an education and business culture that tends to reward quick factual answers over imaginative inquiry. Questioning isn't encouraged-- it is barely tolerated. Warren Berger



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