

The Socratic Method

Leveraging Questions to Increase Performance

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Increasing performance means getting more of what you want, which of course assumes you indeed know what you want. If you can't put your vision for your organization into a story that excites and energizes your staff, then I recommend you explore Noel Tiche's concept of "The Teachable Point of View" in his book *The Leadership Engine*.

However, once you've got a story that captures the essence and energy of your vision, using the Socratic Method can help you quickly turn "your" story into "our" story and send the energy cascading through your organization. The Socratic Method is also a powerful way to help your staff discover how to turn that story into reality.

Defining the Socratic Method

The Socratic Method is about moving people along—in a direction they want to go. It's not coercion, or manipulation—it's a means to help people see the world around them, and how they think about it, more clearly.

The "moving" is done by guiding and, when necessary, nudging people to examine those things they take for granted such as their assumptions, beliefs, experiences, and paradigms. The Socratic Method uses questions to challenge these things, to check their accuracy and their completeness. Through these questions the Socratic Method guides people on a journey of discovery, and moves

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them toward greater understanding and increased performance.

Although leadership is about moving people, the simple truth is that nobody moves anywhere unless they move themselves. The Socratic Method is a way to help people see when they need to move, and where they need to move to. It produces better learning and better solutions because it leads people to explore, challenge their thinking, and discover answers for themselves. These discoveries make it easier for people to take action because they've figured out for themselves what needs to be done, and why.

Putting the Socratic Method into Action

There are two elements essential to using the Socratic Method: 1) questions, and 2) knowing where we're going. We'll explore each in more detail.

The Most Important Part—Staying Focused on Where You're Going

It's not enough to just ask questions. You must ask questions that move people toward a desired goal or end state. This is why the vision story is so important—it captures and communicates the desired outcome. Use your vision story to help you, and everyone in your organization, stay focused on where all of you are going.

When you're working one-on-one with individuals, think of yourself as a facilitator, where your role is to convey that



person to where he or she wants to go. If you're not sure where that is, ask. What's the desired outcome/end result? Then stay focused on helping the person to move there.

The Hardest Part: Figuring Out What Question to Ask (Next)

Once it's been decided where you and your organization are going and why,

the next question is usually, how do we get there?

If this question draws nothing but blank stares, try flipping it around—tell me why we can't do this. This will produce a list of obstacles—a treasure trove of questioning opportunities.

- Why is this an obstacle?

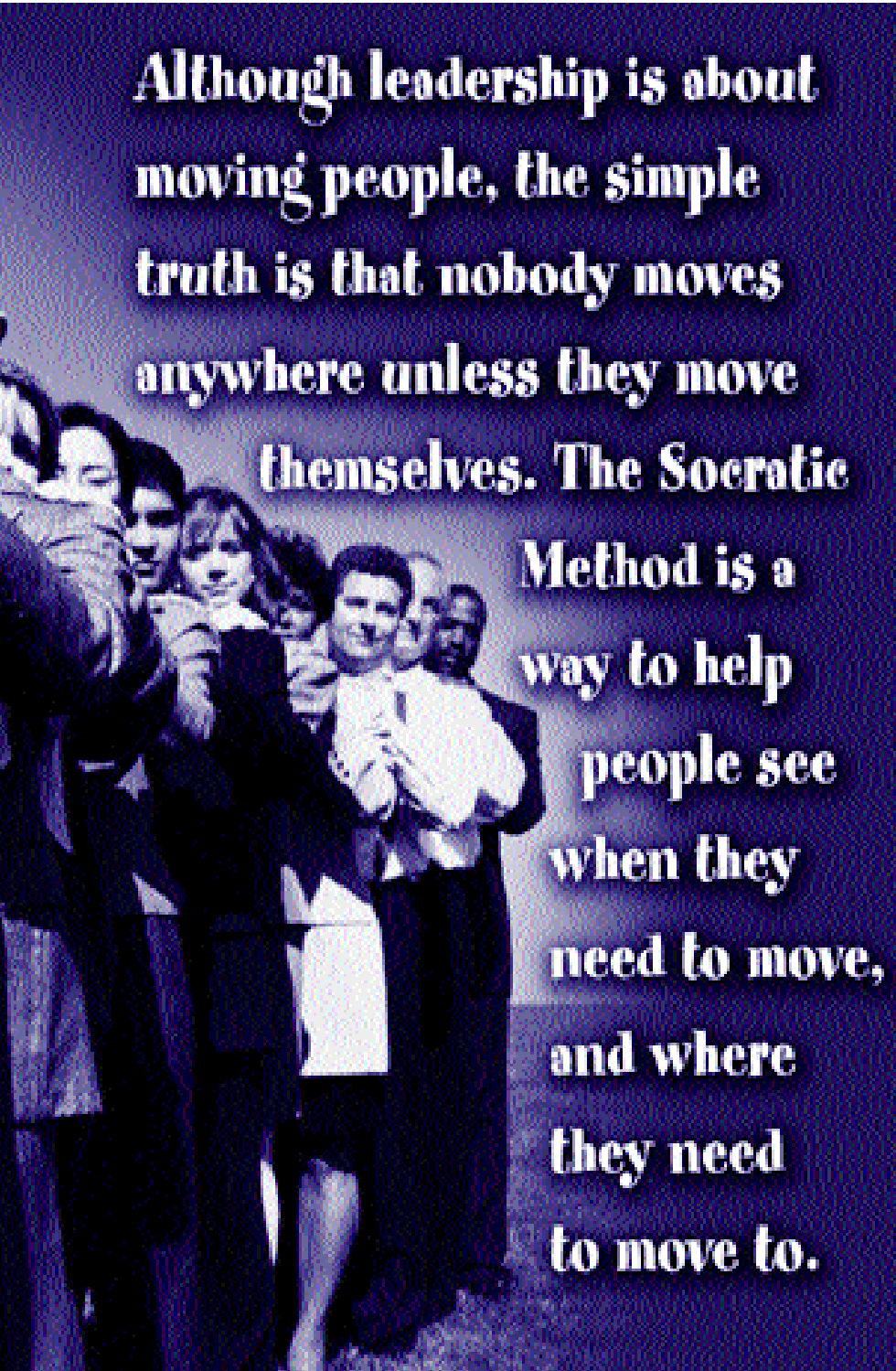
- Can we break it down into a set of smaller obstacles?
- What condition do we need to create to overcome this obstacle?
- What actions can we take to create this condition?
- Which do we need to do first?

Once you ask a question, be quiet. Wait. Even if there's a very loooooooong pause. Allow the person time to think and reflect, to form an answer. Don't answer your own question! You don't want to send the message that your questions are rhetorical. If someone is unable to answer your question, back up and break your question into smaller questions. Or you might ask the person what their question is—what's got that person stuck?

Your questions will likely elicit both statements and questions. Both contain valuable information, which you can use to help you determine the "needed next step." Knowing where the group (or individual) needs to go next, and how big a step that group (individual) is capable of taking will help you form the question that will move them forward.

To help you figure out the "next step," evaluate where they are on Bloom's Hierarchy of Learning (Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation). Are they asking basic "comprehension" questions about the facts, or are their questions about synthesizing the facts into some new application? If their questions are asking for facts and data, then responding with questions asking them to evaluate the implied concepts will probably move them backward, not forward. Use their questions to guide you in determining the level of your "response questions."

It's also helpful to understand the layers of complexity used to create information. In its simplest form, information is composed of concrete data and facts—things you can see and touch. With a firm grasp of the concrete things around us, we can then describe concepts such as trust, initiative, and commander's intent. And finally, when we



Mike's Plan to Get on Contract



grasp a concept and are comfortable with it, we can use those concepts to describe big universal abstractions such as “visionary organization” or “democratic republic.”

Start with what you’ve just been given—the statement or question. What’s the level of complexity? Do you need to take that group (individual) up or down a level? Dropping down will allow you to help them clarify and build a strong foundation for moving back up. Stepping up an additional level allows you to challenge them mentally, to stretch their thinking. Be conscious of your choice and stay focused on where you’re going.

As you’re looking at the goal—where you want to go—ask yourself what’s needed to take the next step forward. If you’re working with a statement, ask what’s missing. Or if you were given a question, ask what’s needed to answer that question. What you’re doing is

using Socratic questions on yourself to help you find the next step forward. Then, once you find what’s needed, you have to figure out how to help them find it as well.

Sometimes, “finding” something is actually an exercise in recalling something—of pulling it into conscious thought. Other times the group (individual) will have to do some research, or you may have to do some teaching. At any rate, once you know what’s needed, form the question that will move them there.

Now you’re ready to respond to the initial statement or question—with a question that will help them move forward, toward where they want to go. Note that moving forward may mean stepping sideways, or even backward, as you ask questions to help them find what they need to answer their earlier questions. Because you don’t know before you start what they’ll need, you

can’t know in advance what path you and they will take as you guide them to where they want to go.

This can seem quite “messy”; however, with practice you’ll find the approach both fun and rewarding. After all, when do you learn best—when someone tells you the answer, or when they help you figure it out for yourself?

An Example—Getting on Contract by Jan. 30

Let’s join the Program Manager (PM), Kevin as he meets with his Contracting Officer (KO), Mike, to discuss how they’re going to meet their short schedule to get on contract.

PM

Mike, thanks for coming by. Let’s see what you’ve put together.

KO

[Hands his plan to Kevin—see chart to the left.]

PM

[After studying the plan for a few moments, asks] *What was the date we said we needed to be on contract?*

KO

January 30

PM

You remember why we said we needed to be on contract by 30 January?

KO

Yeah. It was driven by the customers’ IOC [Initial Operating Capability]—they were hard over on that date. I don’t think we’ll get them to change it.

PM

So, will this plan get us on contract by 30 January? [Kevin’s first objective is to reach a clear understanding and agreement of “where we need to go.”]

KO

No, it doesn’t show us getting on contract until 15 March, and I’m not confident we’ll actually be on contract before April Fool’s day.

PM

Well, we promised our customers we'd meet their IOC date, so let's see if we can find a way to keep from becoming the subject of their April Fool's jokes. Let's start with the plan you've mapped out. You have any ideas on how to shorten it? [At this point, Kevin is prepared to be quiet and wait. It may take Mike some time to think before he answers.]

KO

Well, I wish I could get the engineers to give me a SOW [Statement of Work] right now, but I know from past experience I won't see one for another 2½ months. [The key here is to explore "past experience," so Kevin asks "why."]

PM

Why's it take them 2½ months to write a SOW for this effort? Isn't it pretty straightforward?

KO

It is, but it's not the only thing on their plate. In fact I don't think it's even their number one priority.

PM

O.K. what if I made it clear to them, and their boss, that this is their number one priority, and they're not to work on anything else until they're done. Given that, how long do you think it would take them to write a SOW?

KO

I'd guess they could knock it out in two to three weeks.

PM

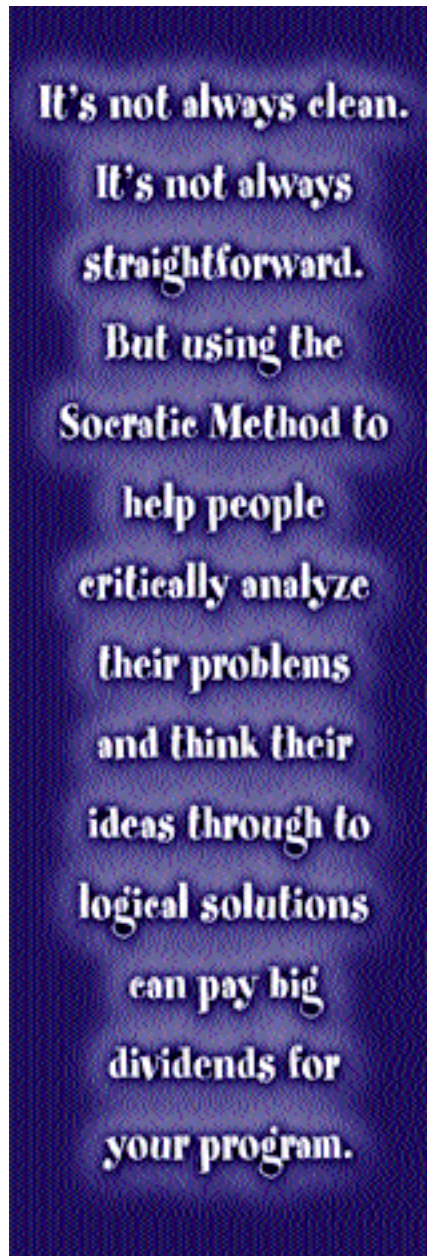
Do you have to wait until they're done to start writing the draft solicitation? [Seeing that Mike's plan shows "Develop SOW" must be done before "Create Draft Solicitation," Kevin challenges Mike on this assumption.]

KO

Actually, no. I could get a lot of it done before I have a complete SOW.

PM

O.K. Here's an off-the-wall question. Do we even need to write a SOW? [Kevin decides to step up a level and challenge



Mike's paradigm of the process. At this point Kevin is checking, instigating an exploration—he doesn't know if the assumptions in Mike's paradigm are valid or not. His intent is to cause Mike to check those assumptions.]

KO

Huh? How will the contractor know what we want them to do if we don't give them a SOW?

PM

What if we give them a SOO [Statement of Objectives], and ask them to give us a detailed SOW as part of their proposal? Could we do that?

KO

Well, yes. It's been done before, and it works fine. If we took that approach, it would let us get the proposal out sooner.

PM

Do our engineers know how to write a SOO?

KO

It's not hard, but I'm not sure they've done it before. Since we've already decided to put them on this full time, why don't you have Laurie, Tom, and Ed work directly with me and I'll help them knock this out.

PM

So how long do you think it will take before we're ready to release a draft solicitation? [Kevin's intent is to move them toward where they agreed they need to go.]

KO

Well, if the four of us work together, and focus on this single task, I don't see it taking us more than three weeks.

PM

So we've just gone from 12 weeks to release a draft solicitation to three—is this really doable? [Again, Kevin is asking Mike to check the assumptions they've just made.]

KO

Kevin, if you can give me Laurie, Tom, and Ed full time, we can make this happen.

PM

Great! That gives us a plan that not only meets our contract award date, but gives us a week's buffer as well. Well done, Mike. You've done it again.

Notice how the Program Manager guided his Contracting Officer to a solution to the problem. First, Kevin clarified where they needed to go, and reviewed why it was important to get there. Next he asked Mike for his ideas, which relaxed Mike, got him talking, and helped them move forward together. With each question, Kevin moved Mike forward by helping him uncover what

was blocking them. Kevin's questions also helped Mike uncover his assumptions, which helped him to generate new options.

It's not always clean. It's not always straightforward. But using the Socratic Method to help people critically analyze their problems and think their ideas through to logical solutions can pay big dividends for your program.

Remember, as you lead people along with questions, not everyone will take the same steps—partly because they're not starting at the same place, but also because people learn in different ways.

Respect that, and ask your questions in a way that helps them move forward. Be open and join them on their journey of discovery. This is far more effective than trying to drag them along the path you'd take.

Make a Commitment to Use the Socratic Method

Why use the Socratic Method instead of just telling your people what to do or directing them? When you have a tough challenge, an intriguing puzzle, what's your reaction when someone walks up and tells you the answer? Anger? Frustration? Perhaps you feel like you've been robbed.

Indeed, "giving" someone the answer to a problem or question is robbing them—robbing them of valuable learning opportunities, because in each of us learning happens fastest when we figure things out for ourselves. And when we figure something out for ourselves, we're energized to go make it happen. So make a commitment to yourself not to rob people of the joy and energy of discovery, but rather to help them move forward by asking Socratic questions.

Editor's Note: The author welcomes questions or comments on this article. Contact him at norman.patnode@dau.mil.

Defense Acquisition University and Lockheed Martin Corporation Form Strategic Partnership

On Nov. 4, 2002, Defense Acquisition University (DAU) President Frank Anderson Jr., and Dr. Malcolm N. O'Neil, Chief Technical Officer, Lockheed Martin (LM) Corporation, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to work closely with each other in the development of joint training curricula that would provide better tools,

techniques, and materials to both Defense industry and government personnel.

The goal of this cooperative relationship is to improve program performance by enhancing knowledge, understanding, and transparency of the government and contractor roles in systems acquisition.

The opportunities for partnering include, but are not limited to, collaboration and coordination on numerous subjects including:

- Revisions to the aerospace and defense addendum to the Project Management Body of Knowledge.
- Lean learning practices.
- PM Toolkits and the digital environment.
- Knowledge management communities of practice.
- Risk management tools, including Independent Nonadvocate Reviews and Independent Cost Estimates.
- Transition phase (proposal to performance).
- Program failure analysis.
- Systems engineering.
- Subcontract management.
- Earned value management.
- Mutual development of case studies in program management.

This MOU contemplates a joint effort between DAU and LM that focuses on lessons learned (both government and industry), elements of success, and best practices.



From left: Dr. Malcolm N. O'Neil, Chief Technical Officer, Lockheed Martin Corporation, and Frank Anderson Jr., DAU President.

Photo by Army Sgt. Kevin Moses