

6 PHILIP DENNETT

A SOCRATIC APPROACH TO MANAGING CREATIVITY IN BUSINESS

ABSTRACT There has been considerable research on identifying antecedents of creativity and the determinants of organizational creativity but researchers are yet to develop an effective model for managing creativity within a traditional hierarchical management structure. It has been suggested that using the Socratic Method to create a learning environment within an organization is a way to foster creativity in an uncertain environment. In this context the Socratic Method is defined as a directed questioning technique to encourage critical thinking. This paper proposes that taking a Socratic approach to champion creativity will enable management to increase creativity in their teams, reviews the relevant literature to test support for this assumption and proposes a model to manage a Socratic Dialogue in a team environment.

Introduction

The importance of creativity in an organizational context was first highlighted by Schumpeter in 1942 when he said that the process of “creative destruction” (new ideas/ways destroying old ones to create value) was at the heart of Capitalism (1942, 82). However, creativity of itself is not enough to guarantee growth. Edith Penrose (1959), in espousing her theory of growth of the firm, points out that a firm’s failure to grow is “often attributed to demand conditions rather than to the limited nature of entrepreneurial resources” (Penrose 1959, 37). Those demand conditions are not just market driven but are also influenced by the culture of an organization which in many cases doesn’t tolerate trial and error decision-making (Thompson 1961, 486). The issue then is to be able to foster creativity in an environment that is not necessarily conducive.

While the ideal traits of the creative individual and the most conducive environmental conditions have been well documented by socio-cultural theorists such as Amabile (1983) and Csikzentmihalyi (1996) there is no clear framework identified for managers to use to foster creativity in real-world conditions where individual and environmental factors are

decision-making is often the preserve of senior management and is not usually encouraged,

A Socratic approach to managing creativity

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." (Sonnenberg and Goldberg 2007, 54). 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 (2008, 41) as the "practice of asking the 'right' questions to stimulate thinking." They say that companies who do, end up with a higher level of engagement and ownership of issues. Skordoulis & Dawson (2007) agree saying that this process is particularly useful in times of change where the status quo is being challenged. Socrates' directed questioning technique is also useful in both leadership and follower roles. Tucker (2007) identifies a number of different roles and applications that have been summarized in the following table:

Role	Application
Instructor	Critical thinking and comprehension
Mentor	Intellectual development
Leadership	Follower buy-in
Follower	Probe reasoning
Peers	Open dialogue and feedback

Table 1: Roles and applications for Socratic questioning

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 (Gong et al, 2009) and is a necessary step in gaining a competitive advantage (Oldham and Cummings 1996) ideas alone "are necessary but not sufficient condition for opportunities to emerge" (Dimov 2007, 718).

Amabile (1983), 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" (Amabile 2012, 3).

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 traits relevant to creative action:

- self-direction/proactivity

- knowledge and experience
- risk-taking propensity
- social competence and
- resiliency.

Figure 1, on page 82, tabulates these characteristics identified by different authors, each of which is discussed below.

Self-direction/proactivity

Writing from a neuro-scientific perspective, Rock and Schwartz (2006), identify the importance of self-direction in developing insights (creativity). If insights are generated by the individual, the brain makes stronger connections than if the insight was given to them as a conclusion. 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 effectiveness. (Kim et al. 2009).

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 ideas (Sternberg in Sawyer et al 2003, 96). According to Ford (1996) "Accumulated experiences lead individuals to develop interpretive schema, preferences, expectations, and knowledge related to specific domains of behavior." (Ford 1996, 1117). Ford includes knowledge and ability as one of three major influences that either facilitate or constrain creativity (the others being sense making and motivation).

From an organizational perspective then, creativity depends not only on the individual but also on the structures that organize them (Sawyer 2006, 292).

Risk-taking behavior

Creativity, according to Florida (2002), 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 (Amabile, Gryskiewicz, Stanley 1987). However, in order for risk to be productive there must be organizational encouragement and tolerance (Amabile et al. 1996).

Social Competence

The interactionist model of creative behavior first described by Woodman and Schoenfeldt (1989) 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 (1987), 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 (Amabile and Gryskiewicz 1987); Oldham & Cummings 1996; Fillis and McAuley 2000). According to Ford (1996) perseverance comes from an individu-

als 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, *self-direction* is the one that must be fostered in all individuals for the Socratic approach to work effectively, as a disinterested individual will not actively participate in the questioning process that is designed to stimulate critical thinking. From an organisation's 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.

Author(s)	Self direction/ Proactivity	Knowledge/ Experience	Risk taking	Social competence	Resiliency
Amabile and Gyskiewicz (1987)	Intrinsic motivation (self reliance)	Ability and experience	Risk orientation	Social skill	Persistence, lack of preconceptions
Florida (2002)	Self assurance, Intrinsic rewards, Individuality		Risk taking ability		Ability to synthesise
Fillis and McAuley (2000)	Internal locus of control, Independence		Risk taking behavior		Perseverance
Ford (1996)	motivation	Knowledge and ability			Sensemaking
Drucker (1985)					Identify and react to change
Gilson and Madjar (2011)	Intrinsic motivation				Problem driven, ability to abstract
Gong, Huang and Farh (2009)					Learning orientation
Mathison (2011)	Creative self-efficacy				
Oldham and Cummings (1996)	Intuition	Broad interests		Aesthetic sensitivity	Attraction to complexity, toleration of ambiguity
Tierney and Farmer (2002)	Creative self-efficacy				
Dimov (2007)	Action orientation			Social interaction	Continuous shaping

Figure 1: Creative traits and competencies

Creativity and the Organisation

From an organizational perspective what are the conditions under which creativity might flourish? Amabile, Gryskiewicz and Stanley (1987, 25) 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 (Bateman and Crant 1999). 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” (Bateman and Crant 1999, 66).

While it is generally agreed (as discussed earlier) that creativity can improve business outcomes, the traditional management model “is built on a monocratic, hierarchically structured authority chain” (Cummings 1965, 221).

Creed (2011) 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 more 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 (1993) 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 (2001, 834) identifies those contextual influences as a combination of:

- Organizational climate
- Leadership style
- Organisational culture

- Resources and skills
- Structure and systems.

This then is the role of a leader (of an organization or a group within that organization)—to create an environment where uncertainty and risk are tolerated and personal consequences in a creative environment are positive.

Socratic Dialogue Model

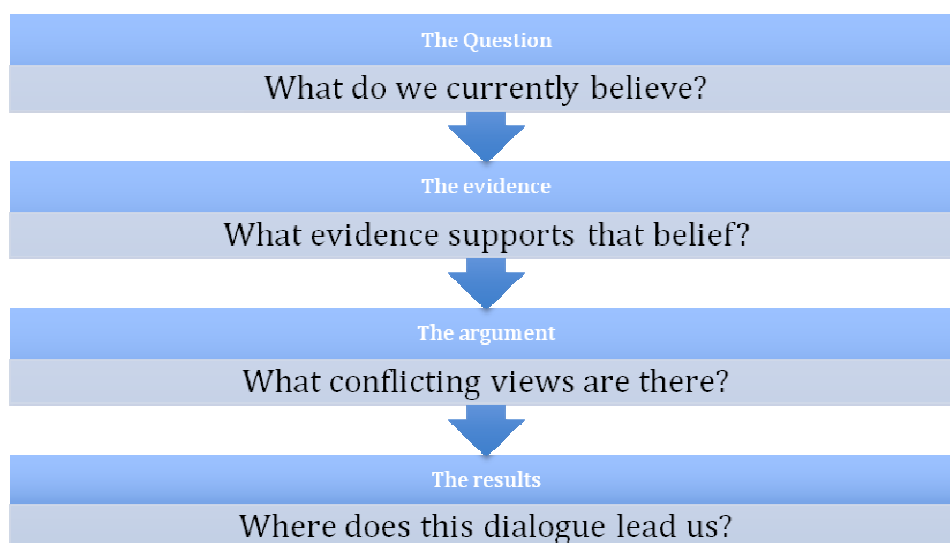


Figure 2: Socratic Dialogue Model

Socratic questioning can be used to stimulate a dialogue where participants' beliefs on an issue are challenged (elenchus) and found wanting by the participants themselves. From this resulting state of confusion (aporia) a joint search for truth is begun. Socrates typically began with a question such as "What is the point of X?" Paul and Elder (2006) agree that the question should relate to a belief or conclusion that is held or has been reached; however other authors suggest starting the dialogue with a collaborative agenda setting process (Bolten 2001; Chesters 2012; Andriopoulos & Lowe 2000).

The proposed Socratic Dialogue Model (Figure 2) synthesizes the approach of Socrates himself with the constructs of 21st century authors (Figure 3) for the purpose of application in a business context. It proposes that the initial question establishes a hypothesis that requires testing (what do we currently believe about the issue?) and is followed by a series of questions gathering evidence (what evidence supports our belief?); questions to uncover conflicting views (what conflicting views are there?); and finally a series of questions to explore the implications and consequences of the discussion (where does this dialogue lead us?).

The objective of the dialogue is not to make final decisions (Bohm 2010:19) but to engage participants in a creative process that "inspires further curiosity and open-minded reflection" (Skordoulis & Dawson 2007:993). This creative process can be used as a manage-

ment tool to engage participants in the decision-making process in order to foster increased understanding and ownership (Kachaner & Deimler 2008; Skordoulis & Dawson 2007).

Socratic Dialogue model	The Question <i>What do we currently believe about the issue?</i>		The Evidence <i>What evidence supports that belief?</i>	The Argument <i>What conflicting views are there?</i>	The Results <i>Where does this dialogue lead us?</i>	
Socratic Method	What is X?		Elenchus		Aporia	
Paul & Elder 2006	Examining origin or source	Belief, statement or conclusion	Support, reasons, evidence and assumptions	Opposing thoughts and objections	Implications and consequences	
Bolten 2001	Original questions formed in collaboration with participants		Information gathering	Argumentation	Results	
Chesters 2012	Problematic situation	Constructing an agenda	Gathering and suggesting	Reasoning and analysis	Making judgements and self correcting	Concluding
An driopoulos & Lowe 2000	Adventuring		Overt confronting	Portfolioing	Opportunising	

Figure 3: Approaches to creating a Socratic Dialogue

The Question

Socrates typically started with a challenging question, the answer to which people often claimed to know but upon further questioning they started to critically examine their

thinking. Paul and Elder (2006) suggest that as part of this process, the origin or source of those beliefs should also be questioned. This process encourages participants to be self-directed by challenging what they may have been told before and putting them in a situation where they have to actively consider their beliefs. Bolten (2001) suggests a caveat that the original question should be formed in collaboration with participants, a collaboration which Chesters (2012) says should include constructing an agenda. Andriopoulos and Lowe highlight the creative aspect of this process by using the term ‘adventuring’ as part of creating a perpetually challenging environment where “individuals are encouraged to explore uncertainty, so that they can generate innovative solutions.” (Andriopoulos and Lowe 2000, 736).

The Evidence

A desired outcome of this second part of the Socratic Dialogue is that the questions should be challenging and produce a realization that a contrary view is possible or even probable (elenchus). It is important for the questioning to be overt and confronting (Andriopoulos and Lowe 2000) and to ask participants to provide evidence of their beliefs (Paul and Elder 2006) to differentiate from assumptions. This process encourages people to use their experiences to reflect on alternatives.

The Argument

By this point participants should be ready to question their beliefs and consider opposing thoughts and objections (Paul and Elder 2006) and at the same time be prepared to argue with other participants (Bolten 2001) to ensure all conflicting views are exposed and examined. At this point of the dialogue group dynamics come into play and participants are forced to consider other opinions. It can also be a test of participants’ resilience.

The Results

The final result stage is to examine the implications and consequences (Paul and Elder 2006) of the preceding dialogue. While Chesters (2012) suggests that a conclusion is required this shouldn’t be seen as an ending of the exploration of the issue, rather a summation of the current situation and hopefully as a starting point for further exploration (Bohm 2010, Skordoulis & Dawson 2007).

Model Validation

To test the model’s applicability in a business context, a program consisting of two phases was designed and tested in the field with a service based small to medium enterprise (SME) with approximately 7 staff members. The program started with a series of in-depth, semi-structured oral histories that were recorded. The interviews were conducted with the workers in their own environments (‘natural location’, Hussey and Hussey 1997) using a small number of probing questions. (Sanders, 1982, 357). Follow up interviews were conducted at the end of Phase 2 to determine the change in participants’ perceptions relating to creativity within the organization.

Phase 2 consisted of a workshop, facilitated by the author, using the Socratic Dialogue Model based on a question the company wanted to explore.

Results

To commence the Socratic Dialogue, the question posed was: “*What are the distinct competencies we have over our competitors?*” In exploring what participants currently believed there were 6 points raised and agreed on by participants. Taking each point in turn, participants were asked to provide any supporting evidence for their beliefs. Interestingly, the only ‘evidence’ that participants could come up with was a broad “feedback from clients” statement which created a sense of *aporia* in the group as the reason this question was raised originally was because the company wanted to improve their responses to tender requests after they had feedback that their standard response lacked strong supporting evidence of claims made.

This led into the third stage of the Dialogue (Argument) where each of the 6 points were examined by initially posing the question “Could your competitor’s claim the same thing?” As a result there were four claims abandoned and the two remaining ones were questioned further by asking participants to describe how these attributes were manifested in projects they had worked on.

In the final stage of the Dialogue (Results) the descriptions provided by participants were assembled to form part of a proposed project management methodology they could field test and then use as evidence of their unique capabilities.

The session lasted approximately three hours and all the participants expressed surprise that a problem they had found difficult to resolve could be solved so quickly. They also felt encouraged to refine the methodology they developed in the session further.

In subsequent interviews all of the participants agreed that the process was both painless and also gave them a sense of ownership that they didn’t have before. This feeling can be summed up best by the comment of one participant who said: “Yes, I definitely think the process we went through got us to a good answer to our question. And, I suspect it could encourage empowerment, inclusion and as a result creativity in an organisational situation. It gave me confidence to think more creatively in future.”

Implications

The objective of this initial test was to determine whether the Model could be successfully applied in a real world context and the result indicated that the process was robust. Specifically:

- The process was an easy one to work with. No one was confused by the task or had questions that weren’t covered in the introduction to the Model.
- Incorporating Bolten’s (2001) recommendation that participants should be a part of the decision on the question to be posed meant that participants quickly became actively engaged.
- The process produced an outcome that participants were happy with and provided a platform for future creative endeavors.
- Feedback from participants afterwards supported the hypothesis that creativity would be enhanced through using this process.

Further empirical testing of this Model is required to validate its applicability in a wide range of business contexts and to expose any limitations or adaptations that may be required.

Summary

Researchers have identified five antecedents of creativity in an individual; however, in order to harness that creativity an organization must provide a supportive environment that tolerates mistakes. The challenge for managers is that they often work in an environment that is less than supportive or tolerant and their teams are made up of people with varying degrees of creativity. Sonnenberg and Goldberg (2007) suggest that using the Socratic Method to create a learning environment within an organization is a way to foster creativity in an uncertain environment. This paper identified and empirically tested a Model that can be used by companies to foster creativity in their organisations. The model requires further testing to prove its applicability in a broader range of contexts.

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Author's brief Bio

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