The Socratic Dialogue in the Work Place: Theory and Practice

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Abstract: From recent research it emerges that addressing questions such as: *How can an organisation harness collective intelligence to improve business performance?* and *What data is required to build efficient and effective knowledge based systems?* are critical for organizations to succeed in the knowledge society (EIU, 2007).

Organizations are aware that knowledge is essential for their survival in dynamic markets, and that intellectual capital is a valuable asset. But what most organizations´ leaderships are not clear on is how to create and manage this intangible asset. It is known that investment in training is essential, but it is often unclear how this investment may be converted into improved performance?

It is well established that effective knowledge management requires a culture of sharing ideas, but how do organizations foster this type of exchange? Davenport & Prusak (1998) pointed out that if as the aphorism says, Knowledge is power, why should anyone want to share it?

This paper proposes the Socratic Dialogue (Remenyi, 2007) as one of the tools organizations can use to facilitate organizational knowledge building and exchange. The Socratic Dialogue may also be used to promote communities of practice. It facilitates the construction of knowledge through discourse based on personal experience and this can create a culture of knowledge sharing. It also promotes people being critical of prevailing ideas. The paper explores the Socratic Dialogue and its process; it illustrates its application through the analysis of two cases; and finally articulates some reflections on how to make it work effectively.

Keywords: Socratic dialogue; knowledge management; community of practice; organisational learning.

1. Learning too passive

It is now being thought that too much learning is passive. Too frequently learners and even researchers accept the authority of the written word, or the opinion of teachers or university professors. Furthermore the availability of substantial amounts of data on the web has led to a relatively unquestioning acceptance of the content of electronic media, whether it is right or wrong. Although it is difficult to generalise, this type of learning can be superficial and of limited duration.

In contrast to this superficial approach to learning what is actually required is a more intellectual activity on the part of the learner which encourages a greater degree of discovery and reflection, and self learning. Learning through discovery or self learning normally has much more meaning for the learner and has a greater chance of becoming internalised by the learner in a more enduring way. When this is accompanied by reflection then the importance of the experience is often brought home in a way that it will not be quickly forgotten.

Learning though discovery can be facilitated by dialogue or conversation, especially if it is well focused and directed at suitable issues. The dialectic which, according to Plato was first employed by Socrates is generally regarded as a useful model or prescription for this type of learning. The traditional dialectic was originally conceived as a conversation between two people. Socrates is reputed to have engaged individuals in the market place in Athens in controversial conversation and arguing with them one at a time. He is said to have been a past master at this and was always able to point out the weakness and the fallacies in other people's argument. He most surely must have been a difficult man to encounter as he was the original prototype of what Charles Handy described in this book, The Age of Unreason1.

In the 21st century this one-to-one dialectic approach would take too long to make any real impact. In any event it is now felt that perhaps more depth as well as breath can be achieved when a larger group of

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1 It is only reasonable that the original source of the use of the word "unreasonable" in this context. Bernard Shaw the Nobel laureate is credited as saying, only unreasonable men can change the world and therefore progress. http://sohodojo.com/ribs/age-of-unreason.html

individuals are involved in these dialogues as this provides for a wider range of different insights. The original Socratic model relied on one 'master' who dialogued with the learners. The new approach allows multiple learners to benefit from multiple experiences. There is quite intentionally no 'master'. Everyone's experience is equally valid and the facilitator who is required for the dialogue simply plays a background role. The Socratic Dialogue is specifically not a debate or an argument. Learning will come from participants hearing themselves speak as well as engaging in listening. Most of the benefits come from active listening. Thus to be a member of a Socratic Dialogue and to get full benefit from it, an individual needs to be enthusiastic about hearing the thoughts of others2 and about listening to themselves as they explain their own thoughts.3

2. Learning through discovery

Thus as described above the notion of learning through discovery is at the heart of the Socratic Dialogue which operates by creating an opportunity for reflection and interchange in a conversational setting. The objective of the Socratic Dialogue is to enhance understanding by discussing the actual experiences of the group. The group needs to be open, non-adversarial and to treat all opinions as equally valid and important. The group should be relatively small. Members of the group may come from diverse backgrounds and status levels. All members of the group should be highly competent in the language which is being used by the group.

Socratic Dialogues are normally used to:

1. Engage in the co-operative activity of seeking answers to questions and to understand each other through the exploration of concrete experiences.
2. Encourages participants to think independently and critically and reflect on that thinking
3. Build self-confidence in the individual's own thinking
4. Answer a philosophically orientated question and to endeavour to reach consensus,- i.e. to reach an outcome. But not any philosophically oriented question: only those in which the participants have relevant personal experiences to draw from.
5. Deepen individual insights and understandings and, ideally, arrive at a shared postulate on the problem at hand, built up from personal experiences.

Although one of the aims of a Socratic Dialogue is to reach a consensus participants may not always reach a definitive outcome in the form of a totally agreed answer to the question. This should not necessarily be seen as a failure as the Socratic Dialogue experience itself has the potential to create reflective learning, which is a desired outcome of the exercise.

The process of a Socratic Dialogue requires the use of a set of guidelines or rules which although not inflexible need to be kept consciously in the mind of the Facilitator. These rules will be explained later.

3. The process of a Socratic Dialogue[4]

At the outset it needs to be said that no philosophical training5 is needed to be part of a Socratic Dialogue. An interest in learning from others is perhaps the only qualification required to derive benefit from a Socratic Dialogue. A sensitive facilitator is required who can ensure that the group does not stray too far off the subject and that no one person dominates the discourse.

Before the group assembles an appropriate question needs to be established. This question needs to be well-formulated and general in nature. It should not be a long and complex question. Each member of the group needs to be made aware of the question in advance and be asked to reflect on their experience regarding the issue in the question. The only qualification for being a participant of a group is that each individual has some direct experience of the subject matter being discussed.

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[2] http://www.philodialogue.com/Authenticity.htm

[3] A few years ago a CNN reporter asked the US Congressman he was interviewing what drove his tendency to monopolise the microphone while in sessions. The interviewee responded, quite frankly, that he found it far more interesting when he spoke than when he listened. Clearly, this Congressman would not benefit from, or contribute to, a Socratic Dialogue!

[4] A Socratic Dialogue is not to be confused with the Socratic Dialogues (Greek Σωκρατικός λόγος or Σωκρατικός διάλογος) are prose literary works developed in Greece at the turn of the fourth century BCE, preserved today in the dialogues of Plato and the Socratic works of Xenophon - either dramatic or narrative - in which characters discuss moral and philosophical problems, illustrating the socratic method. Socrates is often the main character.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_Dialogue

[5] See website http://www.sfcp.org.uk/socratic_dialogue.htm

4. A discourse in three parts

When the group assembles the first step is to ask each participant to recall a real life experience which is directly related to the question. This will be in the form of a story. A set amount of time needs to be allocated to this, perhaps two minutes per group member. A list of all these different stories should be compiled by the facilitator. When this activity is complete the group chooses one of these experiences to examine in detail. It may take a while for consensus to be reached as to which experience is the most relevant or the most effective to closely examine and the member of the group who has provided this story, and who is referred to as the example giver, needs to be prepared to recount the story in as much detail as he or she can recall and also be prepared to be questioned by the other members of the group. The retelling of the story with the additional details should take between 5 and 10 minutes. Members are encouraged to ask any question related to the example which comes into their mind. These questions may seek background information or details of the actions, attitudes and values of the individuals involved in the example.

The retelling of the story of the real life experience needs to be transcribed as do the significant comments made by the other members of the group. This will become the overview of the first discourse and will be used for subsequent discussion and analysis.

The retelling of the story, the discussion arising there from and the transcription may take from 60 to 120 minutes.

5. Drawing out the lessons and seeking out shared insights

Once the overview has been established the participants will then draw together the lessons which have been learnt from the detailed discussion of the real life experience. This might be the raw material for a new definition or a set of rules about a process or some such outcome. In effect the group abstracts from the details discussed in the in-depth example some general rules or principles. This second discourse needs to be done slowly and carefully with as much consensus as possible being established on a step by step basis. Here any conflicts should be resolved if possible and a genuine attempt made to formulate shared insights and knowledge. This part of the exercise can take from 30 to 90 minutes.

Once the content of the overview have been summarised in this way the group returns to examining the other stories which were recounted by all the members of the group in order to see if the learning points which are now established can be generalised beyond the one experience which has been examined in detail. This is an attempt to map the anecdotes told by all the group members on to the general principles established during the previous part of the dialogue. This is the third level of the discourse and may take up to 60 or 90 minutes.

The final outcome is reached when the individual stories have been mapped onto the general principles now established.

6. Alpha Consulting case study

6.1.1 The firm

Alpha Consulting is a young firm, barely 3 years old at the time that this research was launched. It was founded in the UK by several experienced consultants who left one of the large ERP implementation firms, with an aim at offering IT Value Management services[6]. At the time of its founding its leaders thought that "independence from IT vendors" was an essential value of the firm.

In its second year the firm expanded into continental Europe through the acquisition of a mid-sized technology solutions implementation consultancy, with some niche products for the retail and fashion industries based on integrating SAP, Siebel and other industry-specific solutions. This move brought into question the feasibility of simultaneously being independent from vendors and implementing their solutions. The partners of the firm were struggling with this question at the time of the meeting where the fieldwork of this research took place.

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[6] IT Value Management services refers to helping organisations realise the benefits of their IT investments, and comprises actions from evaluating whether its IT investments are aligned with its business strategy, to implementing training programmes to enable better use of its information systems.

In the months before the mentioned meeting, the firm also expanded into Asia Pacific and into America by incorporating local partners and starting operations from scratch based on those partners' local connections and intellectual capital provided by the centre. One of the lessons from this growth process is that the background of the local partners influences the particular slant of the firm. In this vein, the Americas practice was founded and developed as an IT Value Management firm similar to the UK model, but the Asia Pacific one is closer to a strategy and process improvement practice. For the Asia Pacific partners the stress on "IT" in "IT Value Management" is a hindrance, and they would rather the service of the firm be described simply as "Value Management" or "Business Value Management". This again was one of the discussions taking place at the time of the meeting.

The governance, organization and equity ownership schemes of the firm are probably closer to a franchise than to a traditional professional services partnership. The acquisition of the continental Europe implementation services took the consultant-to-partner ratio from 1:12 to 1:15, which falls in between the ratios for traditional strategy firms (1:5 to 1:7) and IT integration and implementation firms (in excess of 1:20).

6.1.2 The question and process

The objective of this case study was to address the following questions: How do professional services firms approach knowledge management? How does their approach to knowledge management relate to their competitive strategy?

After collecting background information on the firm, a Socratic Dialogue session with the 12 leading partners was held within the scope of their annual global planning meeting held in an off-site location near Barcelona, Spain. The participants had a corporate objective of participating in this session, which was to establish the guidelines for their firm's knowledge management strategy. The researchers facilitating the session also had an agenda, which was to validate a *strategy-knowledge management alignment* framework they had previously derived (Griffiths & Remenyi, 2007). This framework is summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Linking knowledge management approach to strategy (Griffiths & Remenyi, 2007)

BUSINESS STRATEGY	APROACH TO KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT	
Trust or Narrow Expertise Based	Quadrant I	Low on Technology-based networks Low on People-based networks
Thought Leadership/Personalisation	Quadrant II	Low on Technology-based networks High on People-based networks
Hybrid/Utopia	Quadrant III	High on Technology-based networks High on People-based networks
Productivity/Re-usability	Quadrant IV	High on Technology-based networks Low on People-based networks

The dynamics of the session was initiated by first agreeing on a definition of knowledge and presenting the framework for *strategy-knowledge management alignment* in professional services firm, developed by Griffiths & Remenyi (2007, pp. 173-6), and then using the Socratic Dialogue as a process of learning through discovery that draws on the experience of the participants. In this particular case, each participant was asked to think of a personal experience in knowledge management. Because Alpha Consulting is a relatively young firm, and the 12 participants had rich experience at other firms before joining Alpha Consulting, some of the cases brought forward were not Alpha Consulting experiences. The participants took turns to explain their example in detail while the remaining 11 listened carefully and asked for clarifications when necessary. After each of these sessions discussion was held with an aim at extracting concepts of general application that were used to corroborate or improve the framework presented at the opening of the session.

The first experience to be analysed was that of one of the UK partners, followed by one of the Australian ones, then one of the continental European experiences, and in fourth place one from the Americas.

When the continental European case was being discussed a vivid discussion emerged around the issue of whether the firm should be in the business of implementing solutions; how that affects independence; and whether it would be possible to grow at the expected rate on purely IT Value management consulting services.

When the fourth experience was being discussed, the group decided it agreed with the framework presented, and that it was not worth continuing down that line but that they would find the session more productive if they now focused on using the framework for developing some principles for knowledge management at Alpha Consulting.

Agreement was reached to move in this new direction. However, before moving on the group was asked to place Alpha Consulting on the 2X2 framework and, after brief discussions, consensus was reached that it sits deep in quadrant 1.

6.1.3 The outcome

The group finally agreed on nine KM development principles.

1. Alpha Co will favour People Networks over Technology Networks in its approach to Knowledge Management
2. Staff will have access to all knowledge, directly or indirectly
3. Knowledge will be organised along a 2-dimension matrix, comprising industries and competences. Each industry and competence will have an expert lead reference.
4. There will be a repository with the latest Methodologies; it will have an owner and will be updated regularly
5. There will be a people repository with the CVs of all consulting staff; responsibility for keeping the CVs updated will be placed upon the individual
6. There will be a Client repository with a brief description of each Client and what work Alpha Co. has done with them. The Partner responsible for the Client is given responsibility for its updating
7. There will be a rudimentary but reliable repository tool for all re-usable material
8. Each geography will define who has access to the re-useable material knowledge system
9. Only Alpha Co.-developed, Alpha Co.-licensed and public domain documents will be uploaded onto the re-usable knowledge repository

The implementation of these principles was broken down into activities which were distributed among the partners who were given responsibility for executing them.

6.1.4 Reflections

Launching the Socratic Dialogue by presenting a framework of the concepts to be discussed, as in this case the *strategy-knowledge management alignment framework*, provides a useful spring board with which to commence an in-depth conversation among the participants. It also gave a conceptual foundation to the discussion that enabled it to arrive at a useful result: A set of guidelines for managing knowledge in the organization.

From an evidence analysis and narrative creation perspective the Socratic Dialogue offers the case study researcher a way of overcoming the problem posed by polyvocal narratives of organizational change that typically emerge from individual interviews. This does not mean that the Socratic Dialogue substitutes interviews; it means that it is a complement to interviews.

An interesting question is what the facilitator should do if the group decides to cut short the exercise after four cycles instead of completing the twelve cycles initially planned. There is little that a facilitator can do when there is a group of senior executives who are usually highly time conscious and goal driven – if they believe they have come close enough to saturation, where each cycle adds little, if any, new knowledge. In this particular case the researchers´ agenda, which was having a group of experienced practitioners validate the *strategy-knowledge management alignment framework* being proposed, had been accomplished. So it made little sense to stubbornly insist on continuing as originally planned.

Moving from method to content, the Socratic Dialogue led the participants to understand the dynamics of the competitive value of knowledge: The value of knowledge bases is debatable – they are static and by the time

knowledge components have been uploaded, they may have lost some value. It can be theorised that knowledge objects, as competitive tools, have two dimensions of value. An absolute value (intrinsic value, derived from their verisimilitude) and a relative value (derived from few people knowing them). It follows that knowledge objects loose value gradually, at the rate that other people get to grips with them (erosion of relative value); but at a certain point in time they will lose value abruptly (as they are falsified and thus lack verisimilitude).

Knowledge connotes understanding, both of a set of evidence and of the ideas that have been inferred from that evidence. The essence of knowledge is structure, so part of the process in the creation of useful knowledge is to take fragments of information that are specific to a person or thing and generalize them so that they apply broadly, thereby turning private information into knowledge that many use. (Warsh, 2006, p.296). This is exactly what the group of people participating in this Socratic Dialogue have done. The method obliged them to reflect on a personal experience, thus converting this experience from tacit knowledge to explicit one that they could narrate to others. By narrating their experience the individuals presented evidence that the group used to improve their theory, while simultaneously sharing the theory within the group. The Socratic Dialogue thus proved to be a useful tool to generate a theory (explicit knowledge) grounded in empirical evidence, that was socialized and thus enabled to be used by all the members of the group. Most would agree that this is the essence of knowledge management in any organisation.

Adam Smith said that what is pursued in an explanation is a "connecting principle" between apparently unrelated events, and that science is a search for the "invisible chains" that link these things and events. That is precisely what the participants in this Socratic Dialogue were doing. They were analyzing each individual experience and relating it to the previous ones through the evolving *strategy-knowledge management framework.*

"As a developing individual you see the world in terms of what has gone on before, in your unique trajectory, and slowly transform from an undiscriminating data-sponge to an information cherry-picker. The process of assimilating information may not now occur with the same unconditional and effortless facility as when we were young, but understanding – seeing one thing in terms of another will be increasingly possible" (Greenfield, 2003, pp. 154-5). Another lesson from this experience is that the Socratic Dialogue enables a mature process of learning, one in which the participants are pushed to discriminate evidence, helping them focus on those aspects of the personal experiences being narrated that relate to the problem they are trying to solve.

6.2 Beta-Telco case study

6.2.1 The Company

Beta-Telco is one of the largest telecom companies in Chile. The country fully privatised and opened the telecommunications services in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in what is generally known as one of the most successful cases of its kind. Success here is used in the sense that it resulted in a much improved quality of service and reduced cost of service for the population, and established the telecommunications service as part of the platform that enabled the radical transformation to efficiency and growth of the Chilean economy. Chile has for many years had one of the most competitive telecom sectors in the world. Beta-Telco, previously a state-owned land-line telecom service provider, has specialized in serving the corporate sector in its voice and data communications needs. Beta-Telco has also set up a successful mobile-telephony service but that is managed through a separate business unit, not included in this case study.

Beta-Telco has a high degree of penetration in the corporate market, where it masters close to 60 percent market share in its traditional telecom products. Its leadership team thus realized that in order to grow it would need to have new products to offer its client base and decided to incorporate IT Outsourcing Services to its product offering.

6.2.2 The Engagement

Responding to the strategy implied in the previous point, some three years ago Beta-Telco entered the IT Outsourcing Services market and won several projects, some of them large and highly visible. It created its Corporate Services Division (unit of analysis of this case study) with its sales and delivery capabilities by recruiting individuals with experience in the service, and by setting up ad-hoc partnerships to tackle each

opportunity, but without making the structural and organizational changes that entering this new product market required. So in 2007 it decided to engage consultants to design the required changes. In the diagnostic stage it quickly emerged that one area that needed attention was knowledge management and the leadership of Beta-Telco agreed to apply the strategy-knowledge management alignment framework proposed in Griffiths & Remenyi (2007, 2008). It emerged that Beta-Telco should favour people-driven knowledge networks approach, rather than technology-based ones. It was thus decided to set up six Communities of Practice (CoP) on key knowledge areas for the company, one of which would be taken as a pilot, and the other five would follow incorporating lessons learned from the pilot. It was decided to give the pilot CoP a 5 month period for design and implementation, and that the 6 CoPs would be operating in a year. It was also decided that all 140 professionals in the Division would be encouraged to belong to at least one CoP, and that membership of a CoP would be voluntary. The next section will describe how the pilot CoP was implemented, and the role that the Socratic Dialogue played as a tool for getting the community to work.

6.2.3 Implementing Communities of Practice

It was decided that the pilot CoP would be the one titled "Technological Convergence at Beta-Telco". This had been a particularly popular one at the time of calling for volunteers to become part of a CoP. There were close to 40 volunteers that put this as a first choice, and they came from diverse backgrounds (i.e., sales, product development, pre-sales support, engineering, marketing). The number of participants accepted was finally A CoP leader was selected, on the basis of best fit with a previously designed generic CoP Leader profile. The appointee was one of the Sales Directors of the Corporate business. It was decided that the CoP would be launched with a series of face-to-face meetings in order for people to meet with each other and to start develop a sense of identity within the CoP. In future, the CoP will operate largely as a virtual community, but this requires a minimum social networking infrastructure, so it was decided to set it up in parallel with the operation of the pilot. The selected technological platform for social networking is MS SharePoint, and it was estimated that deployment of this would take some 5 months.

It was specified that face-to-face meetings would happen every third Thursday of the month, in an off-site location close to corporate head-office. Meetings would have a duration of not more than 2.5 hours, and they would have one of three possible formats: (a) Presentation and Discussion, particularly suited to those issues where there is one or several experts in the CoP who could then prepare a presentation to kick-off the meeting. (b) Knowledge café, particularly suited to highly ambiguous issues, such as "What is the meaning of Convergence in Beta-Telco?" for which there were, initially, as many individual answers as the number of people attending. And (c) Socratic Dialogue, for discussing those issues in which many of the participants had personal experiences to draw from.

6.2.4 Application of Socratic Dialogue in a CoP context

The third meeting of the pilot CoP was held on October 13th 2008, and took the form of a Socratic Dialogue, The question put to the participants was "Having agreed on what Technological Convergence means in Beta-Telco, what positive and negative experiences have we had in delivering this service to Clients?" Because it is a large group, it was agreed that 4 to 6 experiences would be analysed. After some 11 proposals, five of them were agreed on by the CoP members. Two were presented and analysed in the first session, and it was agreed that the remainder would be dealt with in a separate session (which was to be held on December 11th.) Interestingly, four of the cases selected were actual Beta-Telco projects, but the fifth one was a personal experience of one of the members in a prior company. Finally, only four of the cases were actually analysed because one of the example givers planned for the December 11th session left the company during the intervening period. Because in that session it was also planned to have a self-criticism instance on the way the CoP was working (so as to improve the design for the remaining CoPs) the moderator proposed and the group accepted that it was not necessary to go back to selecting another example.

The proceedings of the Socratic dialogue followed closely the guidelines given in this paper, and the group arrived at a useful set of "DOs" and "DON'Ts" in technology convergence projects, organized into five quite detailed statements that range from precautions that should be taken in accepting a contract, through the way to set up a proposal team, to considerations on the cultural aspects of the Client and the need to think on change management in IT projects. When these findings were shared with senior management, the feedback was that they expect more depth in the outcomes of the CoP activity. This is a good symptom in the sense that it indicates that senior management has great expectations from the knowledge management initiative. But it also indicates that members of the CoP are expected to be more inquisitive and deeper at the time of questioning the example giver (they need to break away from excessive shyness or politeness

towards the example giver; rarely where there more than three questions on a given example) and need to be more critical at the time of mapping each example on to the emerging theory so as to get down to more granularity.

6.2.5 Reflections

After the Socratic dialogue session came to a close with all participants quite satisfied that they had reached at a useful result, a critical review session on the operation of the pilot CoP was held. People arrived at four or five areas where they believe the operation of the CoP should be changed.

The first was that the members found that the CoP was not sufficiently concrete; that there are risks that there would be no specific action as a result of the CoP. This could be revealing that the members are still not fully aware of the purpose of a CoP as a means of creating knowledge and sharing it by cutting across hierarchical structures. There is a misconception among many people in the pilot CoP that a CoP is a task force to solve problems within its field of activities. This critique could also be revealing that the culture of the organization is such that its members have a low resistance to ambiguity.

Another concern is that the CoP was not inclusive of members of other highly relevant units within the organization, such as Infrastructure Operations Division (IO - the people who manage the telecommunications infrastructure to serve Clients) and the Business Process Outsourcing unit (BPO - the people that actually deliver the day to day service to Clients once the solutions have been implemented). In other words, that the CoP is too closely circumscribed to the Corporate Services Division. This is a valid point and responds to an implementation design decision, that the CoP would start operating within Corporate Services and once successfully operating it will reach out to other Divisions. This was a risk management decision; the reaction is positive and indicates that there should not be cultural clashes when tackling the next phase of expansion into other areas.

There were also suggestions that there should be a representative of the CoP to go out and communicate with the other CoPs and Divisions, the "findings" of this CoP. Again, this could be revealing a relatively low level of understanding of the concept and purpose of a CoP, and conditioned by the lack of the social networking infrastructure that will, in due course, serve as a natural channel for inter- and intra-CoP communications.

Finally, the group arrived at the need to have a list of 5 to 10 important issues to be tackled by the CoP over the year. Again, this could respond to a lack of resistance to ambiguity on the part of the CoP members.

With respect to the Socratic dialogue itself, there was no criticism and the group found it a useful and productive tool (as also the other two kinds of group dynamics applied – presentation & discussion, and knowledge café.) However, there is ample room for improvement on how it should work. The members will need to become more critical, and avoid arriving at a consensus too quickly. Discussion on each given-example need to be more detailed, and the group needs to be more critical of the models that emerge from the Socratic dialogue.

These reflection reinforces the case that for a CoP to perform its objectives, and the Socratic dialogue an instrumental tool to assist in reaching those objectives, the culture of the organization needs to facilitate both a willingness to share, and the discipline to be critical of oneself and others. This is not a commonly found combination.

This Socratic dialogue was facilitated by an experienced external consultant; for the CoP initiative to develop and be sustainable in time, the company must develop its own internal people for that job.

7. Making the Socratic Dialogue work

This is an exercise in learning through exchanging knowledge that leads to discovery by reflecting on the experiences described and thus the members of the group need to be able to focus on their own and others' experiences. The group members need to be honest in the recounting of their experiences and their personal reactions to the experiences of other members. The Socratic Dialogue should be as judgement free as possible. Any suggestion that a member of the group is being judged by the other or by the facilitator will reduce the value of the event.

Members' thoughts need to be expressed as clearly and simply as possible. If something is not clear then it should be discussed until everyone understands the point being made. This requires at all times careful attention to the discussion. If members of the dialogue become tired then they should advise the facilitator who may call for a break for refreshments. In general, running a Socratic Dialogue for more than an hour and a half without a break is not advised.

It is important that no one individual or group of individuals dominate the Socratic Dialogue. If this occurs then a member of the dialogue may ask the facilitator for a break for the purposes of having a meta-discussion. A meta-discussion involves talking about how the Socratic Dialogue is proceeding. Normally there is very little need to have these meta-discussions. When they do arise they should be concluded as quickly as possible so that the group may return to the main purpose of the event.

8. The Facilitator and the Socratic Dialogue

A skilled, energetic and hard working facilitator greatly enhances the Socratic Dialogue. The function of the facilitator is to ensure the smooth running of the meeting and to bring all the members of the group into the discussion.

The facilitator will normally keep the record of the different experiences and will also act as scribe for the overview of the detailed study on the chosen experience.

It is important that the facilitator does not attempt to influence the direction of the discourse. The discussion may stray off the subject and provided these lapses are not too long or too far from the question, they may be tolerated. However in the end the facilitator should bring the discussion back to the issue for which the Socratic Dialogue was brought together.

It must be remembered that either the facilitator or a member of the group may at any time call for a meta-dialogue where there is an opportunity to reflect on the course of the Socratic Dialogue itself. The meta-dialogue provides an opportunity for the group to reflect on itself and to ask how it is doing and possibly influence its direction if it has strayed away from the original point. As the Alpha Consulting case shows, the method is not written in stone; at the end of the day the facilitator must have the sensibility to capture the state of mind of the participants; the judgement to understand when the goal of the exercise has been sufficiently achieved; and the flexibility to alter the course of the exercise as required to keep the participants engaged.

9. Timing and the Socratic Dialogue

A Socratic Dialogue may be structured in several different ways. Firstly, a Socratic Dialogue may be run as one continuous event. In such a case using a large group, say a group of one dozen people, then a whole day of eight to ten hours could be required to complete an event. Some events may require a little longer, perhaps twelve hours. Smaller groups may require less time say five or six hours. It is important not to run a Socratic dialogue if the members are tired as this will produce inferior results. If a large group is involved rest breaks are needed which of course extends the total time required.

In some circumstances it may not be possible for individuals to make such a long period available. In that case there are two possible courses of action. The first is to get the participants to select a subset of polar cases amongst all the experiences proposed, and develop only the selected cases. The other is that the Socratic Dialogue be conducted in a number of parts or a number of sessions. The first session might run until the group has listed its experiences and perhaps chosen the one which they wish to study in detail. Then two or three sessions could be put aside to elaborating on the one chosen example. In this way the Socratic Dialogue experience could be obtained over an extended period.

10. Conclusions

The Socratic Dialogue facilitates learning through discovery by reflecting on actual experiences. Therefore the conversation needs to be based on real experiences. These need to be discussed actively by all the members of the group who need to say what they really think and in an ideal situation the discussion needs to proceed until a high degree of consensus is reached. Thus in a Socratic Dialogue there is a need to start with the concrete and remaining in contact with concrete experience through the entire event: Proper insight

is gained only when the link between any statement made and personal experience is explicit[7]. This means that a Socratic Dialogue is a process which concerns the whole person. The members of the Socratic Dialogue should attempt a full understanding of each other. This involves much more than a simple verbal agreement. Participants should try to be clear about the meaning of what has just been said by testing it against their own experiences. In ideal circumstances the limitations of individual personal experience which stand in the way of a clear understanding should be made conscious and thereby it is hoped that this limitation will be transcended.

Beware of being distracted by lesser important questions. Following a subsidiary question until a satisfactory answere is found may be useful but again it may not be. Groups often bring great commitment to their work and gain self-confidence in the power of their intellect or reason. This may mean not giving up when the work is difficult. Sometimes the discussion has to move on but it may return to the problematic issue again. An honest examination of one's thoughts and the thoughts of others is essential. This honesty may help with the striving for consensus although consensus itself may not necessarily arise.

The two case studies presented are radically different in the purpose they give to the Socratic dialogue. At Alpha-Consulting the technique is used as a one-time event to solve a specific problem (i.e., how to organise knowledge management in the firm) while at Beta-Telco it is used as a tool for an ongoing CoP to build and improve concepts. This speaks for the versatility of the Socratic dialogue,

Finally, this paper stresses the usefulness of the Socratic Dialogue as a tool for organisational learning due to its characteristic of learning through connecting each individual experience with those of others, which normally has much more meaning for the learner and has a greater chance of becoming internalised by the learner in a more enduring way. It also stresses its usefulness in case study research by helping to overcome one of the notorious limitations of interviews as evidence collection tools, due to the need to deal with the polyvocal narratives of organizational change that typically emerge from individual interviews.

Robert Lucas, the noted economist, once said that in arts and sciences, and particularly in the creative professions, knowledge is something that can be accumulated essentially for free, just from being around dense clouds of educated people (Warsh, 2006, p.258). In essence, the Socratic Dialogue is a tool for making this happen in the more disciplined and process oriented form expected in a business organization environment.

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[7] See http://www.sfcp.org.uk/socratic_dialogue.htm