

SOCRATIC LEADERSHIP



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Leaders in the twenty-first century would do well to study the habits of great thinkers and leaders of the past. Socrates famously instructed his students through a series of carefully constructed questions designed to force self-examination and lead them to a conclusion. This method for instilling critical-thinking skills is invaluable to leaders in many circumstances as a way to influence and persuade. Contemporary leaders fill many roles: instructor, mentor, leader, follower, and peer. Each of these roles is well served by the Socratic method.

Socrates was a retired soldier and stone-mason in Athens during the fifth century BC. He was unique among the scholars of ancient Athens by presenting himself not as a master of knowledge but as a fellow student working toward the discovery of truth during mostly informal discussions. Such dialogue empowers the student to question the logic and ideas of the instructor even as the teacher gains insight from the student's arguments. As a result, both the instructor and student are better able to order their thoughts and arguments into a stronger, more coherent theory tempered by relentless hammering in the forge of debate.

The **Socratic Method** (or **Method of Elenchus** or **Socratic Debate**), named after the Socrates, is a form of philosophical inquiry in which the questioner explores the implications of others' positions, to stimulate rational thinking and illuminate ideas. **Elenchos**, a *cross-examination* for the purpose of *refutation*), more usually spelled 'elenchus', is the central technique of the Socratic method.


This dialectical method often involves an oppositional discussion in which the defense of one point of view is pitted against another; one participant may lead another to contradict himself in some way, strengthening the inquirer's own point.

The exact nature of the elenchos is subject to a great deal of debate, in particular concerning whether it is a positive method, leading to knowledge, or a negative method used solely to refute false claims to knowledge.

The Socratic method is a *negative* method of hypotheses elimination, in that better hypotheses are found by steadily identifying and eliminating those which lead to contradictions. The method of Socrates is a search for the underlying hypotheses, assumptions, or *axioms*, which may subconsciously shape one's opinion, and to make them the subject of scrutiny, to determine their consistency with other beliefs. The basic form is a series of questions formulated as tests of logic and fact intended to help a person or group discover their beliefs about some topic, exploring the definitions or *logoi* (singular *logos*), seeking to characterize the general characteristics shared by various particular instances.

According to W.K.C. Guthrie's *The Greek Philosophers*, while sometimes erroneously believed to be a method by which one seeks the answer to a problem, or knowledge, the Socratic method was actually intended to demonstrate one's ignorance. Socrates, unlike the Sophists, did believe that knowledge was possible, but believed that the first step to knowledge was recognition of one's ignorance. Guthrie writes, "[Socrates] was accustomed to say that he did not himself know anything, and that the only way in which he was wiser than other men was that he was conscious of his own ignorance, while they were not. The essence of the Socratic method is to convince the interlocutor that whereas he thought he knew something, in fact he does not".

Use of the Socratic method serves to produce a strong professional in fields that are mainly self-governing. The largely successful efforts of law and medicine to maintain high professional standards (and remarkably little legislative oversight) have their foundation in the emphasis on critical thinking and professional dialogue. Commensurate with the level of trust that society places in its practitioners, the fields of law and medicine have managed to transcend simple training.

Leadership in the twenty-first century has many emerging challenges, and leaders require tools to meet those tests. Taking lessons from an ancient technique for self-inspection provides one such tool for modern leaders to use in their many roles. 

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