Socratic Coaching in Business and Management Consulting Practice

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Socratic Coaching is used either as an independent approach or in the form of partial interventions in the context of established coaching techniques. It complements the more psychologically-shaped techniques and adds a practical-philosophical foundation to them. This kind of coaching and consulting is being established primarily in ‘learning’ organisations and enterprises to develop long-term and long-running orientation of action.¹

Socratic Coaching can connect to modern management and organisation strategies in which management and leadership or empowerment (fixing long-term aims, motivating performance, forming values, promoting responsibility) act in combination. The result is the capacity to act flexibly, reliably and far-sightedly in the modern market of constant change.² The trend is a leadership that acts with the daily challenges from a principle-orientated basis.³

Fundamental to Socratic Coaching is the willingness of the coaching partners (the coach and the coachee) to bring in resources to reflect their basic practical assumptions and attitudes. The space of the dialogue⁴ can, literally, correct and strengthen the basic orientation of our actions.

First, we explain here what we mean by ‘Socratic Coaching’. We give a summary of its roots, development and essential features, distinguishing it from other forms of coaching. The closing section contains notes on how Socratic Coaching can be practised in organisations and enterprises.

Coaching and Its Use

Imagine you have been engaged by your organisation to take part in an important meeting. It concerns a tricky matter. You intend to fix your negotiation strategy during the rail journey to the place of meeting; however, you find that a clear course of action doesn’t arise.

Suddenly, a man enters your compartment. You start a conversation. He seems trustworthy and organised to you. You use the opportunity to discuss your matter. When you arrive at your destination, you know which specific aims you will pursue, which measures you’ll have to take and how to bring in yourself.

The meeting proceeds well. On the journey home you meet again with the same person. You report to him about the course of the meeting. By his questions you gradually gain a clearer insight into what exactly you contributed to the success of the meeting. You become conscious of your competence and potential. You think of the alternative and additional chances you have to master future situations still more successfully. He is a coach. You make an appointment to discuss further challenges.

What does a coach do? A coach supports his clients to clarify and achieve their aims. He listens carefully, distinguishes and summarises. He steers attention to possible solutions, supports the specification of concrete strategies and strengthens his clients’ power to act.

A coach still works in the main part as a coach, not as a therapist or as an adviser, although aspects of these functions influence his practice.

• **Therapy** makes sense when a person suffers from serious difficulties controlling their actions. (‘As soon as I enter the offices, I am no longer able to focus. Therefore, I am not able to decide in a considered way or to act sensibly.’)

• **Consulting** makes sense (according to advice), when specific know-how is needed to realise aims. (‘I don’t know how I should behave to convince my superior of my plans.’)

• **Training** makes sense for acquiring or improving skill and techniques. (‘This task is asking too much of me. I know too little about this area.’)

• **Coaching** presupposes that the coaching partners are personally, socially, technically and methodically capable of acting. It makes sense when persons are searching for optimal solutions to concrete challenges and want to take up the rational and emotional reflection competence of a trained dialogue partner. Coaching means determining aims realistically and in a motivating way and using available behaviours effectively. (‘The task of arranging a new project team is a great challenge for me. Therefore I want to think precisely about how to proceed and what I would like to achieve.’)

’A basic aim of Coaching is [...] helping people to help themselves and to behave responsibly [...] The coach tries to influence processes in such a way that the resources of the coachee are developing.’⁵

¹ J. Kessels (2001); H. Gronke (2004 b).
³ F. Covey (1999).
⁴ H. Owen (1999).
⁵ Ch. Rauen (2002), p. 68, transl. by the authors.
the only method which causes an activation of the useful potentials immediately and in every customer contact.\footnote{9}{See Plato, Laches, 184 c ff.}\footnote{8}{Sometimes Socrates is referred in this respect. See D. Chessik (1982).}

Illustration 1: Forms of consulting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>Type of Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Therapy</td>
<td>Ability to act and master reality</td>
<td>Enabling action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting (Advice)</td>
<td>Implementation of know-how</td>
<td>Giving solutions and counsel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Learning of new competencies</td>
<td>Teaching and exercising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>Independent solution to concrete challenges</td>
<td>Solution orientated, clarifying, fortifying, promoting</td>
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We suggest subdividing the coaching process into three phases, which are evaluated differently depending on the requests and the challenges of the client. (1) The first phase is to focus the attention of the client in the area of solutions. (2) In the second phase the coach supports his coachee to design and organise possible solutions. (3) The third phase finally aims at the realisation of the chosen solutions.

Illustration 2: The three phases of the coaching process

This activating form of structured process, related to concrete solutions and resources, constitutes the essential success of coaching. The ‘triumphal march’ of staff and management instrument coaching started in the 1970s. Its development and improvement has passed through several phases since then.\footnote{6}{B. Wrede (2002), p. 276, transl. by the authors.}\footnote{7}{U. Böning (2002), p. 25.}

On the one hand it was easy to speak with Socrates because he spoke intelligibly and clearly. He didn’t give any long talks. On the other hand, it was exhausting because his form of dialectical dialogue used demanding argumentation patterns. As a rule, Socrates proceeded according to the ‘elenetic hypothesis’ method (checking for contradictions). He proved to be a master of questioning. He didn’t ask his interlocutors to explain their techniques for attaining their aims: How do you proceed to reach this or that? Socrates asked for the general reasons they pursued their aims.

The Old and the New Socratic

The application of this art described in the Platonic dialogues stands for what we refer to here as the ‘Old Socratic’. Socrates practised his art in the Agora, the market of Athens, where economic and political life took place. There he interrupted people, either ordinary citizens or respected statesmen and traders, to examine the reasons why they pursued their aims.

Socratic dialogue the basic idea of Coaching – as supporting and co-reflecting with a protagonist involved in a concrete issue – was founded. From all we know about Socrates (primarily from the writings of Plato and Xenophon) he achieved his effect neither as an ‘adviser’ nor as a ‘therapist’ (healing spiritual illnesses).\footnote{9}{His specific art is the form of dialectical dialogue (dialegesthai).}

A characteristic of the Socratic dialogue is the demand for and acceptance of self-responsibility on the part of the dialogue partners. The Socratic dialogue expects self-determined persons with a basic readiness for change – not unlike coaching. If this is not the case, the Socratic dialogue, which increases the capacity of the dialogue partners to develop rational beliefs, will be ineffectual. Sometimes people engaged in dialogue with Socrates because they wanted to be clear about their motives and reasons. In Plato’s dialogue ‘Laches’ the two fathers Lysimachos and Melesias turn to Socrates for advice on how to educate their sons. And it is not the army commanders Nikias and Laches that can convince them, although they are regarded as experts in the teaching of courage. Socrates proves to be the true expert, not because he knows more, but because he can lead the soul to practical cognition.\footnote{9}{His specific art is the form of dialectical dialogue (dialegesthai).}

After his dialogue partners had articulated their convictions, he compared them with their other basic convictions. If there was harmony between the disclosed convictions and between the consequences, which most likely would happen, they were proven to be fit. They then could be regarded as a safe base for acting for the time being. In the case of a contradiction it was necessary to further explore the convictions.\footnote{10}{The characteristic confusion that was caused by Socrates’ art of refutation}

Socrates As a Coach

The classical origin of the essential elements of coaching is located in Greek antiquity, primarily in the dialogue practice of Socrates in the Athens of 5th century BC. In

\footnote{9}{The characteristic confusion that was caused by Socrates’ art of refutation}
reveals to interlocutors the free space for new insights. In Plato’s dialogue *Charmides*, for instance, Socrates helps his dialogue partner Critias to discover his contradiction and to approach the correct definition of temperance as self-knowledge.\(^{11}\)

Critias: I mean to say, that he who does evil, and not good, is not temperate; and that he is temperate who does good, and not evil: for temperance I define in plain words to be the doing of good actions.

Socrates: And you may be very likely right in what you are saying; but I am curious to know whether you imagine that temperate men are ignorant of their own temperance?

Critias: I do not think so.

Socrates: But must the physician necessarily know when his treatment is likely to prove beneficial, and when not? or must the craftsman necessarily know when he is likely to be benefited, and when not to be benefited, by the work which he is doing?

Critias: I suppose not.

Socrates: Then, I said, he (a physician) may sometimes do good or harm, and not know what he is himself doing, and yet, in doing good, as you say, he has done temperately or wisely. Was not that your statement?

Critias: Yes.

Socrates: Then, as would seem, in doing good, he may act wisely or temperately, and be wise or temperate, but not know his own wisdom or temperance?

Critias: But that, Socrates, he said, is impossible; and therefore if this is, as you imply, the necessary consequence of any of my previous admissions, I will withdraw them, rather than admit that a man can be temperate or wise who does not know himself; and I am not ashamed to confess that I was in error. For self-knowledge would certainly be maintained by me to be the very essence of knowledge, and in this I agree with him who dedicated the inscription, ‘Know thyself!’ at Delphi.

For Athenians, eager to learn, the dialogue with Socrates meant stimulus and risk at the same time. They exposed themselves to his special dialectical art of questioning and examination, firstly to be able to prove themselves in the dialogue, and secondly to be led reliably to self-knowledge with questions. The German saying ‘wer fragt, der führt’ (‘who asks, leads’) means more than a success-orientated form of conversation to attain an arbitrary aim. It means, ‘leading to inner convictions, which can induce the interlocutor to act on his own initiative and authority’.

Admittedly the ‘Old Socratic’ suffered from three weaknesses. The first is of a fundamental nature. The Socratics of the Platonic dialogues exaggerated resistance to rhetoric, which, putatively, is not good for the investigation of truth but only suitable for influencing the masses. Therefore dialogue remains an external remedy for examining the orientations of his interlocutors. In principle everyone can carry out the examination on their own and the philosopher above all. Plato’s Socrates ignores the fact that in dialogue with others one can gain new perspectives one would not obtain alone.

A second weakness of the Socratic practice of dialogue is linked to this. Every reader of Plato’s dialogues immediately notices that Socrates determines the content of the dialogue. The putative self-knowledge of his interlocutors is *produced* by him. They have comprehended Socrates’ ideas step by step and they aren’t simply confronted with the ready results of a cognition process, yet they haven’t really worked it out independently. Therefore, their motivation to realise the gained insights suffers.

The third weakness of the Socratic practice of dialogue is connected to one of its special strengths. Socrates doesn’t discuss matters at a purely abstract level. He connects all dialogue contributions and the insights worked out with concrete practical experience. Therefore it is important to him to state the relevance of the general principles of acting for the reality of life. On the other hand he generalises too strongly. For Socrates the world is the world of the *polis*, the city-state. He has no highly-developed consciousness of the different orientations or mentalities of various milieus and cultures. Therefore some of his attempts to uncover generally valid norms and values for action (by comparing similar situations) do not succeed or seem absolutist. Although the norms and values are probably general, they are not absolutely general: they apply to a certain kind of situation.

Since the middle of the 20\(^{th}\) century, rhetoric has experienced a renaissance through the development of the ‘New Rhetoric’.\(^ {12}\) To renew itself, the ‘New Rhetoric’ referred to the ‘Old Rhetoric’\(^ {13}\) (primarily to that of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian) and supplemented it with the modern knowledge of linguistics, communication, philosophy and psychology. ‘New’ does not mean here that the Old Rhetoric was thrown overboard. On the contrary: ‘new’ primarily means ‘newly discovered’ and ‘improved with new insights’. In an analogous way we bring in the distinction between ‘Old Socratic’ and ‘New Socratic’.

What does the ‘New Socratic’ adopt from the ‘Old Socratic’?

- The orientation of Socrates to dialogue and questioning to examine the basic convictions and attitudes presupposed more or less consciously by the concrete decisions and actions;
- His confidence in the competence of his interlocutors to develop and to investigate independently their basis for acting;
- The consistent and beneficial reference to the life and professional practice of the dialogue partners.

Although Socrates spoke with people from all parts of society, he primarily addressed those citizens that saw themselves as the key players of their society and took on institutional responsibility. Therefore we will illustrate the

\(^{11}\) Plato, *Charmides*, 163 e – 164 d.


\(^{13}\) R. Barthes (1970).
objectives of Socratic dialogue practice with two ancient models, which support that point of view: the Archon model of leadership and the Stadium model of clarification of ethical orientations.

Illustration 3: The Archon model of the leadership art

The Greeks described the owner of the highest public office as an Archon. From a state leader one expects a sense of responsibility, an organisational talent and intelligence in decision-making. Solon, the founder of the Attic democracy and one of the ‘seven wise men’, was regarded as a model for this. He derived his leadership primarily from insight into the origins and principles of his behaviour (the archai). This insight proves fertile if it influences a firm attitude of character (arete) and is achieved with method (methodos). In such people the basis of a practical intelligence (phronesis) will be created, which enable one to act adequately in different situations. An Archon knows about the origins of his behaviour and can give information about it, he is credible and reliable, he knows how to organise and decides in a considered way. The Socratic dialogue connects precisely these levels with each other if the interlocutors examine the principles and attitudes underlying their concrete actions.

The dialogue ‘Kriton’ is a testimonial for this as Socrates alone filled the role of an Archon. He has clear ideas of his archai, his action principles, and he can unfold them in a dialogue held methodically with his friend Kriton. He has internalised his principles that commits him to do ‘his citizen life by deeds not merely by words’.

An unusual feature of the Socratic dialogue is that the interlocutors don’t start with a blank sheet. The Socratic dialogue proceeds from the findings and the potentials, which they bring in at the beginning of the examination. Because life and work has always already succeeded and has proved it, a proper degree of knowledge and ability must be embodied in every life and professional experience. It is important to bring the mostly unconscious knowledge out into the open to use it systematically and expand it constructively.

Admittedly, one must follow the exhausting way to the light of practical cognition on one’s own. Otherwise the insights would lack the power of persuasion. The Stadium model which goes back to Aristotle clarifies what has to be done. It uses the picture of the Olympic double race ‘with a start in the west to the turning point and the way back to the starting line’. The runner at the starting line stands for one who is skilled and from what is evident to himself has already achieved a basic understanding of life. He ‘runs’ on this basis to the understanding which shapes his concrete judgments and decisions. The reconstruction of this underlying understanding and set of judgments is the essential preliminary work which must be achieved in a Socratic dialogue.

The real Socratic examination consists in changing those of one’s own attitudes, decisions and behaviour which have been prevalent so far. Instead of going ‘forward’ to further judgments and decisions, a U-turn (Greek: periagogé) is carried out, back to the starting point which has become an aim now. Through this the orientation is made explicit and critiqued. By reflexive examination it gains clarity and reliability. It corresponds more and more with the knowledge of principles which should really be the basis for individual decision-making and acting.

Illustration 4: The Stadium model

Example: Should I trust my employees?

Start (aim): The experience-based pre-understanding of what is evident to us

Knowledge of orientation

Concrete judgments and decisions

Aim (start): The enlightened understanding of what is evident in itself

Turning point (concrete judgment): So that my employees work effectively, I must have them under control. (But I see, everything cannot permanently be monitored.)

Aim (enlightened understanding): ‘To be capable of acting, I must trust others (e.g. my employees), also in the economic world where one has to realise that people look for their own advantage.’

What does the New Socratic add?

• The idea of independent self-assurance is realised consistently. The restrained and sensitive support for an autonomous search for convincing orientations takes the place of Socrates’ influencing dialogical control. It’s

14 I. Weiler 1981, p. 151, transl. by the authors.

not the first priority to lead the dialogue to the final principles of human living together. It is more important to articulate and refine the convictions that direct the partners in their respective practical contexts.

- The revived and renewed rhetoric, as well as the new communication between philosophy and psychology, offer a basis for uniting the thematic level with the emotional and social dimensions. Through this the Socratic dialogue gains in persuasiveness and effectiveness.

- The New Socratic fully exploits the possibilities of the ‘dialogue’. A ‘dialogue’ gives way to a common examination between equal partners, which is not about attack and defence or profit and loss. In a climate of dialogue the interlocutors are able to refer to the most fundamental and tricky questions objectively. If these topics remain hidden, they are an insuperable block to the development of persons, teams and organisations.

Perhaps you remember the ‘silent’ comments in some meetings. One person says to himself: ‘I have been prevented from doing my work again. The results of our meetings are so poor.’ Another one thinks: ‘We are all very guarded and don’t mention the important things.’ In a Socratic dialogue such topics are taken up at a fundamental level. In the case of permanently unsatisfactory meetings, it could be important for the members, to clarify their common understanding of a good meeting: ‘What is a good meeting for us?’

Or the question could be put still more concretely: What do I share here with the others? How important is co-operation for us? What ideas do we have for improving co-operation? Which kind of decisions do we feel committed to? and so on.

Socratic Coaching: What It Is and What It Is Not

Socratic Coaching is a specific form of dialogue practice in accordance with the New Socratic. It can always be used if persons, groups or teams want to clarify basic questions in order to shape their lives actively and collaborate constructively.

Socratic Coaching achieves its effect in the interplay with other forms of coaching, particularly solution-focused systemic coaching and personal coaching. The main tasks of solution-focused coaching are to determine aims and tasks, to clarify steps for putting them into action and to practise necessary behaviours. It builds primarily on the momentum of processes initiated by purposeful interventions. Personal coaching puts emphasis on the strengthening of potentials and resources. The appreciation of the particular life-story is central here as well as the support of an inner stability and charisma, based on a coherent self-assessment.

Socratic Coaching can contribute on occasions when these forms of coaching are unable to ensure a lasting transition from the problem area to the solution area or if the solution area can be strengthened by a Socratic Coaching. The objective is to clarify the attitudes and basic convictions, which hinder or promote the concrete attempt at a solution by an individual or a group. ‘We have intensively discussed the project with each other, but we don’t manage to come to concrete decisions. Should we talk about the conditions under which we accept a decision in our team?’

It has turned out that ‘successes’ reached fast and taken euphorically can fade easily if the fundamental attitudes are unexamined or really contradictory. Then a relapse to the problem area threatens with corresponding disillusionment. The Socratic Coaching seeks to build a solid base of convictions for the time of transition and to build action plans for the consequent realisation.

Illustration 5: Orientation in the Socratic Coaching

At the beginning of a Socratic Coaching our clients often tell us that they must come to solutions quickly due to the pressure to act and therefore have no time to think seriously about fundamental questions. However, business people in leadership roles are again and again confronted with these questions because competitive pressure in economic life intensifies the tension between divergent attitudes and values. An example from our coaching experience:

Mrs Webster has been head of a department in a great industrial enterprise for a short time. She has recognised that a project has gone wrong. Now, she must draw conclusions. This will bring up difficult conversations, primarily with the project manager whose faults she has to point out. Perhaps she has to dismiss him. This challenge doesn’t strike her as a competence problem. She knows a lot about this kind of conversation and knows how to conduct them. It is for Mrs Webster all about more basic things. She feels an inner conflict in this affair. She asks herself: ‘Which values should I respect here? What am I responsible for? When do I give somebody a second chance?’ If she can clarify these questions, she will be able to act more sensibly, namely in harmony with herself, in this case and in similar cases in the future. As a result she will conserve energy and time for handling the daily tasks.

If in educational, therapeutic or consulting contexts people speak of a Socratic dialogue practice they often understand by it a concealed directive instruction: the teacher or therapist asks, the client answers. Until today, Socratic dialogue practice has not for the most part got beyond the standard of the Old Socratic.16 Moreover, the word ‘Socratic’ has come to be used diffusely and increasingly frequently for ‘philosophical’ or ‘questioning’.

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16 See: J. O’Conner and J. Seymour (2001) in their book ‘Ratgeber für Trainer, Referenten und Dozenten’ (pp. 228 f)
The orientation of the Old Socratic and a diffuse understanding of ‘Socratic’ also indicate the progressive therapeutical approaches which work with these techniques: the rational emotive therapy by Albert Ellis and the cognitive behaviour therapy developed by Aaron T. Beck. The rules of a Socratic dialogue practice remain somewhat unclear. The therapist ‘conducts’ the client to the ‘discoveries’ which he (the therapist) regards as helpful.

At least Ellis and Beck base their dialogue practice on philosophically-founded analysis models that show a characteristic Socratic structure, one related to general convictions.

Illustration 6: The ABC model in the Rational Emotive Therapy

According to the Ellis ABC model, feelings and behaviours, which adapt to particular situations, are influenced by elementary personal belief and assessment systems. To change them in a life-supporting way, he asks for concrete or general convictions, which underlie the problematic feelings and actions. Through this, rational, reality-balanced convictions come to take the place of irrational convictions.

Example: a dialogue situation

Situation: ‘He only has eyes for my business partner, and he hardly pays attention to me.’

‘Irrational’ concrete belief: ‘He doesn’t accept me.’

‘Irrational’ general belief: ‘If one doesn’t pay attention to somebody, one doesn’t accept him.

Behaviour: I feel refused. I won’t participate in the conversation and I will hold my information back.

‘Rational’ belief: ‘There can be different reasons that he doesn’t look at me, e.g. …’

‘Rational’ behaviour: I participate in the conversation and so I can find out whether he pays my remarks any attention.’

In a similar way the Socratic-orientated approaches of cognitive behaviour therapy are oriented at the ‘backgrounds’ of negative moods and feelings, behaviour and physical symptoms. The question here is: How can one change the manner of his thinking so that one feels spiritually and physically better and behaves more appropriately in relation to reality? To uncover the personal patterns of thought, Dennis Greenberger and Christine A. Padesky have developed the three steps of the ‘Downward Arrow’ technique.

(1) At first something like an automatic verbalised thought appears. For example: an employee feels unsure about the praise received from his superior. Perhaps he thinks: ‘Well, at least this time he is satisfied with me’; or: ‘Obviously, he must think that I have a strong need to be praised.’ or: ‘He certainly doesn’t mean this seriously.’ and so on.

(2) Behind this automatic thinking there are basic assumptions which lie more deeply and are less accessible. They have an ‘If … then…” form, e.g.: What does the employee think about others? ‘Mostly, if somebody praises me, he hasn’t meant it seriously’; or: ‘If somebody praises me, then he puts himself above me.’ Such beliefs stand for the interpretation rules, which govern our daily readings of reality. Greenberger/Padesky suggest examining them from three points of view: ideas about me, about others, and about the world.

(3) Behind these automatic thoughts are basic assumptions which lie deeper and are again less accessible. They have a generalising structure: ‘I am X.’, ‘People are X.’, ‘The world is X.’. They often contain generalising words like ‘always’, ‘never’, ‘everyone’ and ‘none’. They are held unconditionally. We have internalised such principles for perceiving and mastering reality. They serve to reduce the complexity of the world. By asking for the fundamental convictions it is possible to put down negative central convictions, or to relativise them, and to strengthen the positive ones.

Illustration 7: The ‘Downward Arrow’ technique of Greenberger and Padesky

Example:

Situation: ‘I got a compliment from my boss.’

Feeling: ‘I am ashamed.’

Automatic thought: ‘I don’t deserve recognition.’

Assumption: ‘Only very hard work deserves recognition.’

Core belief: ‘I am not worthy of recognition.’

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Socratic Coaching integrates these models for revealing and correcting attitudes and principles and connects them with the New Socratic. Primarily, this means moving away from the therapeutic orientation (to develop the ability to act and to manage reality) and focusing on protagonists who are already capable of acting from realistic beliefs. The main approach is not to uncover ‘irrational’ convictions but to replace them by ‘realistic’ ones.19

It is important to enrich the convictions of clients who are supposed to be competent in practical matters. The coach introduces the Socratic structure of the dialogue and keeps it going by his interventions but the shaping of the dialogue spreads out among all dialogue partners. The clients practise dialogue behaviour in the course of this and, guided by the model behaviour of the coach, co-operation outweighs defending and asserting against others. Listening, explaining, taking contributions and putting oneself into the shoes of the other are key behaviours.

The strong contribution of the coaching partners to the coaching process is evident in the fact that the participants work out the ‘Socratic question’ by themselves. An inspiring Socratic question, which is formed by the partners themselves, can be a powerful instrument for speeding up personal development as well as the development of teams and organisations. This approach is valid because short-term solutions are not required or sought. The aim is to find questions whose answers make possible a lasting change in behaviour.20

Socratic Coaching maintains the balance between emotion and reason.21 On the one hand it is important to be emotionally involved, to develop the motivation to act. Feelings that arise are therefore tied into the process of dialogue. (‘How do you feel now with this judgment?’) On the other hand, sensible investigation needs sufficient emotional detachment to obtain a clear picture of possible orientations for action. This can be reached by examining the problem from different perspectives.22 It has proven to be elegant and effective to focus the communal examination on a past situation that has similarities to the current problem. (‘Could you remember a situation during the last year in which an analogous problem arose?’) It is easier for the coaching partners to understand the people involved from a reflective distance. They are more likely to accept criticism of their assumptions and central convictions constructively.

A further quality characteristic of Socratic Coaching lies in its systematic argumentation structure (see Illustration 8 below).23 If the Socratic question derives from a current situation (1), then relevant experiences are looked for to serve as example situations for further examination. (2) Then the behaviour and acting is described (with all relevant feelings and physical reactions). (3) Such reactions frequently take place habitually or are simply part of the acquired behaviour repertoire. The opinions and motives from which the behaviours have arisen will be identified. ‘What leads you to think your behaviour in this situation is adequate?’ This is how they are asked for their concrete judgments.(4)

The preconditions for the main phase in the process of Socratic Coaching are created with that. Now the general assumptions are brought up on which the concrete judgments are based. What are the characteristics of the situation? What has to be done in such cases? Which rules, values and norms are valid? These questions lead to communication about the general orientations to act in characteristic contexts. If situations of this and that kind are present, then I react to them in a foreseeable way. (5) The validity of these orientations is increased if they are founded on sensible and general principles, which find their expression in a firm attitude and a stable conception of oneself. (6) The special strength of these principles frequently lies in a distinctive and simple wording – like the Formula 1 manager Bernie Eccleston’s answer to the question what he would like to do ‘for example’ as a retired person, he said: ‘for example’ is not included’.24 In checking these principles, completion, expansion and precision can be achieved. They can help in mastering the current situation and future challenges.(7)

According to this structure the course of a Socratic Coaching can be divided up in to seven main phases:

1 Identifying the current problem situation and determining the topic.
2 Working out the central (Socratic) question.
3 Establishing the specific orientation to practice by example situations.
4 Recording the actions, behaviours, feelings and physical reactions.
5 Investigating the concrete judgments and most important arguments.

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22 Different models have been developed, especially the model of positions of perception and the reframing techniques.
6 Revealing, formulating and examining the basic patterns of thought and attitudes.

7 Defining and integrating new or extended central convictions.

Each of these phases makes special demands on the Socratic coach. We give some notes, in the following, on those demands to which one has to pay most attention. We refer to actual situations that we have encountered with organisations and enterprises in our Coaching and Socratic Dialogues with teams and individuals.

**Socratic Coaching in Organisations and Management Consultancy**

There are a number of problems and conflicts in organisations where the protagonists don’t believe in moving forward by communicating with each other. ‘It is no use explaining this to my employees. They don’t understand it’; ‘A discussion? That’s pointless. At the end we are more estranged’; ‘Dialogues are actually useless. One doesn’t have influence on the decisions.’ We often hear such statements from our clients when they reflect on their professional situation in their organisation. Often they have the impression that the decisions depend mainly on tactical skills and arbitrary preferences. Some aims therefore are realised only half-heartedly. ‘Don’t they see the significance of customer services for our enterprise?’. ‘Why is important information withheld from me again and again?’

But it is not only communication with each other that sometimes turns out to be difficult. The clarification of one’s own orientations of action can come off badly. Frequently, the reaction to a challenge follows a usual pattern of action, often unconscious (although the irritation in one’s own behaviour is significant). This can take great effort and still the personal discontent lasts or even grows. ‘I don’t know whether I can really move something here.’

The first task in Socratic Coaching is, together with the coachee, to find and formulate the topic that can lead to a durable and stable change in behaviour or organisational culture. It is important to find the ‘hot’ point. As coaches we ask e.g.: ‘What do you believe, we really must discuss, but to you in your organisation it seems to be impossible to discuss?’ To increase the motivation to tackle the topic, we ask additionally: ‘What do you mean, which consequences are likely to occur if we don’t discuss it? If we discuss it, which positive consequences could arise?’

In order to analyse general assumptions and basic convictions systematically, we have to find a Socratic question for the topic, namely a question of 2nd or 3rd order. Questions of 1st order check directly for solutions. Questions of a higher order search for conditional and contextual (2nd order) or absolute and general (3rd order) orientations. In Socratic Coaching, much depends on a good initial question. We can only give some notes in this paper and convey a rough impression of Socratic dialogue practice in an example dialogue.

A Socratic question should concern not only a specific situation but refer also to a general one. It should pick out basic orientation and attitude problems as a central theme such as convictions, principles, values and scales. It should be not merely factual but should require a reflective dialogue to reach an answer. It should make concrete results possible by referring to typical situations within the coachee’s experience. Its wording should be as simple and short as possible and as demanding and trenchant as necessary.

A special challenge is that the coachee himself should formulate ‘his’ or ‘her’ question. The Socratic coach supports this process by examining the presuppositions or the conclusions: He in addition can ask ‘meta-questions’, i.e. questions about questions: ‘Which questions would you like to be asked by your colleagues?’ If a question is found, which is relatively basic and hits the mark, then it is necessary to look for concrete experience situations.

The following dialogue sequence, developed in coaching with a newly appointed head of department (‘Mr A’), gives a brief idea of this procedure. Mr A had been an employee in his department before his promotion:

**Mr. A:** ‘The employees expect me to fill my leading role in the same way as my predecessor. But I want to do this differently. They must get this.’

**Coach:** ‘What do you do differently, for example?’

**Mr. A:** ‘Well, for example, I also want to participate in the training which I organise for my employees.’

**Coach:** ‘You think you can make use of this training as well?’

**Mr. A:** ‘Actually, no, but this shows the employees that I am one of them.’

**Coach:** ‘The employees will notice that you sometimes stand with them on the same level? … This is your claim to your leading role?’

**Mr. A:** ‘Yes. But they see this differently. They want the usual leadership behaviour.’

**Coach:** ‘I would be interested in knowing where the differences are. How would you ask e.g. your managing director or your employees if you wanted to ask them about their understanding of your leading role?’

**Mr. A:** ‘This isn’t possible in our company. They would find it strange.’

**Coach:** ‘We could act it out here, hypothetically. Perhaps it helps. What do you mean?’

**Mr. A:** ‘OK, why not. I think I could ask: ‘What do you demand of me as head of department?’ … Or perhaps: ‘How do I earn your respect?’ …’

**Coach:** ‘So this is it. If you ask yourself the question, what would that be?’

**Mr. A:** ‘I perhaps could ask: What do I value in what I do?’

**Coach:** ‘What do I appreciate in my role as head of department? Let’s have a closer look at this question. I would like to ask you to look back over in your mind’s eye your time as a head of department until today. Now you have new tasks,'
compared with your previous situation as an employee of this department. Think of these new tasks and tell me about situations, in which you have approved very much of what you’ve done.'

In this coaching Mr A developed a differentiated understanding of his leading role, by dividing it up into seven functions (e.g. setting medium-term and long-term aims, keeping an overview, delegating effectively, etc.). It turned out, that he himself appreciated some of the ‘usual’ leadership behaviour and he could imagine integrating it into his ‘new’ understanding of leadership.

In the course of such a dialogue further questions of this fundamental kind can arise: ‘When will I inform people of my plans? How much control should I exert? How much readiness to change do I demand of my employees? Which responsibilities do I keep and which do I delegate? What criteria do I use to measure my performance? And so on..

In order to clarify these questions the Socratic coach observes four rules. They arise from the structure of the Socratic Coaching (see above).

- Putting it in concrete terms (current or example situation): An important role is to clarify the situation and the reference to it. e.g. ‘Which employees have said this to you? How often have you already experienced this?’

- Concluding (concrete judgment, action, and behaviour): The judgments, which are connected with the behaviour and the feelings of the coachee, are worked out. e.g.: ‘Can you explain to me why you have reacted this way? What are your reasons for changing this? How would you explain it to your employees?’

- Generalising and deepening (if-then rules, basic convictions): The assumptions from which the concrete verdicts and assessments of the coaching partners arise are disclosed and specified (e.g. always? sometimes? as a rule? necessarily?). E.g.: ‘Do you always proceed like this in such situations? How do you arrive at this judgment? How would you formulate the rule which you follow here?’

- Checking the logic (the relations between ‘situation – assumptions – judgment’): The basic convictions and assumptions are checked to see if they are coherent, if they are consistent with the coachee life, professional attitude and values and if they are used adequately in the situation. It is also important here to pay attention to the use of auxiliary verbs (want to, should, have to). E.g. ‘Is this a principle that you follow in all situations? Is this a principle that you follow in all situations? How does this value connect with your opinions about...? Do you wonder whether you are obliged to do it or if you want to do it?’

Of course knowledge of such rules isn’t sufficient to design a fruitful Socratic Coaching. It requires practice and experience. Still more fundamental to us is the attitude which should characterise Socratic Coaching: of trust in the coaching partners, the staff and the executives and the belief that they can achieve a fruitful clarification of the basis on which they act towards each other and can contribute to a culture of dialogue within their organisation.

Literature


26 The influence of Socratic dialogue on the communication culture in companies has been investigated by H. Bolten (2004) on the basis of interviews. Recently the use of Socratic dialogues for public debates has been investigated in a project of research. See: E. Griessler/B. Littig (2003) and H. Gronke/ P. Dordoni/B. Littig (2004).


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