The Socratic Method in Leadership Positions: Teaching, Psychotherapy and Supervision

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Leadership can play an important role in classroom teaching, psychotherapy sessions and supervisory meetings. Recent work on the Socratic method has identified useful strategies derived from an integration of ancient philosophy and contemporary psychology. The nine core elements of the Socratic method can be organized into process and content. The five process elements include the use of systematic questioning, inductive reasoning, a disavowal of knowledge, guided discovery, and brief sequences. The four content areas include a focus on universal definitions, self-Improvement, virtue ethics, and core beliefs. Finally, the Socratic method has been useful for leadership skills in three different areas: classroom teaching, psychotherapy sessions, and supervisory meetings. Each leadership style will be discussed long with a metaphor to help clarify the Socratic style of leadership.

1. Introduction

The field of psychology benefits from an understanding of leadership skills. Strong and supportive leadership can have a beneficial impact on classroom teaching, psychotherapy sessions, and supervisory meetings. The Socratic method can provide the foundation for a thoughtful leadership style. Historically, the Socratic method derives from the dialogues of Plato (Jowett, 1892/1937), in which Plato captured the essence of public discussions led by Socrates. Although Socrates denied being a teacher, most people think of the Socratic method as a form of teaching whereby the instructor leads students to a pre-planned conclusion by asking a series of leading questions. Instead, Socrates argued against a authoritarian leadership style in preference for a more collaborative exploration (Overholser, 1995). In addition to teaching, the Socratic method has been adapted for use in psychotherapy sessions as a strategy for guiding clients toward more adaptive behaviors and attitudes (Overholser, 2018). Finally, the Socratic method has been found useful in supervision meetings in order to downplay the use of a dogmatic leadership style in favor of a more collaborative approach (Overholser, 2022).

At its broadest level of interpretation, the Socratic method has been described in terms of its processes and its content areas. The five processes include the use of a systematic series of questions, a discussion that is guided by inductive reasoning, a disavowal of expert level knowledge, guided discovery, and brief segments. Although these five process elements provide a comprehensive view of the Socratic method, not all elements are well suited to each application site.

The Socratic method relies on systematic questioning whereby the professional uses a series of questions to gather information and explore new ideas (Overholser, 1993). The reliance on questions can be useful for effective leadership (Mobus, 2023). Instead of telling other people what to do, the leader can work side-by-side, exploring options and evaluation reasons for different actions. In the process, it is advisable to avoid tasking "Why?" questions because it can be too easy for the participant to respond with "I don't know". Instead, useful questions may ask if the person has any ideas for making positive changes, thereby encouraging the person to explore new options. During the process, it helps to avoid asking questions in which the leader already has an acceptable answer in mind. Useful questions avoid including an implied directive, such as when asking "Do you think it would be a good idea to talk with your boss about your frustration?" These leading questions are not sincere questions but include direct suggestions for managing the problem situation. In contrast, Socratic questions rely on a sincere search for information or new ideas. Useful questions can be phrased in an open format, accepting almost any reply as the starting point for a more thorough discussion.

As the dialogue continues, two people can work together to explore new ideas. The Socratic method often uses inductive reasoning whereby the two parties review relevant life experiences, searching for patterns over time and across situations. Sometimes, the inductive process can uncover previously successful coping efforts, and reinitiate strategies that were helpful in the past. The underlying goal is to help clients learn from their own experience. Teachers, therapists, and supervisors can use a similar process to help students, clients and trainees search for useful strategies based on their own prior life experiences.

Implicit in the Socratic approach is the notion of a disavowal of knowledge, sometimes called Socratic ignorance, whereby the teacher / therapist / supervisor avoids the role of expert (Overholser, 1995). Instead, both parties respect the client's knowledge and focus on the ever-present ability to change. Further, the leader is willing to learn alongside the client. This is in contrast to the common scenario whereby young professionals seem to act as if they have the knowledge and expertise beyond their years of experience, assuming they possess the wisdom needed to solve others' problems. Likewise, it can be helpful for teachers and supervisors to build on the assumption that trainees arrive with a solid knowledge-based on which to build a more sophisticated understanding of key issues. The Socratic approach shifts the role of the instructor from master of knowledge to fellow student seeking answers (Tucker, 2007).

Guided discovery is a process whereby two parties work together to solve problems in a collaborative manner. The leader offers assistance without taking over and forcing the discussion down a predetermined path. The process is similar to helping a child to assemble a jigsaw puzzle. The process begins by turning all pieces with the image facing up so the image can be seen. Then, the assembly begins with the corners and border edges. Gradually, the image starts to appear. Along the way, the follower learns a style of approaching problems and seeking solutions. Thus, the leader helps by providing some structure to facilitate the learning process.

Finally, the Socratic approach is often best applied in brief segments, interspersing conversation with exploration. Leaders may occasionally share their own thoughts and insights in order to avoid the feeling of an interrogation.

The three most common content areas of the Socratic method are focused on clarifying definitions of key terms, promoting self-improvement, and exploring core beliefs that typically guide emotions and actions. Again, these content areas provide a comprehensive overview, with the realization that some topics may not be central in certain situations.

A focus on universal definitions aims to clarify the client's use of key terms and major interpretive issues. The focus can be on the use of terms like success / failure, labels such as what makes an event "horrible" or "terrible", or what underlies goal phrases such as "a good marriage" or "a good job" (Overholser, 1994). At the core, it is implied that words matter, and many clients use words that carry negative emotions. The discussion can help to identify flaws with the client's use of certain terms.

A focus on self-improvement aims to expand the client's awareness of their own thoughts, emotions and actions (Overholser, 1996). The discussion can help to identify the client's goals for successful performance, often with a focus on long-range goals and improvements, gently guiding the client toward adaptive changes. Along the way, a leader can encourage the tendency for honest and fair self-evaluation of one's performance.

Finally, some discussions explore core beliefs that underlie effective action. For example, it can be useful to hold onto the belief that change is possible: better choices are typically available; meaningful changes take time and persistence; problems can be solved; mistakes can often provide opportunities to learn; and past troubles do not need to continue to influence future behavior. Adopting these core beliefs can help a person to retain a positive attitude and a focus on future adjustments.

2. Classroom Teaching

The Socratic method can be used to guide the processes commonly involved in teaching (Overholser, 1992). The Socratic style of teaching has most often been conducted in college seminars (Friesen & Stephens, 2016; Tredway, 1995) but it has also applied to middle school classes (Polite & Adams, 1997). Classroom meetings can go beyond lectures providing an endless series of facts, famous names and historic dates. Instead, class discussions can shift to a more conversational and exploratory style. Questioning can be used as a central tool when teaching (Williamson et al., 2002). Both teacher and student can learn the value of education through the use of questions. Many people learn best by asking questions (Cooksey, 2009).

In many situations, it is helpful for a teacher to think like a student, with an open mind ready to explore new ideas (Mobus, 2023). The Socratic method relies on questions to push students to examine their beliefs (Tucker, 2007). Some questions can force students to respect issues that they do not fully understand, reducing a false sense of knowledge (Pekarsky, 1994). Appreciating what is not understood can be the beginning of true learning (Miyake & Norman, 1979). When their false knowledge has been reduced, they become more open to learning new ideas.

Instead of the usual dogmatic style, the teacher can bring a sense of humility and curiosity to class meetings (Pekarsky, 1994). Because the teacher remains open to learning (Rud, 1997),

the Socratic style of teaching involves multiple people thinking together to explore new and useful ideas (Moir, 2004). Lectures become discussions, designed to discover new ideas or debate controversial topics. Questions can be used to lead a critical examination, sometimes confronting essential topics, such as what sources of information can be trusted as valid knowledge (Gose, 2009). The issue of useful and accurate knowledge is important, given the overreliance on social media and online news reports that lack empirical validation. Students often trust information they find online without checking to see if the material can be cross-checked with more reliable sources. Over time, class assignments can be used to help students to express their opinions and support them with evidence that can be trusted. This can include personal experience but often goes beyond anecdotal evidence to include more reliable sources.

In a classroom setting, the Socratic approach expands the use of questions to guide class discussions (Ferguson, 1986). Questions are used to promote critical thinking and encourage students to think about a topic from new angles, sharing different perspectives (Friesen & Stephens, 2016). Reading materials can be used to encourage students to read critically, and class discussions or homework assignments can challenge ideas presented in the articles (Acim, 2018). Further, when showing a video in class, questions can be posed to push students into an active role instead of a passive viewer (Lawson et al., 2006). When showing a video in class, it is helpful to encourage or require students to submit questions about the material (Lawson et al., 2006) to avoid the tendency to watch, listen, and passively accept the content of the video.

According to the Socratic approach, the teacher is seen as a facilitator who asks questions, helps to paraphrase student replies, and occasionally restates a student's response in order to clarify their intent (Tredway, 1995). The instructor uses a series of questions to guide class discussions (Williamson et al., 2002), often using an assortment of questions (Whitely, 2006). The Socratic dialogue may be used in brief segments within traditional lectures so as to not overwhelm the students with questions. The teacher's use of questions can be seen as similar to the endless small taps of a goldsmith's hammer, sharpening the student's ideas and shaping the student's critical thinking skills (Tucker, 2007). Each tap has its effect, and across many small taps, an image can be shaped.

The instructor can focus on developing improved judgment (Dinkins & Cangelosi, 2019) and skills that will be useful beyond the classroom (Mobus, 2023). It can often be useful to ask students to discuss how the material might relate to their own life beyond the classroom (Ferguson, 1986). Questions can be used to clarify the use of common terms, asking students to clarify their definition of key terms (Gose, 2009). For example, in some classes, it can be informative to clarify what constitutes good versus evil (Gose, 2009), or success versus failure. Instructors can give students the responsibility to submit questions once a week in order to facilitate class discussions. Later, the instructor may select a subset of these same questions to form the basis of the final exam (Ferguson, 1986).

In sum, the teacher is a leader, having a plan for each class meeting while nonetheless serving as a well-informed guide. According to the Socratic method, the teacher can be seen as analogous to a tour guide whose job involves helping others to see and understand the remains of an ancient city. The tour guide is most helpful when possessing a deep knowledge of the destination and the locale's most important sites, while remaining sensitive to the local culture, and making accommodations to suit any special interests of the tourists (Al-Okaily 2022). The best tour guides are well informed and prepared for their meetings, and the guide's knowledge

facilitates positive rapport with the tourists (Hwang & Lee, 2019). In classroom meetings, the teacher guides the students toward important issues, and highlights the most important remnants from the past that continue to influence modern society. Likewise, the teacher may promote an awareness of the historical foundations underlying some current cultural, religious or political beliefs. The teacher's strong knowledge and supportive style promote a positive rapport between teacher and student.

3. Psychotherapy Sessions

The Socratic method has been integrated with cognitive therapy to create a useful approach to contemporary psychotherapy (Overholser, 2010). Most of the core elements, both content and process components, are well-suited for psychotherapy sessions. When conducting psychotherapy sessions, all elements of the Socratic method can be included as parts of a comprehensive plan for treatment. The therapist guides the client toward adaptive changes in thoughts and behaviors, which often help reduce negative emotional reactions. The therapist works to guide clients toward better life choices, helping to change daily behaviors and shift away from negative attitudes. The process is different from other current forms of psychotherapy, shifting away from attempts to reduce or remove a patient's psychiatric diagnosis, and instead helping a person make meaningful and lasting lifestyle changes. The therapeutic goal shifts from treating a patient who was diagnosed with a psychiatric diagnosis to helping a person who might benefit from aspects of self-awareness and self-improvement (Overholser, 1996).

Although Freud viewed the uncovering of unconscious motives as similar to the work of an archaeologist uncovering an ancient city (Thomas, 2009), it may be more helpful to appreciate the role of the therapist as analogous to a charter boat guide (Overholser, 2013). The effective guide has skills and knowledge of local areas to ensure a successful journey. A guide may ask questions to see what type of fish the client seeks and what kind of lure the client prefers to use. Although respecting the goals of the client, the guide knows the local waters and can steer toward the best areas for fishing. The guide is familiar with the local species of fish, knows the proper depth for fishing, and understands the best type of bait to use given the weather. The guide often teaches fishing techniques and strategies, and serves as a role model with more sophisticated skill than the average person (Farthing, Childs, Mann-Lang & Potts, 2022). Ultimately, the guide helps the client to take the lead in reeling in any catch. In similar ways, the therapist helps the client to learn, change, and value the process of self-discovery. The therapist promotes awareness and self-improvement, encouraging clients to take ownership for any improvements that may be observed.

4. Supervisory Meetings

The Socratic method can facilitate the process of supervision (Overholser, 1991) as well as professional coaching (Neenan, 2009). Most workers or trainees appreciate help, support, and trust in their abilities. Few trainees appreciate any form of criticism. According to the Socratic method, the leader avoids any reliance on persuasion or flattery in favor of knowledge to guide proper behavior (Bauman, 2018). When a supervisor conveys a sincere belief in the trainee's ability to manage the situation, often they will feel appreciated and respected.

During supervisory meetings, recent events can be reviewed in order to identify recurrent patterns in the problem areas. Questions may begin by reviewing recent events to identify which strategies have been working well and what strategies have been unsuccessful. The discussion often aims to identify ways that a worker's performance can be improved and future problems can be avoided. Along the way, there is an emphasis on the value of self-awareness and a willingness to evaluation one's own performance on the path to self-improvement. The supervisor may implicitly convey that trainees should always have a reason for what they do (Mobus, 2023).

Questions can be used to guide a problem-solving format for supervisory meetings. Questions can help to define a problem in clear and objective terms. Together, supervisor and supervisee can negotiate a goal for resolving a problem and can generate a variety of alternatives for making adaptive changes. After exploring several useful options, questions can be used to guide a thoughtful decision about how best to proceed. The focus is on critical thinking in order to form the best decisions (Tsiantos, 2023). The discussion can focus on anticipating potential risks and probable benefits in order to identify the best plan for the next step to take. Finally, the two can work together to formulate a thoughtful plan and schedule a time to implement the new strategy.

Effective supervision can help to cultivate the trainee's self-evaluation and personal investment in making adaptive changes. Workers can identify their own areas of strength and potential growth, and hopefully be willing to work toward making improvements. Supervisees can become more aware of their own areas of ignorance (Bouckaert, 2009) and use these issues as goals for improvement and expanding their knowledge.

In sum, the supervisor can be a leader who helps supervisees to make adaptive improvements in their work. According to a Socratic approach, a supervisor is analogous to a mountain tour guide who has a deep knowledge of the terrain. The guide has been here many times before, and the guide knows the most useful and scenic areas to explore. In addition, an experienced guide understands which areas pose risks or hazards that should be avoided. Along the way, the guide frequently helps to highlight the most interesting sights. However, the guide remains calm and patient (Tsaur & Teng, 2017) and asks questions to see how the trainee is coming along in case the path has been too strenuous or they need time to rest. The guide always respects that it is the trainee's journey and it is important to provide opportunities for learning. Together, the two can enjoy a productive hike even if it feels tiring at times.

5. Conclusions

The Socratic method is useful for promoting growth and confidence in the student / client / supervisee. However, the Socratic method requires thoughtful patience on the part of the teacher / therapist / supervisor. By using a series of questions, both parties can explore their underlying thoughts and attitudes, and together they can find useful changes to be made in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The Socratic method helps leadership move from a dogmatic style to a more collaborative process. Both parties work together to improve a problem situation by exploring new ideas, novel strategies and untapped resources.

The ideas presented here have been found useful in classroom teaching, psychotherapy sessions, and supervisory meetings. However, anecdotal evidence needs to be supported by empirical research. Specific strategies have been shown to improve learning in classroom

settings and progress in psychotherapy clinics. Additional research is needed to support its effectiveness in all three application sites.

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