Reflective decisions: the use of Socratic dialogue in managing organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to show that too often decisions concerning change are made on the basis of partial understanding, limited data and unreflective assumptions about people and organizations. In the discussion of the Socratic dialogue the aim is to uncover a useful method for ensuring more reflective decision making that involves active participation of employees on the receiving end of change.

Design/methodology/approach – Although dialogue is used in management processes today, it is contended that the Socratic dialogue is particularly useful in making sense of complex change processes. Data drawn from research conducted in two UK higher education institutions are used to illustrate how lack of knowledge and understanding often pervades and constrains change, and how techniques of Socratic dialogue can be used to secure higher levels of employee involvement and commitment to change.

Findings – It is argued that Socratic dialogue can be used as a practical tool to facilitate "participative" change and contend that further research is required to develop the use of this method as a qualitative research instrument for uncovering data on processes of change in organizations.

Originality/value – If practised consistently by organizational members, the Socratic techniques can lead to a more concrete understanding of the complexities of changing organizations. It is a collective process of change through critical questioning and, as such, it lends itself to further exploration on the part of both change managers and qualitative researchers for its uses as a diagnostic and research instrument.

Keywords Organizational change, Employee attitudes, Employee involvement, Decision making

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Initiating, implementing - and more importantly – sustaining change, has undoubtedly become one of the most critical factors affecting business organizations (see, Burnes, 2004; Caldwell, 2006; Dawson, 2003; Gallos, 2006; Tushman and Anderson, 2004) and the enabling and/or disabling factors connected with change implementation projects have been studied and documented in various ways (see for example, Block, 1987; Buchanan and Boddy, 1992; Cooper and Sawaf, 1997; Guest and King, 2001; Pfeffer, 1982). Many commentators focus on issues such as, communication or committed leadership as the vehicle for ensuring effective change (see for example, Hamel, 2000; Tourish and Hargie, 2003). Despite the efforts involved, an estimated 50-70 per cent of re-engineering projects fail to achieve their intended objectives (Hammer and Champy, 1993) and less than one third of the USA and British companies engaged in Total Quality Management (TQM) reported tangible performance benefits (Askenas *et al.*, 1995). Harvard's John Kotter, in a study of one hundred top management-driven "corporate transformation" efforts, concluded that more than half did not survive the

initial phases (Kotter, 1995, 1996). It would appear that even with a wide range of theories and prescriptions on how best to manage change, the "brutal fact is that about 70 per cent of all change initiatives fail" (Beer and Nohria, 2000). As such, there is certainly room for further consideration of techniques that might aid the process of steering complex change and we contend that the use of Socratic dialogue provides just such a tool.

Socratic dialogue as a tool for managing change

Over the last 30 years there has been an ongoing interest in the place and use of dialogue in management processes. For example David Bohm, an American-born quantum physicist, made an important contribution in his reflections on thought and dialogue (Nichol, 2002). He forwarded the notion that thought is not an individual but collective phenomenon and that stories create dialogue space within which various meanings may flow (Bohm, 2000). He contended that "free space" – under what became known as the "Bohm Dialogue" – could accommodate different personal beliefs and aid more effective communication. In the case of tackling ethical dilemmas, Maclagan (1998, p. 48) argues for the use of the dialogical as opposed to traditional judgmental approaches to decision making, as this enables individuals with conflicting views to reflect on those of others. The use of dialogue has also been taken up in a number of key management areas (see, Isaacs, 1993; Jacobs and Coghlan, 2005, Heracleous, 2002), such as, leadership development (Mirvis and Ayas, 2003), organizational learning (Schein, 2003) and knowledge management (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2003). Peter Senge, in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, identifies tools for dialoguing that can aid effective listening and reduce conflict. As he states: "In dialogue, individuals gain insights that could not be achieved individually. A new kind of mind begins to come into being which is based on development of common meaning ... People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool, of common meaning, which is capable of constant development and change" (Senge, 2003). Whereas Kakabadse *et al.* (2003) in their review of the knowledge management literature highlight how the "philosophy-based KM model is based on interactive dialogues within a strategic context ... which has its roots in Socratic dialogue", and how the importance of dialogue has remained unchanged through the centuries in strategic decision-making processes and "visioning processes that have vital implications for organizational longevity". In a more recent article, reflective dialogue as an enabler for strategic innovation has been taken up by Jacobs and Heracleous (2005). They contend that current ways of thinking (mental models of organizational actors) can constrain strategic thinking and that dialogue (as a form of reflective conversation) enables actors to alter managers' long held assumptions through critical reflection (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005). We also seek to establish the ongoing value of the Socratic dialogue (conceptually and practically) in making sense of complex change processes. In short, we argue that a Socratic dialogue that is able to open established assumptions, question the validity of single claims to "truth" and highlight the multi-story nature of change processes (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007), can provide a powerful tool to secure greater employee involvement, meaning and commitment to collective change agendas.

Ancient Greece and the new millennium
The character that most distinguished Greek social life from that of modernity is the way it maintained, for its size, a distinct character to the measure of individuals in society. Not by accident was dialogue born around the problem of justice and of knowing oneself as an individual. To understand what is just for the single person, says Plato, it will be well to seek it where it is manifested in the grand scale: in the Polis (a form of public organization of classical Greece). Plato affirms this essentially Greek principle, where the individual is a microcosm from which the state reflects, on a much larger scale, the organization of human beings in society. The state thereby becomes the common denominator between the individual, of which it is a reproduction in the large, and the cosmos, of which it is the smaller image (Scroccaro, 2003). This microcosm – in the eyes of the authors – is embodied by the employee striving to understand change and the role they play in it, while the state is represented by the organization, captured as it is, by its perplexed mission of aligning both the interests of the employees (microcosm) and the external business environment (cosmos). On the surface at least, many features of modern organizational life in western industrialized states seem inimical to the conduct of sustained, public dialogue. Contemporary skepticism can be linked directly to the perceived obstacles that modernity places in dialogue's path and yet, there has also been a repositioning of dialogue in management processes (Heracleous, 2002; Schein, 2003).

The year 2001 was internationally proclaimed as Socrates year – reminiscent of the fact that the start of the new millennium coincided with the 2,400-year anniversary of Socrates' death in 399 BC (Nehamas, 2001). This context has rekindled interest and critical reflection on the question of whether contemporary global society is becoming sensitized to the need for enhancing active citizenship, and whether global and local organizations need to develop active workmanship. Active workmanship is defined here as the process in which passive or seemingly "connoisseur" organizational members are transformed into actively involved and self-conscious (in its philosophical sense) decision-makers. These people – general employees, managers, leaders, facilitators or supervisors – are seen to be the driving force behind decisions that shape outcomes towards a more socially responsible and creative organization that deliver products and services that employees can identify with. As Andriopoulos (2000, p. 741) argues: "creative employees have to constantly question their own ideas rather than take them for granted, which would limit the creative thinking process and therefore their exposure to external sources". It is in servicing this process that we contend a lot is to be gained from utilizing the tools of Socratic dialogue.

Socratic dialogue: an explanation
Socrates lived in Athens between 470 and 399 BC. Being the main character in Plato's early dialogues, Socrates set the paradigm for a philosophy practiced as a way of life. For him, philosophy was a very personal affair. He believed that insight into one's own experiences can best be acquired through mutual, critical enquiry. When thinking Socratically, people discover that they cannot clearly define ideas and concepts they previously held with certainty. This awareness in turn inspires further curiosity and open-minded reflection (Nelson, 1940):

> I came to see that, though a great many persons, and most of all he himself, thought that he was wise, yet he was not wise … so when I went away, I thought to myself, "I am wiser than this

man: neither of us knows anything that is really worth knowing, but he thinks that he has knowledge when he has not, while I, having no knowledge, do not think that I have. I seem, at any rate, to be a little wiser than he is on this point: I do not think that I know what I do not know." I tell you that no greater good can happen to a man than to discuss human excellence every day and the other matters about which you have heard me arguing and examining myself and others, and that an unexamined life is not worth living (Socrates in Plato's *Apology*).

In the quotation above, Socrates is trying to convey to the people of Athens that human wisdom does not really amount to very much and it is best not to make too much of it. From this it follows that humility (as used by Socrates) is the best attitude to take toward wisdom. The wise wo/man is the wo/man who knows that s/he does not know. Conversely, it might be argued that the wise wo/man also knows when s/he does know. Given this context of wisdom, one must keep examining and having a dialogue, both with oneself and others, in order to search for whatever wisdom is available. As such, the only way to maintain the search is to be open-minded, to be open to change, to be open to what others have to say. The two dicta are inter-related. If one is to continue the process of examination, then one must also be humble (in the Socratic sense). In other words, if you think that you know more than you do, then self-examination is not going to occur. Self-examination and reflection require a certain level of Socratic humility, that is, "knowing when one does not know".

Being the son of a midwife, Socrates spoke of having inherited from his mother the art of midwifery (*maieutics*), the art of helping men to give birth to what lives within them: wisdom, which must be loved and reared like a living being. Socrates did not provide truths or theories, but simply directed men to inquire, making them at first conscious of their ignorance *(elenchus)* and then eager to know and discover meanings for themselves – all through the artful use of dialogue. The main techniques of Socratic dialogue are:

- refutation of what one thought one knew (*elenchus*);
- making latent knowledge conscious, seen as a form of Socratic midwifery in giving birth to hidden knowledge (*maieutics*); and
- the distinction between three types of knowledge, comprising: scientific (*episteme*), professional (*techne*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

Socratic dialogue has the function of leading, through inquiry into various propositions and hypotheses (refutation of what one thought one knew), the uncovering of hidden knowledge, and the attainment of understanding and knowledge (scientific, professional and practical), to the pursuit of wisdom. A lively Socratic dialogue allows for active participation by all. In many dialogues one does not arrive at an explicit answer to an initial problem, rather, the participant must find it, aided by all the collected evidence and their own desire for truth and consensus with other participants. All the characters/participants in a dialogue, with their culture, their experiences and their thoughts, have importance; therefore in conducting a dialogue it is necessary to keep in mind who are the participants and to remain open to the experiences and meanings they contribute (Boele, 1997).

Contemporary applications of the Socratic dialogue
This form of collegial reasoning and decision making also draws on the ideas of German philosopher Leonard Nelson (1882-1927) and his pupil Gustav Heckmann

(1898-1996), and was further developed by: the "Philosophical-Political Academy" in Germany; the "Society for the furtherance of Critical Philosophy" in the UK; and by Jos Kessels and the "Dutch Association for Philosophical Practice" in Holland. In various manifestations the Socratic dialogue has been used as a powerful method for cultivating critical thinking in a group. And yet, it was not until 1982 when Gerd Achenbach founded the "German Society for Philosophical Practice and Counseling" that philosophical counseling spread over Europe. While the Socratic dialogue derives its name from Socrates, it is not an imitation of a Platonic dialogue nor should it simply be seen as a teaching strategy that uses questions and answers. Socratic dialogue uses the technical strategy of "regressive abstraction" (Van Hooft, 1999) and develops a syllogistic structure of thought as a method of rigorous inquiry into the ideas, concepts and values that we hold. It is a co-operative investigation into the assumptions that underlie our everyday actions and judgments, as well as the tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1974) and assumptions that we bring to bear in our decision making. To put it simply, Socratic dialogue is a collective attempt to find answers to fundamental questions. The question is the centre of the dialogue. Although these questions are general in nature, they are not discussed with reference to philosophical theory but, rather, the question is applied to a concrete experience of one or more of the participants that is then made accessible to all other participants. Systematic reflection upon this experience is accompanied by a search for shared judgments and reasons. The dialogue – as opposed to a standard discussion – aims at consensus, which is not an easy task to achieve. Effort, discipline and perseverance are required. Everyone's thoughts need to be clarified in such a manner that participants understand each other fully. The discourse moves slowly and systematically, so that all participants gain insight into the substance of the dialogue.

The procedure and structure of Socratic dialogue
As each Socratic dialogue is custom-shaped, it is only possible to say something in general about time and number of participants. A dialogue can last between 2 and 20 hours, with 5 to 20 participants (Van Hooft, 1999) and – despite starting with a generic question – it is a movement from the specific to the general. As opposed to a general statement or principle, the dialogue begins with a concrete example and moves to a general statement, which is constantly referred back to the example. This is called "regressive abstraction". The following example of using this Socratic technique in a focus group discussion on the question "What type of reward motivates you the most?" – conducted by the authors at a British university in the process of reshaping its marketing plan (July 2002) – illustrates this procedure. Its logical structure follows three steps:

(1) *Step one.* An example is offered as one in which the participants/employees are given a particular type of reward to enhance their motivation to do a task.

(2) *Step two.* Inquiry into the example reveals that the most motivated employees are the ones that receive a relevant reward from an authority they respect.

(3) *Step three.* The most motivating type of reward is relevant to employee needs and originates from an authority they can relate to.

Step three (the conclusion) is derived from the inquiry by a process of abstracting from the concreteness of the example so as to uncover assumptions about rewards. It is

called regressive because the group works back, as it were, from the concrete example to a general answer to their opening question. That this process has a valid logical structure can be seen when we notice that it takes the form of an inverted syllogism. If we rearrange the steps of the discussion, we find that the logical structure can be turned into a traditional syllogism as follows:

(1) *Major premise.* Motivating rewards are relevant and originate from a respected authority.

(2) *Minor premise.* The example is offered as one in which an employee is rewarded by a supervisor.

(3) *Conclusion.* In the example a respected supervisor appropriately rewarded an employee.

Within this reconstruction, we see that the general answer to the initial question operates as a hidden major premise, while the example is the minor premise. From this it follows that the example should contain relevant rewards from a respected authority. But in the Socratic dialogue, the order of discovery went in the opposite direction – the minor premise was offered as the example. This was then explored so that the conclusion of the syllogism – that the employee felt most motivated by a relevant reward from a respected authority – was discerned. Then, when everyone in the discussion felt that they could understand why this happened and how it illustrated which reward was the most motivating, they came to agree that the best reward is both relevant and originates from a respected authority. This is the general conclusion, which answers the question derived by regressive abstraction from consideration of the example. The process is logically valid because it accords with the structure of the syllogism, albeit in inverted form. However, it must not be thought that the conclusion is binding across all examples. Were the group to have chosen a different example, it might have concluded that the best reward consists in a certain form of praise originating from peers. In this sense, Socratic dialogue – in depending on the particularity of real life examples – generates a range of answers to general questions, which have a validity specific to those examples. Perhaps this reflects the fact that our most profound general concepts are far from unequivocal (Hadot, 2002).

If we look more closely at the structure of the Socratic dialogue, we will find that it is somewhat more complex than an inverted traditional syllogism. Bolten (2001) outlines the following rules in managing Socratic dialogue:

· a well formulated, general question, or a statement, is set by the facilitator (sometimes in consultation with participants) before the discourse commences;

· the first step is to collect concrete examples experienced by participants in which the given topic plays a key role;

· the group chooses one example, which will usually be the basis of the analysis and argumentation throughout the dialogue; and

· crucial statements made by participants are written down on a flip chart or board, so that all can have an overview and be clear about the sequence of the discourse.

It is permissible at any time within the dialogue for the facilitator or any participant to call a kind of "time out" in order to direct the attention of the group to any problems

that may have arisen. For example, it may be that a participant has lost track of the discussion, is unable to understand what others are saying, or feels excluded, one or more participants may have become upset with the way the dialogue has developed, the group may have lost its way and need to review the structure or content of the dialogue, or the group may want to discuss the strategies it is using to seek a consensus on the question. Whatever the reason, a discussion about the dialogue or a "meta-dialogue" can be called for at any time. If it is thought appropriate, someone from the group other than the facilitator may be asked to chair the meta-dialogue. The group should not return to the content dialogue until all the difficulties that led to the calling of a meta-dialogue have been resolved or until strategies for proceeding with the content dialogue have been formulated.

Socratic dialogue and the experience of change in higher education

In looking at change in higher education our study set out to examine the experiences of people employed at a Business School in two universities based in the UK. Over a period of six months, we set out to collect qualitative data on staff's assumptions and feelings about change. After a brief overview of our research design, primary data are presented to illustrate the use of Socratic dialogue for making sense of complex change processes.

Research design and methodology

An action research design was adopted involving focus groups based on the Socratic technique, in-depth interviews and observational methods. Observational material were recorded meticulously throughout the study, providing a wealth of data on informal meetings and discussions about change, were used to cross-validate findings from the focus groups and interviews. The study sought to investigate whether change and commitment are effectively sustained within an organisation when there is a shared insight into critical agendas spearheaded by those people in the organisation who will be directly involved in them. A number of research questions were formulated that served as the basis on which focus groups and interview questions were structured. Open questions that encouraged respondents to reflect on their experiences of change and that served to engage groups in dialogue were used and issues that emerged in these interview conversations were also reflected upon through further probing by the interviewer. Although interviews were free-ranging, the focus was on experiences of change and when appropriate, the interviewer did seek to clarify unanticipated responses. A comprehensive observation diary was kept, which was used to cross-validate much of the primary data collected during the focus groups and the semi-structured interview programme. The analysis of data resembled one of the alternatives proposed by Yin (1994), where information of the individual embedded cases – two in this study – is scattered in different parts of the collective report, according to a structure based on the issues under investigation. All discussions and interviews were transcribed and a series of themes and sub-themes were developed and written up as annotated "summaries".

Socratic dialogue and changing organizations: business schools in transition

The most obvious outcome from participating in a Socratic dialogue is deeper insight into the topic that is discussed. By drawing upon the experiences and insights of the

group, an understanding can be achieved which is deeper and more authentically one's own than is usually gained from more theoretical approaches. Apart from the pleasure of conceptual understanding for its own sake, such insight can also be of importance in reflecting upon one's own life and values (Boer, 1983). Moreover, the value of Socratic dialogue arises as much from process as from outcome. In other words, the painstaking process of inquiry – which it engenders – develops skills in intellectual discussion and broadens experience of human and organizational life. The Socratic dialogue is particularly suited to organizations and companies that are in a process of change, in which basic norms, values and goals need to be challenged and explicitly communicated if the organization is keen to promote alignment across all levels. An employee in the same department eloquently stressed this necessity:

> Not interested, yes. What I find myself saying quite often now is: this is my opinion because my conscience makes me say this, so I'll say it, but you're the boss. There's definitely no debate, no interaction. We (junior employees) don't see the point. Totally disinterested (Supervisor's interview, July 2002).

In a dialogue, you gain a shared insight into the subject and the opinions of other participants. This warrants the method particularly useful for securing carefully thought through opinions of all members, for use, for example, as the basis for strategic decision making preceding change implementation. Impaired communication channels and dissemination of information systems within the department were found to be major disablers of initiating and sustaining transition within the department. Top-down, management driven communication policies did not allow for a wider platform of communication to be established or for the employees to air their opinions more widely. The failure of conventional consultation methods to invoke bottom-up participation in decision making is demonstrated in the words of this employee from another university department:

> It's always the same three people that make decisions, without asking others, in five seconds. There are no questions, no reflection. And whenever people are assigned to rectify a problem, you can guarantee it's going to come up again. Attendants are faced with mismanagement and bad decisions. When I think of the amount of energy and resources wasted on decision making and making rules, not for management and teachers, but only for junior staff, it really frustrates me (Assistant Director's interview – formerly member of teaching staff, August 2002).

Furthermore, opaque human resource procedures in communicating the need for constructive feedback and assessment of employee roles and responsibilities led to an increase in job dissatisfaction, employee disengagement and stress:

> I have zero stress when it comes to the actual tasks of a supervisor's work in the University, but I get stressful with tasks the other staff do and how to interact with them. When you ask someone a question, it's only to establish the blame of another person. E-mail communication has replaced face-to-face interaction and reflection because people are cautious and evasive (Supervisor's Interview, July 2002).

Job segregation practices, lack of trust, development of closed circles of "confidants" and irrelevant reward systems have led to a perpetuation of feelings of resignation, "distancing" and a reduced awareness of job responsibilities:

Personally, I'm completely demotivated. To create fairness and encourage motivation, you need the basics of honesty and respect from your boss. Any praise would be good for me, but only if I felt that honesty and respect from my boss was genuine. If I respected the manager's opinion and agreed with him on principle, I wouldn't need any extra motivation to work better (Supervisor's Interview, July 2002).

The disparity between the Director's and his staff perceptions of their attitudes and ideas about their roles in the department demonstrates the existence of a sense-making gap in the department. Even allowing for the higher commitment levels experienced by the management staff, the Director is portrayed as "walking a loner's path" pursuing his own agenda and vision and failing to connect his staff to the purpose of the change initiative:

We feel that the decision-making process is going on without us and that we get left out...I think we feel that...and that we don't actively participate...It's an irony because in actual fact we are in total control of the learning process from the module description to the learning guide to the learning materials and the marking and the assessment...And the whole progress...that whole process is run by the module leader, the teacher and...nobody else can have a say...We have mechanisms where subject areas are supposed to be talking about this together, so you are not on your own and you talk about these things and there is peer review of what you are doing...and a lot of these mechanisms...I don't know...they don't seem to work effectively here...What we need more of is to stop paying lip service to these mechanisms and engage ourselves in realistically reflecting on them (Teaching Assistant's Interview, July 2002).

The evidence – even the data from the Socratic sessions with respondents explicitly stating that simply being asked for their opinions boosted their sense of self-importance – suggests that employees in the department are frustrated by the way change is being managed:

I did get the impression (from Socratic dialogue sessions) that there's a general disappointment. Respect is a heavy word, but I think that's what's missing. Maybe a kind of personal interest in everybody, a feeling of belonging to a team, in being interested in somebody's work, owning your work, honesty and integrity. There are many ways to do work, but at the end of the day it's honesty and integrity that count (Supervisor's Interview, July 2002).

The movement away from a collegial decision making institution to a more authoritarian imposed governance structure is highlighted in a lot of the interview data. As the following two quotations spotlight:

I can recognise that there were many kinds of intrinsic assumptions in the collegiate way of doing things. The decision making may be poor and slow, but at least you are part of it ... there is a generally collaborative approach to doing things through reflection and that's exactly what we need to come back to. Whereas decision making now may be sharper, but not necessarily any better ... we need to make time for getting together to brainstorm on new ideas and projects (Teaching Assistant's Interview, July 2002).

The core dysfunction in the current emerging culture is one of disengagement and almost the kind of converse of the collegiate ethos ... To give an example of that, we had a meeting on the departmental restructuring and it's 50 people or so in the school and only about 11 people turned up, everyone was invited ... the whole school ... But they knew they wouldn't be included in the actual decision making ... and I think this is a reflection of this

disengagement process which is now at the heart of the culture (Supervisor's Interview, July 2002).

The above quotations and the overall data collected in this project – indicating a rather dysfunctional view of change in which the employees become disengaged from the decision makers – makes a strong case for greater dialogue and reflection to re-engage staff in the management and governance of their work. These feelings of separation, sense of foreboding and impotency to engage and be part of the change process influence the way people think and respond to change. Until some serious attention is paid to the concerns, interpretation and sense-making of those experiencing change, and the ways in which these shared experiences further enable and inhibit perceptions and behaviours that affect the outcomes of change, then change is unlikely to "succeed".

We argue that greater cooperation and involvement can be achieved through the use of Socratic dialogue. This is particularly important in the meta-dialogue, which gives the opportunity to discuss problems one participant may have with another. Although participants often have to relearn skills, such as: attentive listening, clarity of expression, and critical reflection – skills rarely used given the daily pressures of "getting-things-done" – these are essential to opening up a dialogue of critical reflection. The paradox that the more time spent on easy recipe solutions is costing organizations large sums of money through failed change initiatives, should not be under-emphasised. By adopting Socratic methods, participants learn how to hold meetings differently and to engage in dialogue and reflection in striving for agreed solutions to complex problems. We contend that far more reflective approaches are required in the management of change if lasting and committed change is to be achieved.

Socratic change: a reflective approach

In forwarding the value of Socratic dialogue to managing change processes, we characterize the process as a series of loops that facilitates critical reflection and debate in engaging employees with change and securing greater ownership of these complex processes. The framework we propose is presented in Figure 1. The central image draws on Plato's idea of the Classical Greek Polis, which here symbolizes the changing organisation, subject to the centrifugal forces of personal ambition and drive in the context of organisational political awareness and leadership by reflection (microcosm). The dynamic loops suggest the iterative motion of the process as the organisation strives to address the perpetual transition cycles that the development of technology and business market activities generate (cosmos). It comprises the following loops:

(1) Communicate the vision in a relevant way – to overture the sense of urgency and need for change across the organization.

(2) Engage the people to create a "marketplace" (agora) of reflection – to develop a critical mass of support and commitment for clarifying the change vision.

(3) Cultivate a culture of trust within the "marketplace" – to create a non-threatening climate in which dialogue can freely occur.

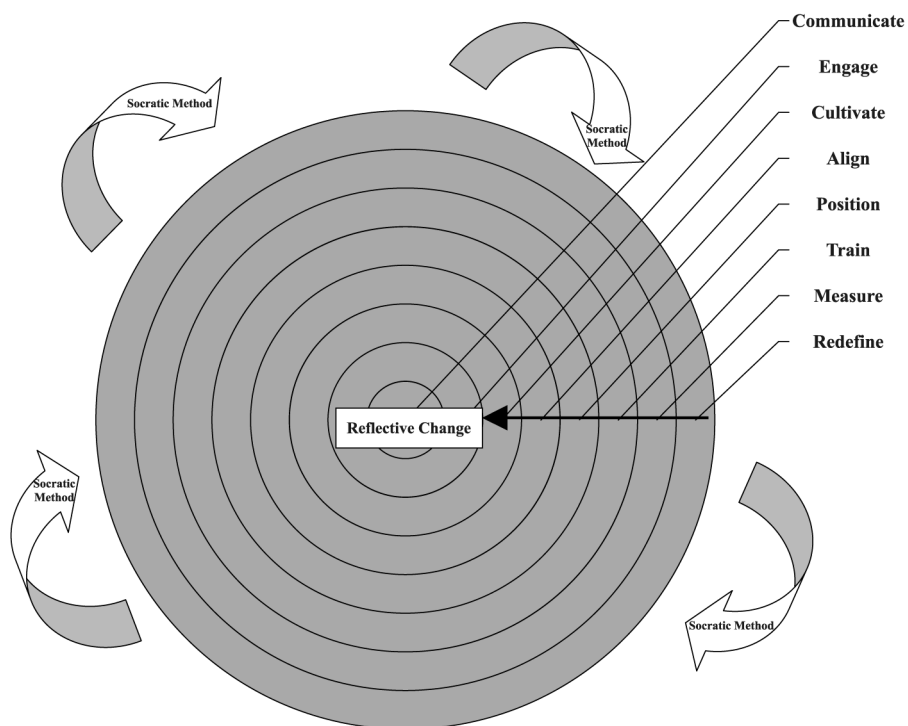(4) Create an alignment of unconventional vision – to foster lateral thinking and new collaborations.

Communicate
Engage
Cultivate
Align
Position
Train
Measure
Redefine

Socratic Method

Reflective Change

Figure 1.
Reflective change

(5) Position alignment to gain credibility and subvert *status quo* by meeting formal and informal standards – to empower employees to enforce the vision and remove barriers to action.

(6) Train and develop the "marketplace" – to achieve active workmanship and credibility of change.

(7) Measure success by the consequences of change and reward realistically – to disseminate outcomes, reward employees during the process of change and keep the momentum going.

(8) Redefine objectives and processes – to consolidate gains, learn from losses, reflect on good practices, embed new behaviours and consider further refinements and changes.

This framework of reflective change provides a useful tool for the practice of change management. It promotes an approach of changing with people rather than imposing directive change and in this regard, follows some of the founding ideas on participation forwarded by Lewin (1947, 1951). From a Lewinian perspective, the focus of participative change is to provide data that can be used to unfreeze a system through reducing restraining forces rather than pushing the system to change (Gray and Starke, 1988, pp. 596-629; Weisbord, 1988, p. 94). Action research is seen to be central to this, as it enables the full participation of employees in assessing the current situation

and reflecting on the need for change, as well as enabling people to consider different options in planning for change. For Lewin, change needs to be an all-inclusive collaborative process and it needs to take place at the group level in order to be effective (Burke, 2006, p. 27). In his work on group dynamics, he recognized the importance of the group in shaping individual behaviour (Schein, 1988) and as such, emphasized the importance of interaction, group norms and processes of socialization both in shifting behaviour, for example, in creating disequilibrium and a felt need for change; and in establishing new patterns of behaviour, that is, in preventing the tendency for individuals to revert to old ways of working following change (Burnes, 2004). In models that have developed from Lewin's early work (see for example, French *et al.*, 2000) considerable attention is given to the practical problem of overcoming resistance and empowering people to manage change (see, Lyle and Sawacki, 2000). We contend that Socratic dialogue provides a useful compliment to these methods in promoting employee engagement and understanding through critical reflection. Six practical lessons that arise from our analysis are as follows:

(1) Critical reflection through the use of Socratic dialogue is a vehicle for broadening employee understanding of the need for change and can be used to highlight alternative routes to the achievement of change objectives.

(2) Each change situation is characterized by a unique set of circumstances that cannot be predetermined but requires contextual analysis and understanding.

(3) Change is a complex dynamic process and not a single event; consequently, snap shot solutions are not practicable, rather a continual dialogue on options for change need to be sustained.

(4) Communication in the form of Socratic dialogue can be used to promote employee ownership and commitment to change initiatives.

(5) There are no universal rules on the successful management of change only rules of thumb that need local modification and adaptation.

(6) Decisions based solely on the perspective of those who hold power and authority are unlikely to be well received, may cause conflict and resistance, and offer limited strategies for getting from a to b.

These are six practical lessons that emerge from our analysis and use of Socratic dialogue in the management of organizational change. Not unlike Lewin (1947), we contend that better decisions can be made through listening to the thoughts and ideas of those on the receiving end of change. However for us, this communication should be in the form of a Socratic dialogue that opens minds to the views of others and enables participants to consider interpretations that at the outset, may conflict with their own long held assumptions. Critical reflection also serves to heighten our understanding of complex change processes and promotes reconsideration of our own position and beliefs about change. Thus, our framework presupposes the utilisation of the Socratic method – with its emphasis on continual dialogue and reflection – feeding back to people in organisations and getting them to engage in change processes through making sense of their own experiences and contributing to a broader dialogue on change. This is captured through our notion of dynamic and iterative loops of change (see Figure 1), that we argue affords the possibility of nurturing reflective organisational culture that is conducive to securing sustainable change that engages employees. Although we recognize that

further research needs to be conducted on the use of this method as an aid to management decision making, our work hopefully provides some useful insights on the potential for Socratic dialogue to aid participative change.

Conclusion

Caught between the demands of industrial efficiency and the ethical issues of managing people at work, business managers are increasingly searching for ways to succeed in business (as well as in their own careers) and for moral guidance in a world of shifting values. Consultation with stakeholders is not a new concept to most organizations. Marketing departments develop focus groups with customers; personnel departments carry out surveys with staff; purchasing departments take part in consultation with contractors or suppliers. These approaches are important and familiar elements of working with stakeholders, but it seems that they are not enough on their own. Conventional "consulting" approaches to exploring stakeholders' perspectives repeatedly fail to uncover, predict, or effectively respond to the deeper social and ethical concerns. The language and intention of dialogue is very different from that of consultation. Where consultation is often a passive one-way mode of communication, dialogue is an active, multi-way process. The intention is to bring the values of all parties to the table, raising issues that are important to all and over time, develop a higher level of understanding between participants. Whilst the information raised during the dialogue is of great importance, the development of trust and shared understanding over time is one of the key outcomes of a dialogical process. The main questions underlying this dialogue are: firstly, what values do an organization's stakeholders want to see embodied in the organization (state), and how should these values be translated into practice? And secondly, what employee activities and behaviour (microcosm) should be promoted so that an organization's practice is in reasonable harmony with stakeholder (cosmos) values? In today's complex, global, and rapidly changing environment, it is no longer sufficient to have good thinkers at the top. The role of leadership has changed from that of the person with the right answers to that of the people with the right questions. Managers need to not only develop their own critical thinking abilities, but also those of employees. Questioning, as opposed to simply answering, allows employees to come up with their own answers instead of being provided with ready-made solutions. The industry leaders of the future will be those who have developed critical thinkers at all levels of their organization.

Imagine that Socrates, the founding father of Western philosophy, lived in our age. What would he do? Would he, as in the past, be found in the marketplace every day, conducting conversations about illusion and reality, about what has value and what does not, about quality and expertise, about competitive advantage and how to manage change? Would he even challenge passers by to reveal their ideas about such things and render an account of their activities, regardless of whether they were schoolchildren, students, administrators, managers, politicians or professors? The authors believe that he would do precisely that, just as he did 2,400 years ago. Except that the marketplace is no longer a square in the middle of Athenae City, as it was in his time. In those days, the "agora" (marketplace) was not only the physical, but also the cultural, political and economic centre of the city. It was where Athenian democracy was born, where meetings were held and policy formulated, where magistrates addressed the citizens, where speeches were made, debates took place and

festivals were celebrated. And because so many people assembled there, it was also the place where the merchants, bankers and traders could be found running their businesses. It was the place to enter into dialogue with people. Nowadays, meetings are held in quite different places: in company boardrooms, government buildings, conference rooms in educational institutions. With modern communication and transport, we no longer have to be physically present in a city centre square. The "marketplace" is wherever people need to meet for discussions, negotiations or an exchange of views, whether connected to change initiatives or not. In our age, these are the places that Socrates would seek out.

Although location and time differs, the people who make up the marketplace remain the same, they are the: policy-makers, entrepreneurs, advisors, managers, scholars, private citizens and all others actively involved in social life. The topics of conversation with Socrates would also be the same. Discussion would still centre on what is illusion and what is reality, what is value-adding and what is not, who has the authority to decide on an issue, what training is appropriate, what enables or disables change resistance; in brief, what is good in life and what is the good life. And likewise his aim would be unchanged too: he would try to uncover the substance of matters through a joint weighing up of arguments, that is, through dialogue. "Socrates wrote no books, published no articles and gave no lectures. Invaluable though their contribution may be, they can provide only second-hand knowledge, book learning and knowledge of words" (Kessels, 2001, p. 50). To gain real insight, it is necessary to investigate a question for oneself, to reflect for oneself. And the most democratic and natural way of exercising our powers of thought, judgment and turn information into knowledge – and eventually develop the capacity of organisations to learn and change – is through dialogue. In a dialogue you learn and practice at the same time.

In a professional or corporate context, the Socratic dialogue is not only of value to individuals – in encouraging reflection on professional experience and goals and the consolidation of commitment – but it can also prove beneficial to both public and private sector organizations facilitating a finer definition of institutional mission and the enhancement of professional collegiality. Nonetheless, it is a time-consuming technique that presupposes an open and receptive organizational culture, which is keen to reap the benefits and anticipate the lurking dangers of the technique, such as "knife thrust" comments on the character rather than the content, power imbalance and negative connotations associated with it, as well as instances of patronisation and knowledge monopoly. It has frequently been criticised as being merely an illusory exercise where participants acquiesce to notions of truth because of power differentials (Etzioni, 1975; Vlastos, 1994; Rud, 1997). While acknowledging these limitations, the authors argue that power relations play a role in all communicative contexts and these adverse effects of power are likely to be greatly reduced in Socratic discourse as the focus is shifted from people to propositions. Indeed, the exploration of ethical dilemmas concerning power and authority in professional contexts is another area in which Socratic dialogue can be effective (Apel, 1976). Furthermore, if practiced consistently by organizational members, the Socratic techniques can lead to a more concrete understanding of the complexities of changing organizations. It is a collective process of change through critical questioning and as such, it lends itself to further exploration on the part of both change managers and qualitative researchers for its uses as a diagnostic and research instrument.

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