Socratic Method

Socrates, a teacher in ancient Athens, rarely gave his students the answers. Instead, he asked them questions until they found the answers themselves. This is the Socratic Method: guiding people to clear thinking with good questions, step by step. The educator Richard Paul later grouped Socratic questions into six types. Managers, coaches and team leaders use them to help people think for themselves and solve problems together.

1. Clarify the Thinking

The first type of question helps us understand what the other person really means. Instead of arguing, we invite them to explain. What exactly is meant by that? Is there an example? These questions show respect, and they often reveal the real idea behind the words.

Example: A friend says that the new phone is bad. Instead of arguing, we ask a clarifying question: what exactly is meant by bad? The answer shows that only the battery is the problem.

At work: Sara, a team leader, hears an employee say that the new project will fail. She does not argue; she asks a clarifying question: what exactly is meant by fail? He explains that he is worried about one thing: the deadline.

2. Challenge Assumptions

The second type looks at the beliefs hidden under an opinion. Many conclusions rest on ideas that nobody has checked. What are we taking for granted here? Is this always true? Once an assumption is named, people can test it calmly.

Example: We may think that a quiet guest at dinner is unhappy. Here we challenge our own assumption: is silence always a sign of unhappiness? In fact, the guest may simply be tired.

At work: The employee assumes that the deadline cannot move. Sara challenges this assumption: is the date really fixed, and has anyone asked the client? Nobody has, so the date may still be open to discussion.

3. Ask for Evidence

The third type checks the facts. Strong feelings are not always strong evidence. How do we know this? What facts support it? Evidence questions turn opinions into information that we can act on.

Example: Someone says that it always rains on holidays. Here an evidence question helps: how do we know this? A look at the calendar shows that it rained only once.

At work: The employee says that the client never answers emails. Sara asks for evidence: how many emails went unanswered? The answer is two, in one busy week.

4. Explore Other Viewpoints

The fourth type opens the discussion to other angles. Every problem looks different from where we stand. How would the client see this? What would someone who disagrees say? Looking through other eyes often reveals options that we had missed.

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Example: A parent sees a messy room, while the child sees a creative space. The parent tries another viewpoint: how does my child see this room? Talking about both views leads to a fair rule.

At work: Sara invites another viewpoint: how would the finance team see this project? The employee realises that they see it as a chance to save money.

5. Look at Consequences

The fifth type looks ahead. Every idea and every decision has effects. If this is true, what follows? What would happen if we did nothing? These questions help people weigh risks and results before they act.

Example: Before buying an expensive car, a family looks at the consequences: what will the monthly costs mean for our budget? The answer leads them to a cheaper car.

At work: Sara asks about the consequences: what would happen if the team stopped the project today? The employee sees that the client would be lost, and he starts looking for solutions.

6. Question the Question

The sixth type steps back and looks at the question itself. Sometimes we are simply asking the wrong question. Why does this question matter? Is there a better question to ask? This type can change the whole direction of a conversation.

Example: Instead of asking which gym is the best, a person questions the question: what kind of exercise would I really enjoy? The new question leads to a better choice.

At work: Sara questions the question itself: instead of asking whether the project will fail, she asks what the team needs so that it succeeds. Together they agree on the first three steps.

Conclusion

In summary, the Socratic Method uses six types of questions: clarify the thinking, challenge assumptions, ask for evidence, explore other viewpoints, look at consequences, and question the question. The aim is not to win an argument or to trap anyone, but to think better together. These questions work best with curiosity, patience and a calm tone. Good questions open minds better than quick answers.

Sources

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