

## Socrates Joins the Board

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Nothing is too exotic when it comes to equipping our modern managers for their solemn task. They go rock-climbing, white water rafting and fire-walking. They have played Lego, studied medieval painting and been closeted on retreat in Benedictine monasteries. Their prescribed bedtime reading includes Jacques Derrida, Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Sun Tzu's *Art of War*.

What is going on? Cynics will say company managers are just deeply insecure and are being exploited by clever entrepreneurs. Caught between the demands of industrial efficiency and human decency, they are searching at the same time for sure-fire success and for moral guidance in a world of shifting values. Or, the explanation could be simpler. It is implied in the fact that these mostly youthful pursuits are being discovered and deployed long after school or university.

Among the latest training recipes is a book called *Socratic Dialogue in the Marketplace* by Jos Kessels of Amsterdam. Kessels describes himself as a dialogue consultant and his book (sorry, in Dutch only) is, as its title suggests, about rigorous thinking. More precisely, it is Kessels's attempt to apply the ancient and forgotten art of dialectic to business problems.

One of his consultants brought the Socratic method to bear on budget priorities in the Netherlands sewage system. ("More reflection, less money down the drain!"). Kessels has "dialogued" with bankers, tax inspectors, retailers, healthworkers and the police. Last weekend he brought his message to a seminar in Surrey.

Professional philosophers are taking their skills to market, perhaps for the first time since the Sophists of ancient Greece charged fees for political spindoctoring and personal consultancy.

Already they have frightened the psychotherapy industry by offering their services at reduced rates (about \$100 an hour in New York) as "facilitators" to help people think their problems through.

"We look at the person's conceptual history, not their emotional history," explained Karin Murriss, another Dutch philosopher, who chairs the *Society of Consultant Philosophers* in Newport, Pembrokeshire. "Often, people's thinking just gets stuck".

At first sight, Socrates looks absolutely the wrong model for managers seeking the grail of truth. His method of "negative dialectic" (as portrayed by Plato, anyway) consisted of inviting people to give their definition of some concept, then demolishing it, often by ridicule and quibble. Rarely did he offer an alternative himself. By encouraging a disrespectful nihilism in the young blades of Athens, he undermined Athenian democracy, wrote the celebrated American journalist Izzy Stone in his *The Trial of Socrates*. He was so irritating, according to St Augustine, that he contributed to his own trial and death by hemlock.

Actually, the new Socratics play down Socrates' behaviour. He is the brand name. What they use instead is a system derived from Platonic dialogue at the turn of the century by a German neo-Kantian called Leonard Nelson.

The first step is for the board or committee to agree a formulation of the question it wants to discuss. This can take time, since any version of a question is likely to contain within it the - usually unrecognised - prejudice of its formulator. (Which is why politicians are so shy of the single question referendum.)

Next, the meeting tries to select a real-life example of the question. Finally, it goes back to the abstract, to tease out—if it can—the general principle enshrined in the example. What is our company's social responsibility? What rights do we give employees? What are our business ethics?

The point, say the Socratics, is for the managers to learn what they really believe, not by shouting or pulling rank, but by slowly and rigorously arguing the thing through. Only thus can they reach a durable agreement.

It is, in other words, supervised brainstorming. To make the business of thinking more enjoyable, philosophical consultants will organise a diner pensant. "Experience shows that that conversation develops best during a shared meal, as this allows for the ideal combination of ease and concentration," says the Kessels brochure. The doctor suggests a maximum of six around the table in a private dining room, starting at 6pm and ending at 10.

If the new Socratics are right in saying the art of dialectic appears nowhere in the management literature, the question remains: why should grown-ups heading big businesses, budgets or labour forces need philosophers to tell them how to think?

The first part of the answer would seem to follow the standard justification for employing any sort of management consultancy: it is easier for the outsider to see what needs doing than it is for the insider.

But the second part is less flattering. It is that logical thinking is just too difficult—for managers as for anybody else. Even if they can do it for themselves, they cannot always stimulate it in others. So, when outdoor games are thought to be good for teamspirit, indoor games like Socratic dialogue surely cannot be bad.

The eminent Harvard classicist, Bernard Knox, in his book, *The Oldest Dead White European Males*, argued that an education in the humanities as devised by the Ancient Greeks—the Sophists, in fact—is indispensable for making decisions in the modern world.

Is it this which managers lack today? If so, it is time to scrap all those vocational courses at school and university, time to wind up those MBA programmes. Let them read Rhetoric.

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