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The Acropolis of Change:
The Socratically Reflective Employee?

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Abstract

This article analyses the use of the Socratic dialogue for making sense of complex change processes and for securing greater employee involvement in decision-making that affects their work. Empirical evidence from two qualitative case accounts – collected from two higher education institutions in the UK whilst in the process of restructuring their operations - is used to corroborate the authors' view that managing change often demonstrates just how little one does know and highlights the necessity for constant examination and dialogue, especially if our intention is to secure overall employee commitment to change. The paper concludes by calling for further empirical research into the application of the Socratic dialogue as a practical tool to facilitate 'participative' change in organisations and as a qualitative research instrument in probing interviews to investigate the inner processes of changing organisations.

Keywords: Socratic dialogue, organisational change, reflective practice, participative change, employee commitment

Scope of the Study

For over 2000 years the ideal expressed in the Hippocratic Oath in Ancient Greece has encouraged doctors never knowingly to do harm: *primum non nocere.* Just 30 years ago the management writer Drucker (1974) argued that it should be used to guide management decision-making in establishing the boundaries of an ethics of responsibility. In this article, the authors would like to propose the redeployment of another ancient Greek technique, namely the Socratic dialogue, as a tool for making sense of complex change processes and in particular, for evaluating the appropriateness of change strategies that seek to secure employee commitment. The main techniques of Socratic dialogue are are: 1) *elenchus* (the refutation of what one thought one knew); 2) *maieutics* (Socratic midwifery making latent knowledge conscious); and 3) the distinction between three types of knowledge: *episteme* (scientific), *techne* (professional) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). As Kotter (1996) and others have indicated (for example, Beer and Nohria, 2000) the majority of major change initiatives fail to meet their stated objectives and the consequences of change for lowering employee morale and commitment can create environments of distrust and cynicism towards further change initiatives (Dawson, 2003). We intend to demonstrate how the Socratic dialogue if practiced consistently by organizational members, can lead to a more concrete understanding of the complexities of changing policies and procedures involving human interaction and the establishment of a set of moral norms and rules. This process can be used to engage employees and heighten the sense of ownership and hence, commitment to change.

Although attention to dialogue is on the increase, so is skepticism about its usefulness. This article develops an example of current efforts to justify and promote public (Socratic) dialogue in an organization as an essential feature of decision-making processes during times of change. The changing organization – and in the context of today all organizations are regarded by the authors as fitting this description - will be the canvas against which the Socratic brush of dialogue and reflection is considered. In drawing on the higher education case studies, the authors use sample quotations from two UK universities, which were undergoing a process of restructuring. The data are used to illustrate the value of using the Socratic technique to provide insights into the complex processes of change. Recent

claims about why dialogue is needed and what it can accomplish, the authors argue, are best understood in the context of an evolutionary process that originates in the Classical Greek *polis* (encircled by Acropolis). It signifies the establishment, structure of the State, or better of the *Polis*, which was the form of public organization of classical Greece; its principle merit, and at the same time the character that most distinguished Greek social life from that of modernity, is the fact that it maintained, for its size, a distinct character to the measure of individuals in society. Not by accident was the dialogue born around the problem of justice and 'knowing thyself' 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. Plato affirms this essentially Greek principle, according to which 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). The microcosm – in the eyes of the authors – is embodied in the organization 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 microcosm (employees) and cosmos (external business environment). The authors in the last section of this paper will attempt an imaginative depiction of this relationship through employing the techniques of Socratic dialogue.

Dialogue: Fugitive Notion or Contemporary Tool?

The Classical Greek idea that dialogue - public talk about common concerns - can be personally transformative as well as socially integrative seems to reappear at certain historical moments, when the prevailing consensus on social, organizational norms or cultural identity is disrupted by conflict and change (Linder, 2001). The peacemakers, then, reassemble the basic arguments favoring dialogue, redefine them in contemporary terms, and press them forward as alternatives to existing strategic modes of organizational coordination (see for example, Morgan, 1986; Franklin, 1988). And yet, like radical democracy, dialogue has been largely a fugitive notion, marked by a pervasive sense of skepticism surrounding its prospects and performance. To contemporary observers, the Classical Greek models of dialogue appear anachronistic, at best. The pressures on modern organizations for growth and profitability, the complexity of managing competitive inequalities, cultural diversity and change in the workplace, all seem to militate against any effort to talk things over rather than fight them out, figuratively or otherwise. Still, there are growing attempts to incorporate public participation from the bottom layers of an organization as dialogue in regulatory and decision-making processes (see for example, Pollalis, 1996; Senge, 1999; Hamel, 2001; Kanter et al. 1992; Dawson, 2003; Skordoulis, 2004), while grass-roots movements have emerged to restore public conversation – deriving from the ancient Greek philosophical thinking - to the management arena and its inherent politics (see for example, Dunn, 1979; MacIntyre, 1984; Nagel, 1991; Taylor, 1992; O'Hear 1998). What is more, there is a renaissance in democratic theory that features dialogue – and its offspring communication - as a central element in management practice, inspired partly by theoretical advances in the study of discourse and partly by a renewed appreciation of the merits of active citizenship (see for example, Kessels, 2001; Bolten, 2001; Laurie, 2001).

The year 2001 was internationally proclaimed as Socrates year – reminiscent of the fact that the new millenium start coincided with the 2,400-year anniversary since Socrates' death in 399 BC (Nehamas, 2001). This context has rekindled interest and

critical reflection of the questions of whether the 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 result of a process ideally permeating all organization layers, whereby passive or seemingly 'connoisseur' organizational members are transformed into actively involved and self-conscious (in its philosophical sense) decision-makers.   These people then – junior employees, managers, leaders, facilitators or heroes/heroines – will be the driving force behind decisions that shape outcomes towards a more socially responsible and creative organization that deliver products or services that employees identify with.   As Andriopoulos (2000: 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 the Socratic dialogue.

From two distinct origins each associated with the prolific fields of philosophy and management, a western conception of dialogue, as public conversation directed either toward will formation or inquiry within an ethical context, emerges. To dispel the impression that dialogue is a late-modern invention, we will carefully consider the legacy offered by the classical models of dialogue accorded to Socrates and recorded by his student Plato and the Athenian democrats. What happens centuries later, however, is that Enlightenment rationality erodes the status of dialogue on all fronts (Linder, 2001). The decline of dialogical practice follows the tarnishing of the ideas behind it and is further hastened by the pressures of modernity. 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. Opposition to dialogue in the management practice feeds on this skepticism typically invokes calculative rather than dialogical forms of rationality, counsels restraint and ultimately anticipates failure. Since the arguments of contemporary proponents are framed, in part, as a response to the modern skeptic, our understanding of them will depend on a careful assessment of modernity's inhibitory effects, as well as of the claims of dialogue's opponents. The authors argue that the principal models of dialogue informing its recent popularity owe much to their Classical predecessors; so much so, that current models can best be understood as reflecting a Neo-Classical revival of the Socratic method. However, this debate is beyond the scope of this article, which is to transcend the aforementioned skepticism and focus instead on the practical benefits that the use of dialogue can bring to enhancing employees' self-knowledge and self-examination as organizational members and, therefore, improve intra-organization interaction, communication channels and creativity.

A Summary Explanation of the Socratic Dicta

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 ones 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)*

Just what do the two Socratic principles of humility and self-examination come to? In the two quotations above, Socrates is trying to convey to the people of Athens that human wisdom does not really amount to very much, and thus, it is best not to make too much of it. From this it follows that humility, in the Socratic sense, 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 *maieutics* (midwifery), 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 give truth, nor theories, but simply directed men to inquire, making them at first conscious of their ignorance *(elenchus)* and then eager to know and discover truth for themselves– all through the artful use of dialogue. A simplified version of the *elenchus* procedure is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Socratic Elenchus: A Simplified Version.

- Stage 1: Pursuit of a complex question

- Stage 2: Conventional answer

- Stage 3: Counterexamples

This instrument in the hands of Socrates - who as the inventor was an expert user - assumes a depth and a meaningfulness that is difficult to summarize in a few lines. The dialogue answers in fact to many needs. Dialectics has the function of leading, through the inquiry into various propositions and hypotheses (refutation of what one thought one knew), to the attainment of understanding and knowledge [*episteme* (scientific); *techne* (professional); *phronesis* (practical wisdom)]; the pursuit of wisdom. Through the dialogue, therefore, the participant is often led to draw out consequences, and often anticipates the solution to the problem; in a much different

way from a consultation, conversation or discussion. A lively Socratic dialogue allows for active, bottom-up participation as well as regressing to the stages that led to various conclusions. In many dialogues one does not arrive at an explicit answer to the initial problem: the participant must find it, aided by all the collected evidence and their own desire for truth and consensus with other participants. What is more, in the living Socratic maieutics, there is no conversant alone to espouse his theories, all the characters/participants in a dialogue, with their culture, their experiences and their thought, have importance; therefore in conducting a dialogue, it will be necessary also to keep in mind who are the participants: the wise wo/man is not at all solely who knows, but who can speak in a diverse manner to diverse souls, adapting the language to whoever is facing them (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 the European continent. Especially deep roots were established in the Netherlands where Nelson's (1940) model of the Socratic dialogue to the expectations and demands of the modern world were developed and adapted. While the Socratic dialogue derives its name from Socrates, it is not an imitation of a Platonic dialogue not 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, 1958/1974) and assumptions that we bring to bear in our decision-making. A Socratic dialogue is a collective attempt to find the answer to a fundamental question (see Table 1 previously). 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 a simple or 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. Participants can also engage in meta-dialogue, which is about the process and strategies of the dialogue. An overview of the fundamental forms, principles of conduct and virtues characterising a dialogue, as well as its basic distinctive elements from a conventional discussion are then presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2 The Neo-Socratic Dialogue In A Nutshell (Adapted From Bolten, 2001).

Forms of Socratic Dialogue	Partners in Socratic Dialogue	Conventional Discussants
Content: Question & Example Inquiry **Meta:** How we are investigating (behavioral areas to work out) **Strategic:** Group decides where to go (different possibilities are offered) **Socratic Virtues** • Active listening • Patience • Perseverance • Trusting one's doubts • Talking frankly • Postponing one's judgement • Willingness to revise one's opinion • Validating authenticity • Corresponding with one's deep self • Improving communication & team building	• **Strive for consensus** • Investigate a matter • Give each other room to speak • Pose questions in order to understand each other • Reflect back on each other's words • Say only what they really mean • Strive for mutual understanding • Have a common understanding of the matter • Make their viewpoint as clear as possible to the other • Are willing to give arguments that support their viewpoints. • Investigate differences of opinion • Think for themselves with no reference to authority	• **Strive for approval of their own viewpoint** • Seek to convince each other that they are right • Demand speaking time • Look upon each other's speaking time as lost time • Undermine each other's standpoints • Attack each other's arguments • Try to make each other's viewpoints seem unintelligible

Willingness + Respect = Critical Attitude

Procedure of Socratic Dialogue. In professional contexts, a group may have a preliminary meeting with a facilitator in order to define a topic most relevant to its own concerns. 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 the procedure. Its logical structure follows the following three steps:

- *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.
- *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.
- *Step three* - The most motivating type of reward is relevant to the 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 the assumptions about reward, which are contained in it. It is called regressive because the group works back, as it were, from the concrete example to the general answer to its 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:
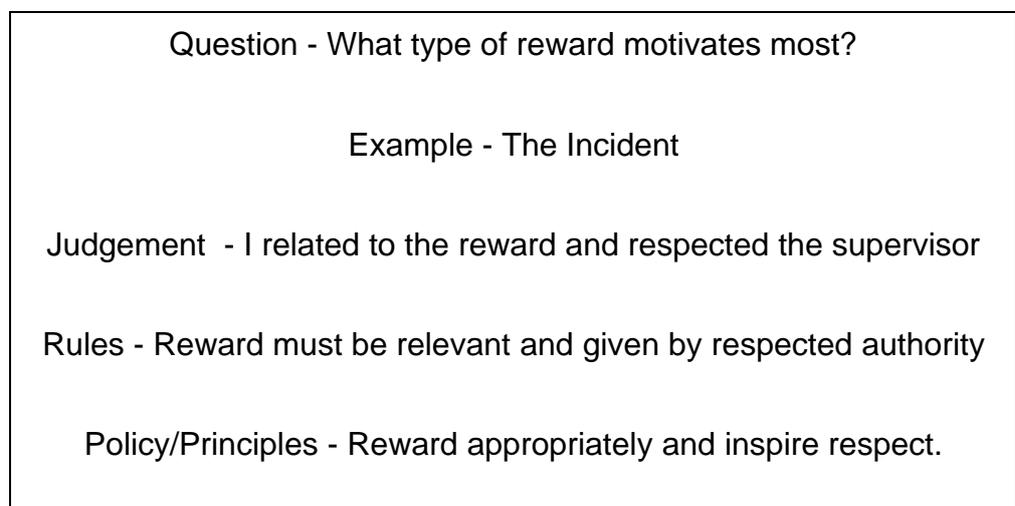
- *Major premise:* Motivating rewards are relevant and originate from a respected authority.
- *Minor premise:* The example is offered as one in which the employee is rewarded by a supervisor.
- *Conclusion:* In the example a respected supervisor appropriately reward (or should) the employee.

With 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. The major premise is the tacit sense of what type of reward motivates best in general, while the example applies this to the particular. A principlist approach would correspond to this form of traditional syllogism and would yield the practical imperative, which is signaled with the word 'should' in the conclusion. 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 best reward consists in a certain form of praise originating from peers or authorities not necessarily connected with respect. 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. It has been illustrated by Jos Kessels (1997) as an hourglass, with 'Judgement' alongside the narrowest part of the hourglass:

TABLE 3: Logical Structure Of The Dialogue

Question - What type of reward motivates most?
Example - The Incident
Judgement - I related to the reward and respected the supervisor
Rules - Reward must be relevant and given by respected authority
Policy/Principles - Reward appropriately and inspire respect.

Although this diagram shows the logical structure of the dialogue, there is no suggestion that participants need to be aware of this or that the facilitator should impose this structure. On the contrary, the structure will obtain if the rules of the dialogue are adhered to. These rules are as follows (Bolten, 2001):

- 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.
- 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.

Participative Models for Managing Change: OD and Lewin

Initiating, implementing - and more importantly – sustaining change has undoubtedly become one of the most critical factors affecting business organizations (see, Burnes, 2000; Dawson, 2003) and the enabling and/or disabling factors connected with change implementation projects have been studied and documented in various outputs (see for example, Buchanan and Boddy, 1992; Pfeffer, 1982; Guest and King, 2001; Block, 1987; Cooper and Sawaf, 1997). Many commentators focus on issues like communication, employee empowerment and satisfaction and committed leadership as ways to enhance performance of organizational change implementation (see for example, Hamel, 2000; Tourish and Hargie, 2003). Despite the effort involved, however, an estimated 50-70% of re-engineering projects do not succeed in producing the intended results (Hammer and Champy, 1993) and in less than one third of the US and British companies engaged in Total Quality Management (TQM) programmes were tangible performance benefits gained (Ashkenas 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). It would appear that even with a wide range of studies, theories and prescriptions on how best to manage change the 'brutal fact is that about 70% of all change initiatives fail' (Beer and Nohria, 2000). As such, there is room for further consideration of possible tools that might aid the process of steering complex change, we contend that the Socratic dialogue provides just such a tool; but first, it is worth briefly considering one well developed theory - Organizational Development (OD) - that also seeks to achieve employee well-being and involvement during processes of change.

A founding figure of the OD approach is Kurt Lewin whose work on inter-group dynamics and planned change has proven to be particularly influential (see Kreitner and Kinicki 1992: 723-61). Lewin argued that in order for change to be successfully managed it is necessary to follow three general steps (Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman, 1995: 667-9). The three general steps identified by Lewin (1951) comprise: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Unfreezing is the stage in which there is a recognized need for change and action is taken to unfreeze existing attitudes and behavior. This preparatory stage is deemed essential to the generation of employee support and the minimization of employee resistance. For example, in his pioneering research (some of which was published after his death in 1947), Lewin found that in order to minimize worker resistance, employees should be actively encouraged to participate in the process of planning proposed change programmes (see Clutterbuck and Crainer 1990: 105). Managing change through reducing the forces that prevent change, rather than through increasing the forces which are pushing for change, is central to Lewin's approach and his technique of force-field analysis (1947: 5-42). He maintained that within any social system there are driving and restraining forces that maintain the status quo and within which organizations generally exist in a state of quasi-stationary equilibrium. Thus, in order to create conditions conducive to change it is necessary to identify the restraining and driving forces and to change one or other of these in order to create an imbalance.

In the management of organizational change, the focus of OD specialists has been on providing data that would unfreeze the system through reducing the restraining forces rather than increasing the driving forces (Gray and Starke, 1988: 596-629; Weisbord, 1988: 94). Once an imbalance has been created, then the system can be altered and a new set of driving and restraining forces put into place. A planned change program is implemented and only when the desired state has been achieved, will the change agent set about 'refreezing' the organization. The new state of balance is then appraised and where appropriate, methods of positive reinforcement are used to ensure employees 'internalize' attitudes and behaviors consistent with new work regimes.

Although there are many different OD models, the general approach has been described by Huse as 'the application of behavioural science knowledge in a long-range effort to improve an organization's ability to cope with changes in its external environment and increase its internal problem-solving capabilities' (1982:555). It is based on a human relations perspective which stresses the importance of collaborative management and, according to French and Bell (1983:15), can be defined as 'a long-range effort to improve an organization's problem-solving and renewal processes...with the assistance of a change agent or catalyst and the use of the theory and technology of applied behavioral science, including action research'.

Typically, the OD approach is planned; it attempts to consider and include all members of an organization; the proposed change is supported by top management; the objectives of change are to improve working conditions and organizational effectiveness; and an emphasis is placed on behavioural science techniques which facilitate communication and problem solving among members (Beckhard, 1969). The six major steps in an OD programme comprise identifying a need for change; selecting an intervention technique; gaining top management support; planning the change process; overcoming resistance to change; and evaluating the change process (Aldag and Stearns, 1991:724-8). However, the main problem with this approach is that it adopts a normative framework and assumes that there is one best way to manage change that will increase both organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. Typically, a lot of organizational effort and resources are allocated to developing and planning, but the targets are seldom achieved with, too much focus often being placed on the model and mechanistic task of executing plans. Time constraints are often used to justify actions that constrain dialogue and debate, ultimately limiting true involvement and participation by employees. The process is managed from the top down with espoused rather the actual programmes of employee involvement. Dunphy and Stace (1990: 67) have also criticized OD proponents for failing to account for the increasing incidence of revolutionary or radical change, which they argue may require alternative strategies of change. Moreover, by creating an image of a need to design in stability (refreezing) the Lewinian model has a tendency to solidify what is a dynamic and complex process. It may also result in the creation of cultures and structures not conducive to continuous change. As Weisbord (1988: 94) has argued, Lewin's concepts begin to fall apart as the rate of market and technological change enters a state of perpetual transition, rather than equating with the notion of a 'quasi-stationary equilibrium'.

Other commentators have also highlighted the importance of nurturing growth and development rather than following mechanistic stage models that by their nature constrain wider participation and ownership (Senge, 1990). Senge's view of the learning organization placed the maintenance and development of inter-personal relationships as central. Through using the metaphor of living organism, Senge (1999) argues that nothing in nature starts big and that change is like a seed, which

starts small and, through cultivation, becomes ripe and supplants the old. Consequently, change should spring from the lower levels of the organization and emerge as self-generated rather than compliance-oriented, necessitating a shift from the traditional, hero-archetype of manager to a facilitator-mentor one. He uses the term 'profound change' to describe organizational change 'that combines inner shifts in people's values, aspirations and behaviors with outer shifts in processes, strategies, practices and systems' (Senge, 1999: 15). It is the achievement of 'profound change' that has most taxed organizations and proven particularly elusive and difficult to attain. We, therefore, suggest that it is time to move away from mechanistic step models and that Socratic dialogue provides a potential versatile tool that allows for greater employee involvement and ownership of change processes.

Research Design of the Study

The examination of the staff's assumptions and feelings about the imminent change in two knowledge organisations (universities) over a period of 6 months meant that a qualitative research rationale became a critical methodology. A qualitative approach was adopted because this study sought not only to describe but also to identify whether employees and managers were aware of change issues and explore how they achieved their resolution. An inductive research approach was adopted to form a research objective to be explored by means of an action research design involving focus groups based on the Socratic technique, in-depth interviews and observational methods. The observation material recorded meticulously throughout the study – and the authors' active participation as employees of one case organisation - provided a wealth of data in relation to informal meetings, processes and discussions on the change project and served to confirm the 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 and served as the basis on which focus groups and interview questions were structured. These questions were as follows:

- What implications does a specific mindset of pre-conceived assumptions have for organisations that seek to undergo change?
- What is the contribution of a learning organisational culture to sustaining change and interpreting its metaphors accurately?
- How can individual and organisational goals be aligned?

These questions directed the focus of the research whilst also allowing for interviewees to talk freely and widely about emerging issues. The data collection procedure adopted was to begin with focus groups, which led on to the development of a more detailed set of questions to be discussed in the subsequent interviews. A comprehensive observation diary was kept, which was used to validate much of the primary data collected during the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. 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 was developed, which were then written up as annotated 'summaries'. The overall evidence and findings collected were subsequently cross-

checked and validated with the observation material. After defining the research constructs, the systematic analysis was about discovering explicit indicators concerning each construct. It is characteristic in analysing the data of this research that multiple indicators related to a single construct measure, as Eisenhardt (1989a) also notes when presenting the process of inductive theory building. To ensure the validity and reliability of the inferences, the attempt in the analysis was to link each indicator of a construct measure to an explicit data source. The authors' own understanding gathered through participant observation was mainly utilised for selecting the indicators and their explicit value of evidence from the vast data, as well as discovering connections between individual and seemingly separate issues that were linked, for example through being indicators of the same construct.

Socratic Dialogue and Changing Organizations: Illustrative Case Data

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 the Socratic dialogue arises as much from its processes as from its outcomes. The painstaking process of inquiry - which it engenders - develops one's skills in intellectual discussion and broadens one's experience of human and organizational life. It is a valuable experience and a lucid demonstration of the benefits philosophy can provide if appropriately imported into management. By reaching out to organizations, philosophy and its consultants may enable and empower them to operate as fully reflective and self-aware business entities – 'natural organizations' (Laurie, 2001: 3) – rather than be trapped by a management rhetoric and set of beliefs about people and work that are alien to themselves and alienating to others. A director of a university department highlights not only this form of entrapment, but also the preconceived assumptions that managers may hold about their staff:

> *The difficulty we have is with so many casual staff and a high turnover in operations staff. To keep them updated is a nightmare, it's very time-consuming. But, I believe even the permanent ones will be the last to know and that will never change, because they're not part of the actual decision-making. Because of the very nature of their position, they will always be undervalued. (1st interview-July 2002)*

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 stresses 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 the carefully thought through opinions of all members, for use, for example, as the basis for strategic decision-making preceding change implementation. 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).

A Socratic dialogue is a direct exercise in cooperation. This is particularly important in the meta-dialogue, which gives the opportunity to discuss application of the methods, or any problems one participant may have with another. The method requires the use of communication and thinking skills which may have been forgotten in a business context. Participants often have to relearn these skills, such as attentive listening, clarity of expression, understandable and logical reasoning, which are rarely used in the daily haste and pressures of work. Whilst the method is time consuming and likely to be discarded by business managers who continually stress the importance of quick actions and methods for achieving results, it is paradoxical that the more time spent on easy recipe solutions is costing organizations large sums of money through failed initiatives. To spend more time on costly change programmes actually makes commercial sense even though these are rarely evident in the harsh time-pressured environment of modern business. This is because a decision based on concrete, clearly expressed experiences, that have been thought through and agreed upon to the point where basic norms and values are closely scrutinized, should not need later revision nor is it likely to be withdrawn:

> Our people manage to deliver. What I would have liked to have more of is that, when there are issues to be resolved, there is greater understanding of the bigger picture. (Director's 1st interview, July 2002)

Participants learn how to hold meetings differently. A meeting is set up differently, flip-charts are used, and the level of discussion is changed. Improved use of time in meetings through the striving for consensus can raise the efficacy of meetings, and, furthermore, make them more pleasurable, honest and fair:

> Personally, I'm completely demotivated. To create fairness and encourage motivation, you need 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 including me in decisions 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, June 2002)

The Acropolis of Change: A Reflective Model

- 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 model we propose is presented in Figure 1 and labeled the Acropolis of Change. The central image draws on Plato's idea of the Classical Greek Polis as explained in the introduction, 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:
- Communicate the vision in a relevant way – to overture the sense of urgency and need for change across the organisation
- Engage the people to create an 'agora' of reflection – to develop a critical mass of support and commitment for clarifying the change vision
- Cultivate a culture of trust within the 'agora' – to create a non-threatening climate in which dialogue can freely occur
- Create an alignment of unconventional vision – to foster lateral thinking and new collaborations
- 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
- Train and develop the 'agora' – to achieve active workmanship and credibility of change
- Measure success by consequences of change and reward realistically – to disseminate outcomes, reward employees during the process of change and keep the momentum going
- Redefine objectives and processes – to consolidate gains, learn from losses, reflect on good practices, embed new behaviors and consider further refinements and changes

Figure 1: The Acropolis Of Change: The 8 Loops Of Role Modeling Organizational Change On The Socratic Method
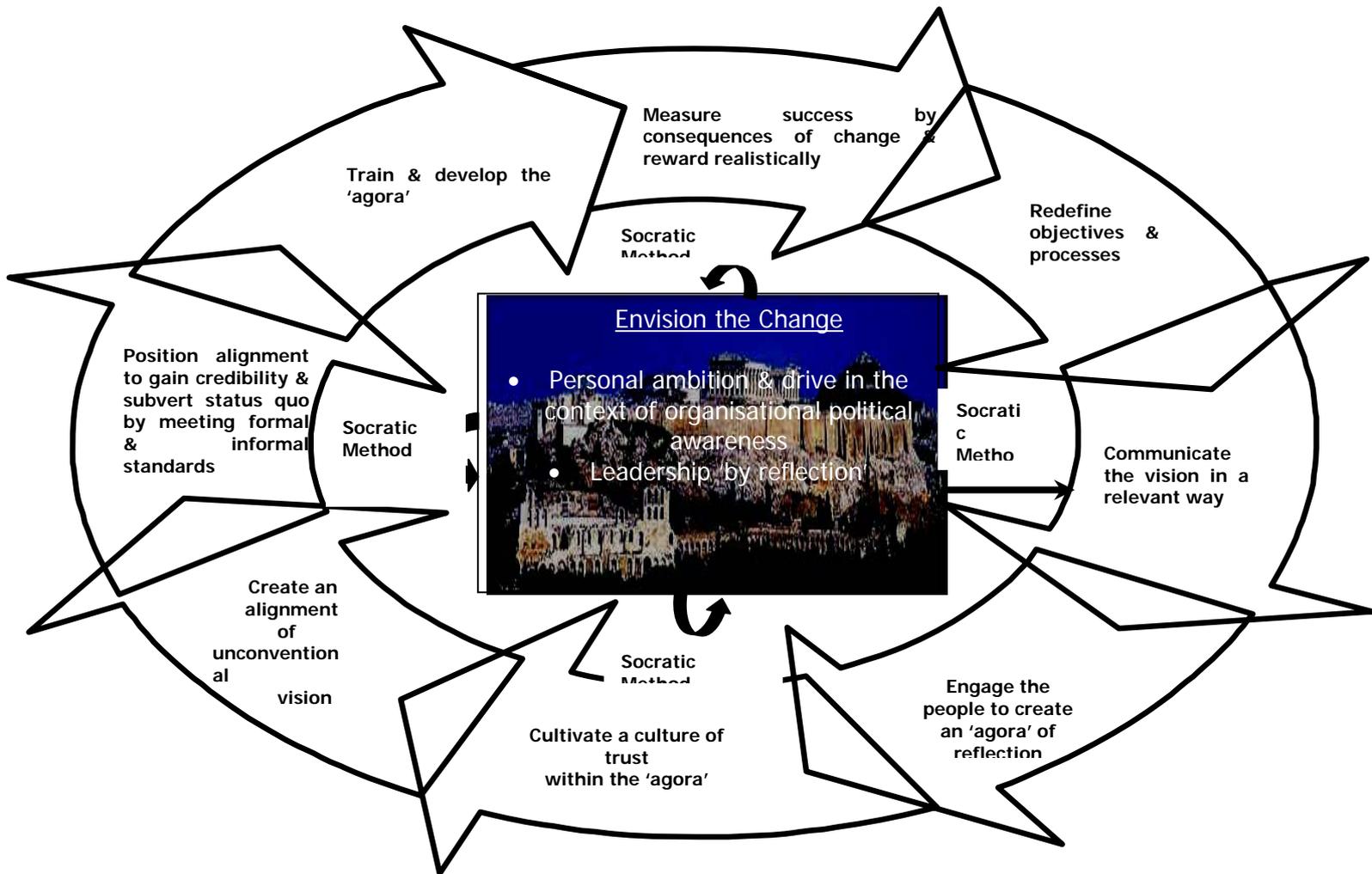
This model incorporates Kurt Lewin's (1947) adoption of the systems concept of homeostasis or dynamic stability acknowledging its usefulness in that it gives rise to thinking about a staged approach to changing things. Looking before you leap is usually sound practice. However, the beginning and ending point of the unfreeze-change-refreeze model is stability, which has been criticised and proven contentious (Weisbord, 1988). Thus, what is different about this framework is that it does allow for more flexibility in change efforts that begin with the organisation in extremis (a dynamic that slashes open an organisation), or in organisations that are already experiencing many forms of change over extended periods of time (they are never frozen, let alone unfrozen). It also presupposes the utilisation of the Socratic method – with its emphasis on feeding back to the organisation people's concerns - throughout the dynamic and iterative loops of change. We argue that such an approach affords the possibility of engendering a reflective organisational culture that is conducive to securing sustainability of change through engaging the commitment of employees.

To Learn and Practice at the Same Time…

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 dialogue process. The main questions underlying this dialogue-culture are: '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 'what employee activities and behavior (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 person with the right questions. Managers need not only to 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 – top, middle and bottom - of their organizations.

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 and training and anything at all connected with our views on how to live and 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 Athena 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 'agora' is wherever people need to meet for discussions, negotiations and exchanges of views, whether connected to

change initiatives or not. And, in our age, those are the places that Socrates would seek out.

So, the location is different. But the people in the marketplace are the same: policy-makers, entrepreneurs, advisors, managers, scholars, private citizens and all the 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, 'a 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: 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 the dialogue: in a dialogue you learn and practise 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 missions 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 especially 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 policies and procedures involving human interaction and encourage further research and amelioration. Socratic dialogue progresses as participants carefully clarify and justify their thinking and the more they develop insights, the more progress is made. 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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