The 4E's Socratic Model – a framework to foster creativity in teams

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How creative are you?

According to Sir Ken Robinson
Most children think they're highly creative; most adults think they're not.

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 But why is this important?

Today's hierarchical organisations were designed to produce consistent outcomes in a stable environment – and they worked well for decades.
However, since the 1940s when Schumpter coined the phrase 'creative destruction' it was recognized that value creation came through new ideas surplanting old ones. In other words, from being creative.
Now, in a stable environment you arguable had the luxury of taking your time to consider – to minimise the potential for any downside. But 50 years on we no longer operate in stable environments. The pace of change is both rapid and ongoing. Hence creativity is no longer a luxury – it's a necessity.

Paradox

- ideal traits and the most conducive environment - well documented by socio-cultural theorists such as Amabile

- no clear framework identified for managers to use to foster creativity in real-world conditions.

However, the way companies are traditionally organized, risk-taking is not encouraged. We know how to be creative. We know the optimal conditions under which creativity will thrive. But here's the paradox – people are not stable, companies are not stable, so by the time you re-engineer for creativity the conditions you based your decision on will have changed.

So, let's accept that reality and not try to create the perfect structure but look instead at a fundamental perceptual shift. The shift from setting the right goals to asking the right questions. As Alvin Toffler said in his book Future Shock, "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

Purpose

To test Sonnenberg and Goldberg's (2007) assertion that taking a Socratic approach to champion creativity will enable management to increase creativity in their teams. This study was designed to:
• identify the conditions under which this statement is true
• develop, test and validate a model for its use.

Knowledge capital is increasingly important in effective decision-making in organisations today and the use of Socratic Dialogue has been found to have a positive effect on organizational learning.

However, while the steps in the process are well documented – the underlying mechanics remain uncertain. Nelson who perhaps was the first to apply the Socratic method in a modern context says that the method doesn't produce new knowledge, rather uses reflection to make explicit the tacit. He describes the Method as one of regressive abstraction – moving backward from a statement and removing assumptions to be left with the essence.

So how do we apply the process to arrive at that essence?

My research was based on conducting a Socratic Dialogue in 7 organisations ranging in size and type.

In each case the Dialogue (using a basic 4 step Model) resulted in successful outcomes which was confirmation of the assertion being tested.

However, the single dimensional Model as it stood was not comprehensive enough to document a process that could be followed without the input of a trained facilitator.

Based on observation and feedback there were 3 key areas that required investigation in order to produce a workable model.

1. Open dialogue

Institutional roles and status must be suspended during a Socratic Dialogue to remove defensiveness and enable participants to develop the trust necessary to tackle difficult issues and come to some shared meaning.

Dialogues bring conflict which results in the difficult or entrenched being passed over or agreement being reached without mutual belief in the outcome.
This means the wealth of tacit knowledge available to a group remains tacit rather than being converted into explicit (and therefore useful) knowledge.

I found that the ideal place to start, is a discussion on the question itself with input from all participants so that the process begins with an **agreement** and thus creates ownership.

I found that by taking a staged approach to questioning increased the flow of dialogue considerably. I used the construct of Boswell (2006) who identified three question types: concrete, abstract and creative that progressively move from lower level enquiry to higher level abstract and creative thinking.
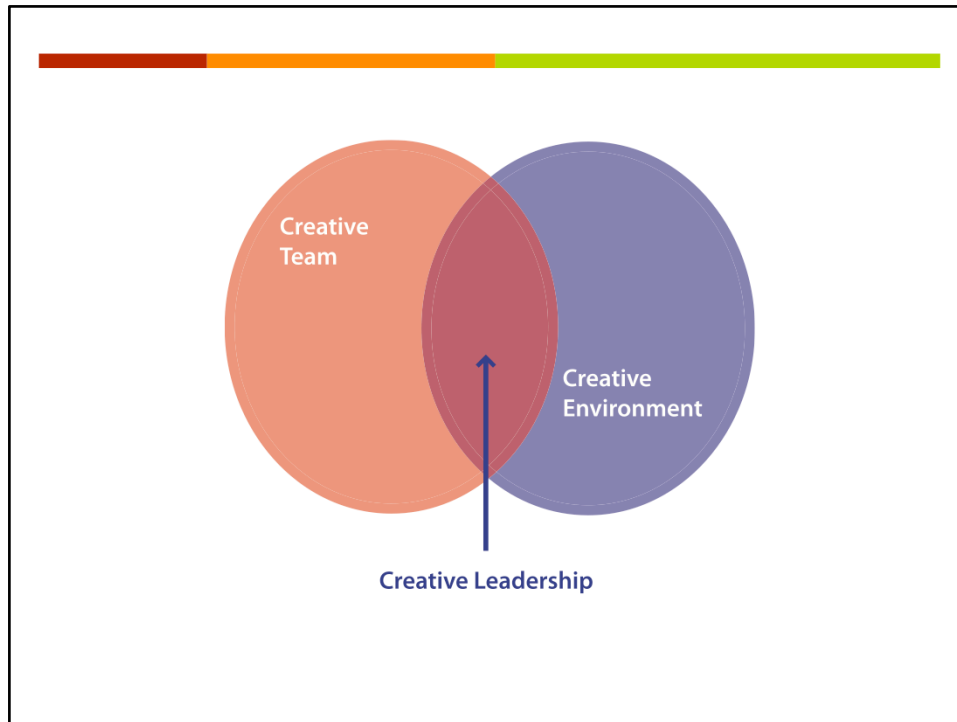
Organisational rigidity was identified as a barrier to creativity and while early on I made it clear that roles should be suspended by viewing all participants as colleagues as rank tends to inhibit the free flow of information.

To overcome this rigidity participants felt it was important to identify a champion from within the organisation who is at a high enough level to influence culture and legitimise the process. The role of this person is to be a **creative leader**, encouraging and supporting creativity in teams.

3. Questioning techniques

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While pre-preparing all the questions is not desirable or feasible, it is important to recognise and react to dynamics of the group whose members apply their own contextual filtering process before answering.

It follows then, that cognition should also be considered as an element of the model…

Source: Draper,S.W. (2002, May 14) http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/best/bloom.html
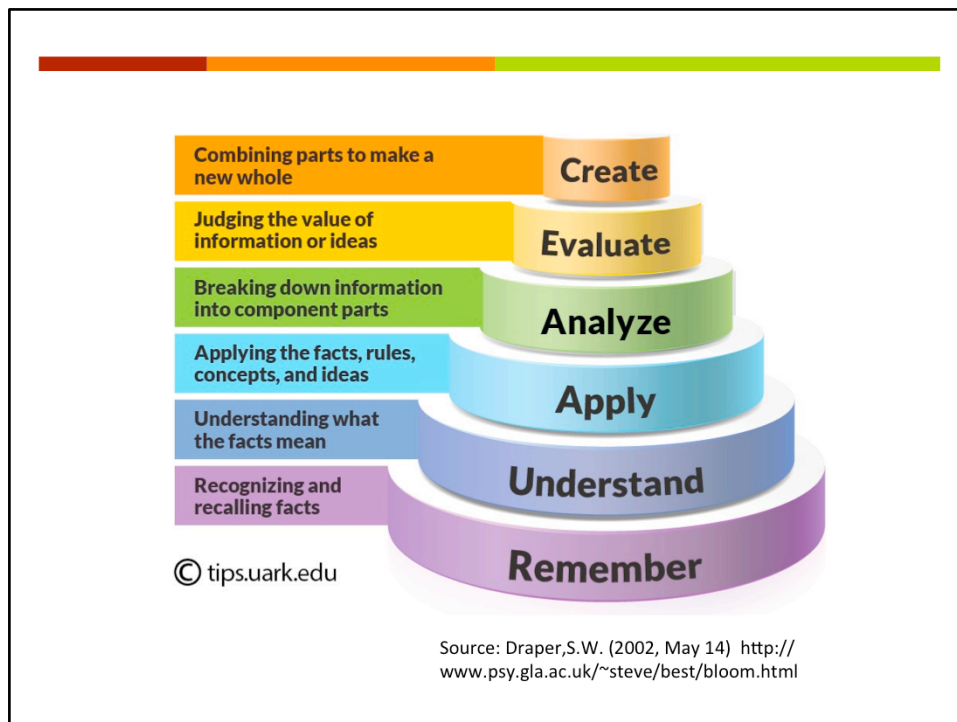
The most widely accepted theory of cognition is Bloom's taxonomy which identifys six levels of cognition: **knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.**

By consciously applying this, asking a complex question too early can be avoided and as a result also avoiding confusing participants and ultimately frustrating the process.

Stage	Question type	Cognition
Exploration stage	Concrete: what, where, when, why, who explain, compare, give examples	Knowledge and comprehension
Examination stage	Abstract: consider, solve, apply (to a new situation) what are the pros and cons? What is missing?	Application and analysis
Evaluation stage	Abstract and Creative: what are the links between…. and …..? defend your choice, justify.	Synthesis and evaluation
Election stage	Decision and resolution	

The 4E's Socratic Model

Based on feedback and subsequent investigation, the addition of two extra layers in the Model made it much easier to keep focused as the facilitator.
Firstly, in terms of preparation, it suggested consideration of not only questions that might be asked but also staging them at the appropriate level in both type and cognition.

Secondly, having a visual of the Model available during the discussion gave immediate guidance for the type of question required at different times in order to stimulate discussion or tease out linkages in the evaluation stage that resulted in more creative thought.
In a separate workshop with a group of team leaders, the final iteration of the 4E model was presented and explained and as a result all the participants expressed confidence in terms of their ability to facilitate its use in their organisations.

Conclusion

- Effective process
- Facilitation critical
- Progress mapped to question type and cognition levels
- Guide to operation written and tested

The purpose of this research was to test the viability of a Socratic approach as a tool to champion creativity in an organizational context. The 4E's Socratic Model was found to be an effective tool in producing creative outcomes in the context of an organizational team.

It achieved this through:

Producing a creative, actionable outcome in all seven organizations studied.

Creating an environment where creativity is encouraged by producing conditions that are conducive to creativity, namely:

personal freedom – to provide an opinion in a non-threatening environment,

encouragement – to think creatively outside normal operating constraints,

recognition – that each team member's opinion is valid and valued,

challenge – to go beyond the common wisdom and create something new and innovative.

Modeling a culture that encourages creativity and tolerance.