Socratic Group Leadership Mentoring

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Abstract
In this paper a Socratic approach to mentoring groups of leaders is presented. The Socratic seminar is a group activity intended to increase critical thinking, self responsibility and self-reliance. A fairly simple methodology is utilized to improve the complex interplay of dialogical and intellectual skills. Combining Socratic seminars and traditional group mentoring in a pilot study has resulted in leaders experiencing a richer and deeper critical thinking process. We will in this paper present the method, its applications, theory, and some results.

Keywords: Critical thinking, dialogue, interaction, leadership mentoring, Socratic

1.0 Introduction

"You will not learn from me philosophy, but how to philosophize, not thoughts to repeat, but how to think. Think for yourselves, enquire for yourselves, stand on your own feet."
Immanuel Kant in Emmet (1986), p. 19

Having mentored leaders for many years, we have noticed that leaders gradually become more aware of their need to reflect on their practice and that this reflection preferably can be carried out in groups. Time for reflection and contemplation is often less prioritized when work is intense. The dialogue with other practicing leaders often becomes an important and vital tool when handling a complex and demanding role. Deciding to participate in mentoring is an important step. The decision itself suggests a change: an insight that time for reflection is required to reach one’s full potential as a leader. It is an investment in time and personal commitment and it is therefore of vital importance that the participants feel that the quality of the sessions are worth while and applicable to their professional responsibilities.

In this paper we present the results of a two-year pilot study. The goal of the study was to find a complementary method to enrich the group dialogue in group mentoring sessions with inexperienced and experienced leaders.

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1 Mentoring is here a translation of the Swedish concept handledning: literally “leading by the hand”.
2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Traditional group leadership mentoring, goals and dilemmas
The method we have chosen to call “traditional” group mentoring uses the problems that participants experience in their everyday work. Participating in analyzing and solving these “cases” is intended to give every participant a rich repertoire of how to cope with problems and dilemmas. At best, the synergistic effects result in a deeper understanding of why problems might occur and how they might be solved, giving each participant a broader competence as a leader than they might have had on their own (Andersen, 1987). The role of the mentor in traditional group mentoring is not to be an advice-giver, but rather to help the participants to reflect. The mentor should ensure that the dialogue is focused and functional by nurturing a culture where feelings and experiences can be processed (Andersen, 1994). Change and development is supposed to be accomplished between the sessions rather than during the sessions. Even though this often is the case, one of the challenges in traditional group mentoring has been to find methods that effectively keep the thinking and adjusting processes alive when the participants leave the session (Fröman & Pihlgren, 2008). The problems participants bring into the sessions tend to focus on some specific areas of leadership: problems with staff members, organizational dysfunctions, or problems concerning their superior; whereas other problems seldom occur, even though they are documented leadership dilemmas, like ethical and moral problems. Participants also tend to forget dilemmas they have experienced in the period between sessions, even though they would benefit from being evaluated.

2.2 Socratic leadership mentoring
The Socratic seminar has long been used to enrich thinking, from the exploring approach, encouraging thinking beyond the everyday prejudice, which Socrates used in the early dialogues by Plato (Vlastos, 1994). One of the most important foundational traditions for thoughtful discussion came from bildning1, a description of a cultural and political phenomenon which was commonly used in German-speaking countries and in Scandinavia in the later part of the 19th century. There are different ways to interpret bildning. One ideal can be traced back to the Kantian theory of cognition, where understanding is regarded as a lifelong activity possible for every human being. Various Socratic traditions describe a similar methodology, emanating from this bildning concept: Leonard Nelson in Germany (Nelson, 1965), Mortimer J. Adler in the USA (Adler, 1983), and Oscar Olsson (Olsson, 1911) and Lars Lindström (2000) in Sweden. The traditions present almost identical methods, goals and theoretical assumptions (Pihlgren, 2008). In the Socratic tradition, intellectual and dialogical habits of mind are expected to be internalized as “virtues” (cf. Aristotle, 1998). Research shows, that having Socratic seminars in teams develop a more “polyphonic”

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1 The word bildning is equivalent to Bildung in German, dannelse in Danish, obraczenie in Russian and to the Greek concept paideia. English texts use either general education, liberal education or just culture.
interaction, a better social climate, and a more professional culture (Mangrum, 2004). Students participating in recurrent seminars develop their critical thinking skills, self-esteem, and a greater understanding of self (Billings, 1999, Robinson 2006, Orellana, 2008, Pihlgren, 2008).

The seminar is conducted as a series of recurrent activities, starting with individual analysis of some “textual” material such as literature, art work, music, or a mathematical problem. The mentor prepares questions to promote inquiry and foster critical thinking. The seminar should balance between questions of textual interpretation and questions of evaluation of ideas to achieve a reflective inquiry. The role of the mentor as facilitator becomes less active as the participants become more skilled. Typical of Socratic interlocution is that no statement is taken for granted as true, false, or foolish without examination. The purpose of seminars is not to give the participants an opportunity of free and uncontrolled chatting but to help the participants to develop and enrich their thinking. If this training of intellectual habits is to take place, the culture will have to promote an open disposition: generosity to give everyone time to formulate and reformulate ideas, sincerity in saying what one believes without hiding behind authorities, courage to express guesses, and justification, supporting arguments by referring to evidence in the text or to own experience (Lindström, 2000). The safe seminar ensures a context where “bold ideas” might be tested, as long as they are allowed to be probed.

3.0 Methodology
The method used was based on Socratic seminars as presented in analogous traditions. Adjustments were made to suit the purpose of mentoring. Four groups of leaders (in all 15) participated in the study, with two mentors conducting the 36 sessions. All the participants had previous experience of participating in traditional leadership mentoring. The methodology was evaluated and revised by the mentors throughout the study. Some sessions were filmed or tape-recorded; some were transcribed, to make evaluation easier. The participating leaders were continuously invited to discuss the method and its results, and revisions were made accordingly, during the period. Qualitative interviews with the participants about the effects they experienced during the Socratic group leadership mentoring compared with traditional leadership mentoring were made at the end of the study.

4.0 Results from the pilot study
Our way of working with Socratic leadership mentoring is not a completely new method within the area of mentoring or coaching. It is a merger of traditional group mentoring and the Socratic approach. In our pilot study sessions, experienced and inexperienced leaders met in groups of 3-5 individuals for two and a half hours once a
month. The first hour they participated in a Socratic seminar, focused on a text, a picture, or some other artifact, not always about their area of work and concerning events located elsewhere in time and place, but dealing with dilemmas or ideas that they might meet in their experience as leaders. After a break, they either delved deeper into the dilemma discussed in the seminar or they chose a common theme, discussing everyday problems at work.

4.1 The Socratic seminar used in group mentoring

The Socratic seminar that emerged as one of two parts of each mentoring sessions was designed to use the synergetic effects of dialogue (Andersen, 1994, Vygotsky, 1978). The seminar has a distinct, almost ritualized frame, with steps to activate different psychological and intellectual processes to enhance thinking and understanding (Pihlgren 2007):

The first step is often accomplished before the session takes place: the participants read the text individually, making a first interpretation and evaluation of the ideas presented.

At the second step the participants are asked to set goals for seminar conduct (personal and group), focusing the participants on the communicative ritual and helping them to over time reverse and balance less effective individual and group patterns like talking too much or too little. This step is less stressed (and might be excluded) when the group is skilled.

The third step is the actual Socratic seminar facilitated with the following types of questions:
1. Opening question, usually the most open-ended type, designed to elicit the ideas embedded in the text that are most evocative. The participant is here accountable to the pre-judgment with which he/she starts before entering into cooperative group thinking.
2. Textual analysis, the least open-ended type of questions, asking participants to examine specific ideas in the text. This step makes it possible for the participants to distance from everyday experience by cooperating in group to analyze the ideas and dilemmas of the textual material. They are here free to think differently, without being held personally accountable to the questions and “bold ideas” that might be presented in the group discussion.
3. Evaluating questions, asking participants to focus on how the ideas in the text relate to their everyday lives (most commonly as leaders). These questions are important as they help the participants to personally integrate new knowledge and insights. Half of the seminar time in mentoring is often used to explore this section (comparably more time to when similar methods are used in educational settings).

When the seminar is ended after approximately one hour, the goals set in the beginning are evaluated as well as the seminar content.
4.2 The second part of each mentoring session

The Socratic part of the session is facilitated by one of the two mentors present. The other mentor has during this section a reflecting position, listening actively to the dialogue without participating, trying to find meta-questions that might be a starting point of the second section. In the pause between the two sections the mentors decide on what meta-focus might benefit the group at this point. This question emanating from the Socratic dialogue is noted on the board before starting the second section. The philosophical dialogue is here “translated” into questions, closely connected to the participants’ leadership, attitudes, or to how different incidents or phenomena in their organization might be interpreted and treated. The group is now given a choice either to explore the question noted on the board, or to analyze acute problems or dilemmas they have brought to the session, i.e. using the rest of the time as a more traditional mentoring session.

4.3 A session inspired by “A Hanging” by George Orwell

In this example we meet a group in a mentoring session. The three leaders have met for Socratic mentoring for half a year, and before that for traditional group mentoring for one year. They have prepared for the session by reading “A Hanging”, an essay by George Orwell. The text is provocative and challenging, describing an execution in Burma. The story is told by one of the jailers, assigned to carry out the execution. Suddenly a happy dog appears on the short path from the death cell to the gallows, putting the jailers in distress. After the execution is over, the jailers and their officers react by laughing and joking.

Each participant notes a personal goal to practice during the seminar; they also decide to help each other to understand the text better by asking for clarifications during the dialogue. The mentor, facilitating the seminar, now asks the participants to consider the following question in silence for a couple of minutes:

- “If you would have been one of the jailers, how do you think you would have reacted when the dog turns up?” After some minutes in silent reflection, the participants discuss the contradictory feelings that the situation creates: it is a funny situation, with one of the jailers chasing the dog and the dog wagging, jumping, and barking. But the men are in distress, they seem to panic, trying to get rid of the dog quickly. That is probably what most people would have done in the situation - the dog is prolonging the tense situation.

**Facilitator Ann:** You all seem to agree that the people in the text want to end the situation as quickly as possible?

**Ron:** Yes, it says here that the jailers feel very distressed by the prisoner’s monotonous chanting of prayers.

**Eve:** I think they’re trying not to see him as a human being. The sound makes him human as the dog does when it tries to lick him.
Mary: After the execution, they seem to gorge on the human weaknesses of the prisoner, laughing and joking. Is it some way of dealing with it all?
Facilitator Ann: Would you have participated in the laughter?
Eve: I hope not!
Ron: It’s like after a funeral: it’s dark, but often it’s very gay afterwards at the reception.
Mary: The execution is a completely impossible thing to talk about at home. I guess one needs to ease the pressure. Jargon develops in all lines of work as a way of coping with difficult situations, I guess.

The discussion continues: is it possible to choose not to participate in the laughter afterwards? That would mean leaving the group and it’s hard to be alone in such a difficult situation. The laughter is a way of uniting the group. When performing unpleasant tasks a strong group identity is needed. It could be constructive or destructive - something to be aware of when leading groups. The Socratic seminar ends after approximately one hour.

During the break the mentors agree on a follow-up question, writing it down on the board: "What is “dangerous” jargon in your line of business?" The second mentor now takes on an active role, supporting this section. None of the participants have brought everyday problems to discuss, and they choose to continue with the question on the board. While trying to identify positive and negative jargons in their lines of work, one of the participants exemplifies with a group that seems to scare new staff members away. She is determined to confront them with the problem:

Eve: They work all right, but they won’t let anyone in. The new ones quit, one by one.
Mentor Hans: You said earlier in the Socratic seminar that there could be silent agreements. Is that how they do it?
Eve: Facial expressions I think. I’m confronting them now by showing them who has left and when this year.
Mary: But do you think they themselves wonder why everyone quits?
Ron: Or do they just go “- Why do all the incompetent people end up here”?
Eve: The later, I think.
Mentor Hans: Is it a group “censoring”, not wanting change, or might it be a competent group after all, with the new members less competent?

As the discussion continues, the participants realize that a confrontation probably is not enough to solve the problem. There has to be a more constructive dialogue, making change possible. One of the participants suggests that a Socratic approach might help: giving each one a chance to think silently about why people leave the group, before discussing, will allow more ideas. A group goal set before dialogue might help the
discussion to progress productively. The session ends by presenting the next text: a section of “A Madman’s Manifesto” by August Strindberg, a text on relations and love.

The analysis of the described execution and the actions of its fictive people has, even though seemingly deviating from their everyday experience, allowed the participants to see patterns of human behaviour. The follow-up question resulted in analysis of a problem that the participant didn’t consider worth bringing to the mentoring session, but which in dialogue proved to be a generative problem with applications to similar situations. The Socratic atmosphere lingered – no one waited on the mentor’s expertise; everyone contributed to the problem solving.

4.4 Effects and further studies

Based on our pilot study, leaders say that participating in Socratic leadership mentoring is a more effective way to address complex relations and dilemmas they are confronted with in their work than the traditional approach. Our participants agree that seminars have important effects on their analysis of everyday problems as leaders, and that they tend to remember the discussions and the analyses made by the group, connected to certain textual material, better than the discussions in traditional mentoring. Even though they might choose not to continue discussing the suggested follow-up question, they tend to think about it when returning to work, often writing down session notes. After participating in Socratic mentoring, leaders noticed a difference in attitude when having other types of conversations with staff members, clients, and others: They are “open” longer to the other participants’ ideas and opinions, and are more prepared to listen to what they say. Some of them relate that they have staged Socratic seminars with groups of their own staff members to promote progress at work.

The Socratic seminar’s capacity to help the participants to take a step back from their everyday experience and prejudices seems to result in important effects. It helps the participants work with problems from another angle than the personal, thus experiencing areas that they might not have considered otherwise. This mutual experience seems to level the gaps between inexperienced and experienced leaders to a higher extent than what has been our experience with traditional training. The mentoring session gives them the opportunity to integrate the new knowledge and to link it to their previous understanding. Compared to traditional group mentoring, the participants more often refer to reflections and thoughts they have had in earlier sessions. It seems as if the ideas penetrated in the philosophical dialogue are more vigorous and useful as tools when the leaders are confronted with a complex and stressful work situation.

The pilot study was intended to develop a complementary method to traditional mentoring, coping with some of its problems. The study has enabled us to do so, and with some promising results. The Socratic seminars are designed to teach clear and coherent thinking, and the participating leaders seem to acknowledge that participating in seminars have helped them to develop this. The next goal will be to record and
analyze effects on a larger, systematized scale, and to compare those findings to what is accomplished in traditional group mentoring.

References


