

Disrupt, unclutter, innovate. Why Google and Apple hire Socratic Leaders

“We run the company by questions, not by answers.”

(Eric Schmidt, Google’s former CEO; in: Caplan, 2006)

“The best innovators are able to live with not having the answer right away because they’re focused on just trying to get to the next question.”

(Warren Berger, journalist and author, 2014, 8)

The most successful people in the business world have long realized that asking good questions is at the core of good leadership. To see the art of asking good questions at work, several management consultants and leadership coaches point to Socrates in Plato’s dialogues (Brooks and John, 2018; MacLachlan, 2016; Vicino, 2018). Some have even proposed that the Socratic method, the art of asking good question, is “one of [our] best leadership tools” (McMillan, 2018). I believe that these management consultants and leadership coaches point to a question that is worth exploring in more detail: what are good questions and how can we get into the habit of asking them?

My proposal for the Teaching Hub at the Eastern APA 2021 is part of a larger project on what I call “Socratic Leadership.” Elsewhere, I argue that Socratic Leadership centers around three specific lessons: think in questions, be on a mission, and think like a beginner. Here, I focus on Socrates’ third lesson. I show that Socrates demonstrates throughout Plato’s early dialogues, though particularly clearly in the *Laches*, that a “beginner’s mind” is especially well-equipped to generate good questions.

My goal is to raise awareness among philosophers that there is something in Plato that non-philosophers in the business world highly value. Companies want to hire young adults who exhibit Socratic leadership skills. I believe that we instructors have yet to fully appreciate that we can teach these skills by reading Plato. We have thus underutilized our expertise and underestimated our market value.

Texts

I propose that when Socrates in Plato’s *Laches* questions Laches and Nicias, his goal is not only or even primarily to find a definition of courage. Rather, Socrates wants his interlocutors to take inventory of their beliefs and unclutter their minds. This idea of taking inventory of our mental possessions is very prominent in Zen Buddhism. In *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki explains that “when you study Buddhism you should have a general house cleaning of your mind” (Suzuki, 2011: 101). Hoarding knowledge is strongly discouraged. True understanding, “to see and feel things as they are,” comes from an “empty state of mind” (Suzuki, 2011: 120-121). Suzuki famously calls a successfully uncluttered mind a “beginner’s mind” (*shoshin*).

Engaging side by side with Socrates, Zen Buddhist Shunryu Suzuki, and leaders like John Seely Brown, former chief scientist of Xerox Corporation and director of its Palo Alto Research Center, we will see the link between having a beginner's mind, asking good questions, innovation, and corporate success: those with a beginner's mind dare to ask questions that disrupt our ordinary ways of thinking and thus force us to see things in a fresh light.

Exercise

The bulk of my session will be devoted to a concrete exercise that combines Socratic and Buddhist practice: I will propose that anyone can acquire a beginner's mind by looking at art in the way Amy Herman does in her book "Visual Intelligence" and in her class "The Art of Perception," which she has taught to corporations like American Express and Microsoft, to health care providers like Johns Hopkins Medical School as well as to law enforcement such as the Chicago Police Department. The exercise is simple: I will ask the audience to take a look at the painting on the right and tell me what they see.



Many people look at the same thing, but only one sees a detail, a question, an opportunity. "When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just *saw* something,"ⁱ admits Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, who also happens to be a Zen student. By meditating art with Herman and questions with Socrates, we can cultivate a habit of approaching things with an open, inquiring mind and eye. Such a mind is able to "see what's there that others don't. To see what's not there that should be. To see the opportunity, the solution, the warning signs, the quickest way, the way out, the win. To see what matters" (Herman, 2017: 5).

ⁱ Steve Jobs in an interview with Gary Wolf for Wired on 02/01/96 (<https://www.wired.com/1996/02/jobs-2/>).