

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

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## Socratic Leadership

The art of asking good questions.

- The Socratic method is “one of [our] best leadership tools” ([McMillan](#), consultant).
- “We run the company by questions, not by answers.” ([Eric Schmidt](#), Google’s former CEO)
- “What’s the answer to the problem and how do we fix it?” We get asked this question a lot. But in today’s workplace it’s not about being the one with the answer anymore, it’s about being the one with the smart questions and having everyone answer [them] with you. ([Paul Bennett](#), chief creative director at IDEO)

What can we learn from Socrates about asking “smart questions”? How does one come up with “smart questions”?

**My thesis:** Socrates in Plato’s early dialogues presents a unique leadership style, which I call Socratic Leadership. I will here focus on one of Socrates’ leadership characteristics: I show that Socrates demonstrates a “beginner’s mind” and that someone with such a mindset is especially well-equipped to generate good questions.

### 1. Plato: *Laches*

Fathers: What kind of education will make our sons turn out best (*Lach.*179b3-4, d8-e2)? Should our sons learn how to fight in armor (*Lach.*181c)?

Socrates: Do you think that this is a question that should be decided by the majority or by an expert? An expert of what? What do you want to achieve by training your sons in the art of fighting in armor? What is courage?

Leadership lesson: we need to unclutter our minds and take inventory of our beliefs!

1. Bring your beliefs out into the open
2. Go through them one by one
3. Let go of some old beliefs and make room for new ones  
(e.g., Laches cannot believe both that courage is to defend oneself without retreating *and* that some warriors who retreat during battle are courageous, *Lach.*190e).

### 2. Shunryu Suzuki: *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

“When you study Buddhism, you should have a general house cleaning of your mind. You must take everything out of your room and clean it thoroughly. If it is necessary, you may bring everything back in again. You may want many things, so one by one you can bring them back. But if they are not necessary, there is no need to keep them” (Suzuki, 2011: 101). Instead of hoarding knowledge, try to “be free from [y]our knowledge” (Suzuki, 2011: 73). For, 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*).

Student exercise: *Which advantages might a beginner’s mind have over an expert’s mind?*

Beginner’s mind → childlike curiosity → asking foundational, “naïve” questions → disrupt (“disruptive leadership”) → creativity → innovation.

Expertise can be limiting. To the expert, only certain questions seem worth asking and only certain answers worth exploring. Shunryu Suzuki: “[i]n the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few” (Suzuki, 2011: 1).

### 3. Leaders from the business world

John Seely Brown, former chief scientist of Xerox Corporation and director of its Palo Alto Research Center: “I find that every couple of years now I have to re-frame how I even think about using [my] technology,” Brown says. “And that only comes about by using Beginner’s Mind, and asking all kinds of fundamental questions. Through questioning, I eventually realize that the lenses I’m looking through to see the world around me are wrong—and that I have to construct a whole new frame of reference.” (Brown in an [interview with Berger](#))

Paul Bennett, chief creative director at IDEO, an international design consultancy: “I position myself relentlessly as an idiot at IDEO [...]. And that’s not a negative, it’s a positive. Because being comfortable with not knowing—that’s the first part of being able to question” ([Berger](#) 2014: 79-80).

### Exercise

How can we get into the mindset of a beginner? How can we gain the confidence it takes to inquire with a beginner’s mind?

I will propose an exercise that combines the Socratic elenchus with Buddhist meditation: meditating and discussing 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.

Take a look at the painting below and tell me what you see...

#### Think-pair-share:

“Think” individually: 2 min.

“Pair up” and talk about what you see in breakout rooms: 4 min.

“Share” with the whole group: 5 min.



## Summary

Socrates' art of asking good questions is "one of our best leadership tools" because it disrupts our ordinary ways of thinking, which fuels creativity and innovation.

I proposed that one of the things that makes Socrates a good questioner is his beginner's mind. Socrates exhibits such a mindset throughout the early dialogues, but particularly clearly in the *Laches* where he asks seemingly naïve questions about one of the least-questioned Athenian virtues: courage.

I further proposed that we can practice inquiring with a beginner's mind by looking at art. When it comes to art, many of us and our students are beginners; our minds are uncluttered and empty. This allows us to practice inquiring with a beginner's mind and gain confidence doing so.

This confidence to adopt a beginner's mind can set our students apart from other job candidates.

Many people look at the same thing, but only few see a detail, a question, an opportunity. By cultivating a Socratic beginner's mind, we train our mind an eye 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).

Thank you 😊