

# RE-DISCOVERING SOCRATES

## *Conversations To Learning*

The evolution of the educational and training sector has resulted in organizing the delivery of its services in ways that often misaligns with the needs and preferences of adult learners. This misalignment fails to engage participants in *active learning*, thereby undermining the intent of the very process, itself. An alternative approach re-traces the Socratic dialectic, wherein conversations become the engine leading to learning. This also has important implications for managers to consider when training their employees.

### **Background**

Learning can involve the acquisition of information, the discovery of knowledge, the mastery of a skill, and/or the adaptation of deliberate behaviours. With any given topic, there is an enormous body of knowledge and a variety of competing theories, models and approaches, as well as contradictory expertise.

Having extensively studied a particular subject area, the teacher or trainer then organizes the relevant materials into a rational sequence. But because there is so much important information to disseminate and, conversely, limitations on the time in which to do it, teachers/trainers often default to a pedagogical methodology – a system intended to fill each participant's *tabula rasa* with precious packets of learning.

In such circumstances, the environment is not participant-focused, since it is the teacher/trainer who controls the information, the content delivery and the allocation of time. This creates order and security for the teacher/trainer, but may result in isolating the participants who can become totally disengaged and alienated. This is our story.

### **Student Council Leaders**

There are student councils, boards or associations at Ontario's colleges and they are supported directly by student fees. The fees contribute to ancillary college operations, as well as activities and services delivered by the staff of the student councils.

Students run for council leadership positions for any variety of reasons. Although they generally are enthusiastic and well-meaning, their lack of leadership experience severely challenges their abilities to manage through alien situations and dynamics.

Suddenly immersed in a high-demand environment, student council leaders are confronted by the need to:

- ◆ demonstrate leadership
- ◆ transform the board into a team
- ◆ set goals and priorities
- ◆ oversee financial accountability
- ◆ manage conflict and performance
- ◆ direct staff



A lack of continuity from one year's board to the next further impaired transitional considerations, resulting in repeated "start/stop" performance. As well, most student leaders participate in their council for only one or two years, resulting in a near-continuous turn-over. In the past, student council leaders were stranded on their own to work through such issues, with varying degrees of success.

## **The College Student Alliance**

The College Student Alliance (CSA) is a member-driven provincial association, representing 23 student councils at 16 of Ontario's colleges, encompassing over 125,000 full-time students. These student councils are responsible for managing a combined budget of \$56 Million, annually. In 2007, CSA entered into a partnership with *Diamond Management Institute* to deliver leadership training to student leaders from across the province in four workshops throughout the year. This was a Canadian first.

**Leadership Success** was conceptualized around a series of critically-relevant topics, replicating the approach of most corporate training initiatives. Time constraints, however, necessitated significantly condensing the materials.

To augment this content-driven training, an original Case Study, focussing on a fictitious college, was developed. It depicts the types of circumstances and situations often experienced by student councils and their leaders. The Case Study is presented in twelve monthly-installments, replicating the journey of a student council school-year.

## **An Imperfect Beginning**

Armed with a binder full of materials, selected self-assessment instruments and the Case Study, a team of trainers delivered the first **Leadership Success** workshop in May 2007. It was an imperfect beginning.

Participants were ill-prepared for the workshop. Most had failed to do the pre-reading, in particular the Case Study which was intended to be the central point of reference for the related content. Compounding this, many participants were undisciplined regarding punctuality, participation and serious learning. Clearly, there was a significant divergence in expectations between the trainers and the participants that created a frustrating disconnection.

Open consultation and analysis between CSA and *Diamond Management Institute* led to a healthy evolution of **Leadership Success**. It was recognized that the original design was overly-ambitious and the program was subsequently consolidated, so that more time was dedicated to fewer topics.

The CSA Secretariat, working closely with its Board, encouraged participants to be better prepared for the workshops and more serious about the learning opportunities that were available. A Leadership Success Steering Committee (LSSC) was formed that provided essential insights in how best to modify program delivery so that it would resonate with the participants. This continues to be a very collaborative relationship. In addition, the LSSC began to assume a leadership role and peer-to-peer influence began to blossom. Facilitator training was provided to support this shift.



## Experiential and Conversational Learning

**Leadership Success** now is a dramatically-altered program. It has evolved from a content-driven methodology to a learning approach that is based on experience and conversation. Its mode has morphed from *telling* into *exploring* and, as such, it is much more participant-focused. It may take longer to conduct and it may expose the trainer to greater unknowns, but the end-result has significantly-enhanced impact. The following example will illustrate this modified approach.

In the first workshop, there was a session on Effective Meetings, during which participants were provided with a standard Code of Conduct and a sample Agenda. Those landed with a thud. Now, participants identify the types of behaviours described in the meetings from the Case Study and articulate their personal Code of Conduct, taking into account:

- ◆ attendance
- ◆ punctuality
- ◆ preparedness
- ◆ participation
- ◆ confidentiality
- ◆ professionalism
- ◆ accountability
- ◆ text messaging and electronics
- ◆ whispering and side conversations
- ◆ personal and campus agendas

The outcome of this experiential approach is that participants are more likely to internalize their Code of Conduct, because they created it. This is further re-enforced through small group discussions and the follow-on assignment to conduct the same exercise at their next board meeting. This practical application clearly has led to positive and effective behaviours in their meetings.

As **Leadership Success** continues to evolve, there will be more facilitator training and the creation of a *Leadership Success Champion* at each board. Instructional exercises and materials are under development that will support the broad dissemination of this leadership development beyond just those who are able to attend the workshops.

## Re-Discovering Socrates

Experience and conversation always were the preferred approach to learning for most people. This truth became lost as the educational and training sector matured and developed systematic methodologies for transferring vast amounts of information and knowledge. This deliberate return to an interactive and animated dialogue has produced better students who are more engaged and quite anxious to learn.

In a way, the most threatening aspect of the Socratic dialogue to learning is experienced by the trainers. They must forsake order, control, timing, content, and outcome to a process that is inherently ambiguous and indeterminate. Only trainers who have a particular internal confidence will be comfortable with this approach.



Understanding and accommodating the needs and preferences of adult learners is essential for creating environments that will foster *active learning*. These lessons from **Leadership Success** now are being transferred successfully to our corporate training initiatives and are being embraced by those participants, too.

## Lessons For Managers

Are there important lessons that managers can derive from what has been described in **Leadership Success**?

Young entrants to the labour force are from the same cohort as the participants in **Leadership Success**. Their preferences and styles manifest similar needs. They will resist and reject being *told* how to do things. In order to avoid a churning of new recruits, managers need to consider how they might structure experiential learning environments that will engage and support these new employees. (See also: Developing High-Performance Organizations, Generation Y and The Manager As Choreographer)

In addition, open communication and feedback are paramount, so managers' communication styles should be assessed and may need to be modified to "connect" with this cohort. To support this, managers may require some additional training and coaching to bridge this divide effectively.

So start the conversation – it's the first step in developing the full potential of your employees.

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