

Socratic Coaching

What is Socratic Coaching?

Socratic Coaching is a method of teaching that values asking questions over simply giving answers. Socratic Coaching is a skill that takes much practice before it becomes “natural”, and also naturally walks people through scientific thinking. Scientific thinking is a life skill that can be used in many settings, including work. Scientific Thinking is also a countermeasure to everyone’s natural bias, a routine of intentional coordination between what we think will happen (theory) and what actually happens (evidence), and learning from the difference between the two. It is also a universal way of thinking that can be used to avoid cognitive bias any time we try to problem solve and achieve goals.

The intention of the Socratic approach is to allow the company to:

- Accelerate improvement / achieve results
- Intentionally DRIVE culture
- Sustain continuous improvement efforts
- Develop organizational capability
- Empower people at every level of the organization
- Seamlessly align improvement efforts throughout the organization to achieve an overarching strategy
- Build a pattern, which will aid in sustaining the improvements

In his book “Toyota Kata,” Mike Rother details a very prescriptive approach to developing one’s ability to Socratically coach. In the spirit of continuous improvement, we have what we believe is an enhanced version which follows these questions:

- What is the Challenge? – The challenge should be seen as slightly unattainable, but not beyond the realm of physics. It is somewhere between the target condition and True North and could take over one year to attain.
- What is the Target Condition? – The target condition should be just outside of what the team “knows” is possible today.
- What is the Actual Condition now? – This shows the understanding, or lack of understanding, of our current condition.
- What did you plan as your last step / experiment? – Experimentation is to be expected and only changes one thing at a time.
- What did you expect? – This forces the learner to consider the outcome before the experiment takes place.



- What actually happened? – This focuses on the results of the experiment. Werner von Braun once stated that one validated experiment is worth one thousand expert opinions. He made this statement at a time when he was surrounded by thousands of experts with the goal of putting a man on the moon.
- What did you learn from taking the last step / experiment? – There should always be learning. We either succeed or learn; there is no failure. This sentiment has to be encouraged and supported by leadership.
- What obstacles do you think are preventing you from reaching the target condition? – This is a conscious consideration of what is standing between the actual condition and the target condition. If there were no barriers, we would already be at the target.
- Which one* are you addressing now? Not ones! Only one at a time! – Pick one barrier at a time to address. Be careful not to use the shotgun approach.
- What is your next step (next PDCA experiment)? What do you expect? – This forces the learner to think ahead to their next step.
- How quickly can we go and see what we have learned from taking that step? – The focus here is speed. The rate of experimentation should be in hours, not in days or weeks. We must change our paradigm about how long it takes to do things.
- What else do you need? – The focus here is for the coach to allow the learner to express any barriers and/or resource needs.

*Note: you'll often work on the same obstacle for several PTRS cycles

In applying this method early in our journey, we had lots of encouragement from our Toyota mentors. They would use phrases like the ones below to encourage us along the way:

- “Every day little up”
- “Some days big up”
- “Until you take the first step, it will not be possible to see the next step”
- “Please try”
- “Do your best”

We would like to offer the same encouragement to you as you begin or continue your journey toward True North.

In the beginning, the process is not natural, so we offer a “Coaching Kata Card” to help facilitate the process. The key is to literally follow the questions on the card. Over time, you will earn the right to not use the card. Please use the link below to access our free gift to you.

[Coaching Kata Card](#)



Does your leadership team intentionally teach? If so, how do they teach? Are they following a proven pattern to ensure Socratic coaching is embedded into the organization's DNA? If you would like to develop your team's ability to coach using the Socratic Method, we can help. We offer practitioner and executive coaching, as well as a 200% risk-free guarantee on implementation work. For a no-obligation introduction meeting, please contact Paul Eakle at paul.eakle@driveinc.com or 865-323-3491.

