

Socratic Questioning Technique Brief

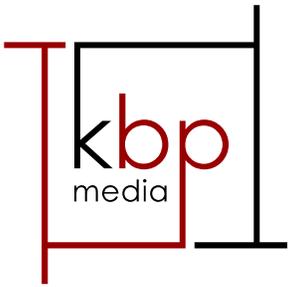
What Is Socratic Questioning

Socratic questioning is a dialog structured by a series of questions intended to draw out answers. First establish a thesis of what your stakeholder thinks their need is (usually expressed as a solution). Then engage in a dialog structured as a series of questions in an attempt to refute or disprove the thesis and get to the actual need.

Socratic questioning is named after the Greek philosopher and teacher, Socrates (ca. 470 - 399 B.C.) who taught his students using questions to involve them in a thoughtful dialog. Socrates' questions allowed his students to examine ideas logically to determine the validity of those ideas. This is a great way to explore ideas in depth which also drives the "student" to deeply consider, evaluate, and analyze their ideas.

Socratic questioning incorporates six types of questions which you'll use to varying degrees during your conversations. Those six types of questions including some examples are:

Clarification	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What problem are you trying to solve?• Could you give me an example of that?• What do you mean when you say...?• How is that idea relevant to our conversation?• How would you summarize the problem?
Probe Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are your assumptions?• How could you confirm or disprove that assumption?• How did you arrive at those assumptions?• Are there any assumptions we have not discussed?• What would happen if...?
Probe reasons and evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pop the "why stack" (5 Whys)• Why does that happen?• Is that a good enough reason to do that?• Is that problem worth solving? Why?• What did you observe when you tried it out?
Viewpoints and perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why is this change necessary, and who benefits?• What is the difference between (A) and (B)?• How are (A) and (B) similar?• Is there a different way to look at this?• What would (different stakeholder) say about that?



Implications and consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the consequences of that assumption?• Why is (A) important?• How does (A) affect (B)?• What is the affect of (A) on (B)?• What are the implications of (A)?
Questions about the Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why do you think I asked that question?• What was the point of that question?• How does (A) apply to this particular situation?• What other questions should I ask?• What have we not discussed that we should?

When to Use Socratic Questioning

Use Socratic questioning to determine the real need behind a request for a project or a change to a product.

You can also use Socratic questioning to gain deeper understanding of assumptions that your team or stakeholders have or to [help your team solve a problem](#).

Why Use Socratic Questioning

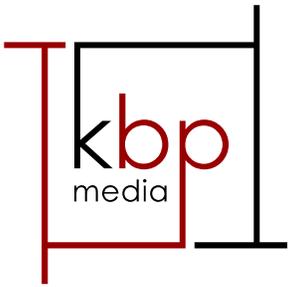
When teachers use this approach to help their students learn, they feign ignorance to help their students develop knowledge about the topic. When you use this approach to understand your stakeholder's needs, the disciplined line of thinking helps you deepen your understanding of that need. At the same time, your stakeholder also gains a deeper understanding of their true need and as a result won't be so hung up on their originally conceived solution.

This approach models the scientific practice of inquiry, so it reinforces the idea that product development is an exercise in learning through testing hypotheses.

How to Use Socratic Questioning

At the core, Socratic questioning involves starting a conversation with your stakeholder at a level they are comfortable talking. Ask a question, listen to their response, and use that response to prompt your next question.

To give you a head start, here is a line of questioning inspired by [Brennan Dunn](#) who uses them to [understand the true needs of his web development clients](#). I've revised his line of questioning to get at the real need for internal products.



What is the project?

Listen to your stakeholder/customer/user about what they think they need. This is similar to what many product people do currently and usually causes the stakeholder to describe the solution they want.

When did you realize you needed to do this project?

This helps you determine the event that sparked the change. It could be a series of events, or there could be that one straw that broke the camel's back. This question helps you get to any time constraints and may also indicate why the project is important.

What problem does this project solve?

This is the blunt question to get at the need the project is intended to satisfy. Your stakeholder probably has a solution in mind, so getting them to walk back to the underlying need helps you build a working definition of success that provides options for how you can proceed.

What is the impact to your organization of that problem?

This gets at whether the need is worth satisfying. If the unsatisfied need is a mere annoyance, you may find that any solution would cost more than the benefit you experience. If on the other hand the need is a big deal, and you can solve it with a very simple change to a process, it'd be silly not to make the change.

How much does that problem cost your organization?

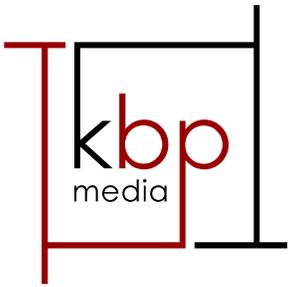
Quantify the benefit of satisfying the need as a follow up to the previous question. This is especially helpful for those people who prefer quantitative measures.

How should tomorrow look after we've solved this problem?

What do things look like if the need is successfully satisfied. It provides an opportunity to express the desired outcome in more concrete terms than "the problem is solved".

What are the next steps?

Let the stakeholder know that you heard them, that you are focused on satisfying their need (although chances are you won't deliver the exact solution they originally approached you with) and give them an idea about next steps.



Caveats and Considerations

While Socratic questioning seems simple, it can be quite rigorous. You need to have a goal in mind, listen carefully to the person you are talking to, and use the response to their questions to guide your next question and ultimately to gain a shared understanding of their desired outcome.

Start the discussion with a list of questions (such as the set of questions listed above) that you can use to structure the discussion, but be willing to explore an idea that comes up if it seems relevant.

Make sure that you ask clear, specific questions.

Allow time for the person you are talking with to answer. You may have periods of uncomfortable silence. That is ok. The person you are talking to may need to take some time to silently formulate their answer.

Follow up on responses and encourage elaboration where you feel more information is necessary.

Periodically summarize the conversation, either by sketching on a whiteboard or stating, “we agree that...” to make sure that everyone in the conversation has a shared understanding.

Additional Resources

[Using Socratic Questioning](#) from the [SERC Pedagogic Service Project](#)

[The Six Types of Socratic Questions](#) from the University of Michigan

[Socratic Questions](#) from [ChangingMinds.org](#)

[10 Ways to Determine the Purpose of a Project](#) from KBP.Media

[Talking to Humans](#) by Giff Constable

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About the Author

Kent is a writer and product manager who helps product people deliver powerful internal products. He has IT and product development experience in a variety of industries including financial services, health insurance, nonprofit, and automotive. Kent practices his craft as Content Curator at [Agile Alliance](#) and shares his ideas and experiences at [KBP.media](#). When not writing or product managing, Kent is his family's #ubersherpa, listens to jazz and podcasts (but not necessarily podcasts about jazz), and [collects national parks](#).