



Socratic Learning in Corporate Training

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Introduction

In the world of corporate learning, the real challenge today is not how much knowledge can be delivered, but how deeply people can think. With the only certainty being change, organizations need employees who can reason, challenge assumptions, navigate ethical and commercial trade-offs, and make decisions with clarity on the reasoning behind such decisioning. To nurture such capabilities, the Socratic method, based on dialogue and questioning rather than passive absorption, offers an effective alternative. While one to one coaching can be conducted using Socratic method, we examine three complementary ways for training larger sets of people ie. through instructor-led training (ILT), through case studies with branching outcomes, and through AI-driven dialogue systems.

ILT as a Medium for Socratic Dialogue

Instructor-led training has long been the most natural home for Socratic dialogue. A skilled facilitator can create a safe but challenging environment where participants are drawn into questioning their assumptions, testing their reasoning, and engaging in collective exploration of complex issues. For example, in a leadership workshop, rather than providing “best practices” directly, the facilitator might pose a series of question such as, *Why do you think this decision worked in that context? What risks might arise if the environment shifts? How could we have assessed the situation or proposal differently? Or, how would this play out if you were accountable to a different set of stakeholders?*

The strength of ILT lies in the fact that a facilitator can read the room, adjust the pace, and probe deeper when they sense superficial answers. Yet, the same qualities that make it effective also limit its reach and render it unscalable. ILT is resource-intensive, dependent on highly skilled facilitators, and often confined to small groups. Also, in hypercompetitive environments, participants might not open up and instead, try to assume defensive stands so that their assumptions are not questioned in an open forum. Scaling such dialogic engagement across a large organization is difficult, and consistency varies based on facilitator skill. Thus, while ILT can serve as a means for Socratic learning, it cannot by itself meet the demands of modern corporate training.

Case Studies and Branching Scenarios

Case-based learning provides a bridge between traditional a fully physical ILT and digital learning environment with extensive AI capabilities. Well-designed branching scenarios replicate the core features of Socratic questioning by compelling learners to make decisions, consider consequences, and reflect on their reasoning. Instead of reading a static case study, learners engage digitally, with situations that evolve based on their choices. For example, a sales manager, might be faced with a scenario where he must balance short-term profit with long-term reputation. Each decision opens new paths, reveals hidden assumptions, and raises fresh dilemmas. With every decision, a feedback is provided; all this in the privacy that only a digital environment provides.

The method of achieving Socratic depth here lies in thoughtful design: the scenarios must be authentic, the branches meaningful, and the outcomes diverse enough to spark reflection. Learners should not simply be rewarded for “right” answers but invited to consider why certain outcomes emerged and what alternative perspectives might have yielded.

The challenge, however, lies in complexity and realism. Poorly designed scenarios risk feeling artificial, with choices that seem either obvious or irrelevant. Learners may disengage if the branching feels too linear or if feedback does not prompt genuine reflection. Creating nuanced cases also requires close collaboration between instructional designers, subject matter experts, lawyers and sometimes ethicists or behavioral scientists to ensure the dilemmas are both realistic and thought-provoking. Case method with branching scenarios can be used at scale and offers a relatively cost optimized solution for training large numbers.

AI as the Modern Socrates

Artificial Intelligence offers the opportunity to directly simulate Socratic questioning at scale. Instead of predefined paths, AI can sustain open-ended dialogue that adjusts dynamically to the learner’s reasoning. This makes it possible to combine the depth of ILT and the engagement of branching scenarios with the reach and personalization of digital tools.

The method of achieving this involves designing AI systems to ask rather than tell. Instead of dispensing answers, an AI coach can probe with questions like: What assumptions underlie your approach? How might someone with a different perspective see this issue? What risks could arise from this path? Early questions can be clarifying, while later ones can explore consequences, ethics, or systemic impact. In this way, AI becomes a thinking partner rather than a knowledge dispenser.

AI can make reflective coaching accessible across an organization, including in regions or roles where human facilitators are scarce. It can also collect insights on how employees reason. This provides organizations insights into decision-making patterns and developmental needs. Studies already show promise: in one experiment, an AI tool called

Socratic Mind improved student engagement and outcomes in online courses[1]. Similarly, recursive Socratic prompting has been shown to enhance reasoning and chain-of-thought articulation compared to direct answering approaches[2].

Yet the risks are significant. Firstly, the method may not be suitable for all learners nor for all subjects. Also, poorly sequenced questions can lead to confusion or disengagement. Learners under time pressure may resist the self-direction required, preferring clear guidance instead. There is also the danger of over-reliance: if learners depend too heavily on AI prompts, they may not develop the internal habit of questioning that is the ultimate goal of Socratic learning. In addition, the price disadvantage cannot be ignored. Building, customizing, and maintaining AI systems that are contextually rich and ethically robust is expensive, especially when compared with more traditional training interventions. Organizations must weigh this investment carefully against the benefits. Finally, the need for stringent guardrails is paramount. Without clear safeguards, AI-facilitated Socratic learning could drift into inappropriate questioning, reinforce cultural biases, or create discomfort in sensitive contexts. Guardrails around content moderation, ethical boundaries, and data use are essential to maintain trust and credibility[3].

Can Socratic Methods Apply to Hard Skills and Corporate Decision-Making?

A frequent question is whether the Socratic method, with its focus on questioning and reflection, can be applied effectively to domains beyond ethics, leadership, and soft skills. Research suggests that it can. In the context of hard skills, such as technical problem-solving, programming, or quantitative analysis, Socratic questioning has been used to deepen understanding by guiding learners to articulate the reasoning behind their choices rather than simply applying formulas. For example, in engineering education, faculty have applied structured Socratic questioning to help students identify conceptual misunderstandings in physics and mathematics[4]. By breaking problems into a sequence of probing questions, learners develop procedural competence as also adaptive expertise, which is critical for complex technical work. Questions such as the following might help the learner validate their assumptions and understand. *Why is this assumption valid here? What happens if we vary this parameter? What alternative model might also explain the data?*

In corporate decision-making, Socratic approaches have been shown to help managers surface hidden assumptions and avoid groupthink. Garvin and Roberto (2001) demonstrated that decision quality improves when organizations use “inquiry-based” dialogue to challenge dominant perspectives before settling on a course of action[5]. Similarly, case-based studies in management education show that when participants are pushed through Socratic questioning rather than being handed frameworks, they not only recall frameworks better but also apply them with more logical reasoning and nuance in strategic contexts[6]. For example, when deciding on a merger strategy, instead of asking only about financial synergies, a facilitator or AI-driven system could use probing questions such as, *What are the cultural risks of integration? How might competitors respond? What assumptions are we*

making about market stability? These kinds of questions encourage broader situational awareness, understanding of one's own assumptions and biases and consequently improved decision-making.

Thus, the Socratic method is not limited to abstract reflection but can extend into technical mastery and practical business judgments. Its role is not to replace the teaching of procedures or frameworks but to deepen the learner's ability to question, adapt, and transfer those procedures into complex, dynamic contexts.

A Convergent Future

Together, these three approaches, ILT, case-based branching, and AI-driven Socratic dialogue, form a continuum rather than alternatives. ILT can model the method at its richest, case studies can embed it in scalable digital learning design, and AI can democratize access to it across the organization. Each has its own challenges, but each also addresses the others' limitations.

What is required now is thoughtful integration. Organizations must invest in facilitators who can model questioning, designers who can create authentic branching cases, and technologists who can develop AI that truly provokes reflection rather than delivers pre-packaged wisdom. Reintroduction of the Socratic method through these diverse pathways offers a chance to move corporate learning from the transactional to the transformational. We can train not just for fact based information, compliance or performance, but for inquiry, discernment, and wisdom, capabilities that matter most in the uncertain, complex business world we face today.

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