



## **SOCRATIC INQUIRY**

### OVERVIEW

The best ideas and thoughts are those that can withstand the tension of examination and scrutiny. Socratic Inquiry is a method that gives power to questions rather than answers. Socrates was a Greek philosopher that was in search of the truth. He answered questions with more questions. He believed that questions would lead us to the truth. Since we are not all philosophers in the work we do, we can't leave everything with a question. So, Socratic Inquiry is a unique tool that is designed to provoke critical thinking and problem solving when groups get stuck.



### WHEN TO USE

In team meetings that are designed to get to decisions, groups can get stuck. Either there is group think (where everyone automatically follows one person's thinking or ideas) or there is a severe disagreement. Socratic inquiry invites the group to question a topic, idea, decision from all angles possible—even angles they had not considered before. The goal is to support a group to transcend from the place of being stuck and to ensure that what they are about to decide or consider can hold up to the power of questions.

### HOW TO USE

When you notice that a group is experiencing group think, extreme disagreement, or unable to decide, consider the following questions:

- What is an angle or a perspective we have not considered?
- (*When is a group showing conformity*) Who has a different idea that has not been shared yet?
- Who is thinking about this (*insert topic*) differently?
- What is missing from how we are thinking about this?
- What is a perspective that is missing from this conversation?
- How close is this decision to our vision of (equity, inclusivity, etc?)
- What is behind the disagreement?
- What is behind the agreement?

An ideal way for a beginner facilitator to use this tool is to set a time during a meeting for 10-12 minutes for pure dialogue time. A facilitator can use the questions above to keep the dialogue moving forward. Some groups may need only two questions and will take to the process of inquiry with enthusiasm. Some groups may take a while to figure out the question that works for them. Setting a time limit to the process provides structure to what may feel like an unstructured process. When used strategically, Socratic Inquiry provides structure when groups get stuck even if it doesn't seem like it in the moment.

### Reflecting on Equity

While many of us have heard the name Socrates before (even if we don't know his philosophy), there are few of us who know the name of his teacher, Aspasia. Like many women of historical note, the record we have of Aspasia is fuzzy. We know she moved to Athens and as a foreign-born person didn't have the rights of a citizen. We also know she engaged in a long-term relationship with the statesmen and military general, Pericles. She may have been a hetaera - a high class female companion to powerful men. This would include sex work, but also include intellectual companionship and lead to her relationship as a teacher to Socrates.



Aspasia's story is interesting because we can consider what elements of the way Aspasia moved through the world influenced Socrates and his philosophy. She lacked many forms of formal power as a non-citizen and as a woman in a time and culture in which women's contributions were not seen as valuable. Navigating these realities, Aspasia may have relied on asking questions to surface new truths instead of asserting her own ideas. Stated another way by the mother in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, "The man is the head, but the woman is the neck, and she can turn the man any



way she wants.” Seen through this lens, we can think of Socratic Inquiry as a tool we can use to help address power inequities when we have little formal power. Socratic Inquiry is one tool facilitators can use to help reach our equity standard of practice around dialogue. The equity standard of practice states that conversations honor the legitimacy and value of diverse forms of communication and ensure all voices in a process are heard on equal terms.

## COMMUNITY LEARNING MODEL

### *Dialogue*

Create a high-quality conversation that clarifies values, surfaces tensions, and taps into creativity; leading to concrete plans that achieve results. Establish conditions of genuine respect for the views and needs of the other.

Socratic Inquiry is a tool for the Dialogue phase of the Community Learning Model. To learn more about tools for dialogue and the other areas of the Community Learning Model, visit [civiccanopy.org/clm](http://civiccanopy.org/clm).

