

SOCRATIC QUESTIONING

Introduction

Every day, prisoners have choices to make. They may be limited, but they still matter.

- Who do they associate with?
- How much do they engage with their work or education?
- How willingly do they follow instructions?

In some cases, prison officers can tell prisoners what to do. But prisoners may not listen – and many choices are made outside officers' direct supervision. We want prisoners to be able to make good choices, in prison, and after release. How can we help them to do this?

One way is to offer explicit guidance. For example, if a prisoner has fallen out with his cellmate, we might say "It would be good to patch things up." This may be the best way to give advice – it's certainly the clearest way to articulate the best course of action. We could usefully go further, and explain why this matters: "You're going to be spending all weekend banged up with him – you'll get on better if you can make it up now."

The disadvantage of explicit guidance is that we're doing the thinking and deciding for the prisoner, not them. They're less likely to follow this guidance. They may actively resist it. They might wonder, for example, whether our advice is a way to save ourselves work, rather than being in their best interests. Moreover, we won't be around when they're released. If we're deciding for them, we're not helping them make better decisions.

So, while there are times when explicit guidance is a good idea, we want to help prisoners think through the choices they have, and their potential consequences. We can do this by asking Socratic questions. These are questions which place the burden of thinking on the respondent. They're named after the Ancient Greek thinker Socrates. He didn't tell listeners what to think: he asked them questions, challenging them to reason things out themselves. This helped listeners see the world in new ways, and recognise errors in their own thinking. If we stick with the example of the upset cellmate, we might ask:

- "How do you think your cellmate is feeling now?"
- "How do you think the weekend is going to be if you're still angry with each other?"
- "What could you do to sort things out?"

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The underlying message is the same as if we had given explicit guidance: fixing things now will make everyone's lives better. But we've invited and challenged the prisoner to do the thinking. We've made the decision theirs. This places them in charge of their own destiny – and should increase their commitment to action. In doing so, we've taught them something which – hopefully – will begin to stick, whether it's how to think through the consequences, how to treat others, or when to swallow our pride.

How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. **Choose guiding questions:** Socratic questions may encourage deeper thinking – but they'll only achieve change if they lead a prisoner to act differently. So, thinking about the prisoner and the situation, decide exactly what you want to see the prisoner doing differently. That is, hoping that they'll be "calmer" or "more thoughtful" is too vague to guide action. Instead, plan that you want them to see them doing: "speak quietly and slowly when talking to you," or "leave their cellmates' possessions alone."
- B. **Select questions that provide new insights:** The most appropriate choice of questions will depend on the insights you are nudging the prisoner towards. For example, if a prisoner has no interest in any courses, we may challenge their assumptions about the courses, and where they lead. We might invite them to seek more reliable information from other prisoners who have been through the courses. We could encourage them to take time over their decision, rather than acting instinctively. Finally, we can look at the potential consequences of engaging with education, or not doing so, and consider the alternatives they have. Three questions is a good number of questions to aim for however depending on the situation you could ask more to help the prisoner reflect more deeply or to get a better understanding of their thinking. Here are some examples of the kinds of questions that you could ask:
 - **Clarify the issue:** "What exactly did he do that made you angry?"
 - **Challenge assumptions:** "Are you sure he meant to do it?"
 - **Seek evidence:** "Can you give me an example of something he said that you thought was disrespecting you?"
 - **Consider alternatives:** "Can you tell me three different ways you could respond?"
 - **Explore consequences:** "What do you think would happen if you avoided him for the rest of the day?"
- C. **Combine listening, questions and guidance:** Socratic strategies are a valuable strategy, but on their own, they are not enough for a

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conversation and may not be enough to persuade a prisoner to change. Socratic questions are a teaching tool. We need to combine them with genuine questions – that is, questions we don't know the answer to. We can listen to the answers and adapt our Socratic questions accordingly. For example, we might start by asking how a prisoner is feeling, and why. A Socratic question might then be useful to help them think about different ways to act on their feelings. If they miss our point, we might then need to offer some explicit guidance. We can combine conversational strategies to help prisoners rethink their approach.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Missing your mark.** Socrates never missed. Once he'd begun a dialogue, he trapped the person he was speaking with in question after question until they were forced to accept his wisdom. But we're in a trickier situation. We want to ensure prisoners see our point – not just leave them confused, or wondering why we were asking random questions. Moreover, Socrates had the time and luxury of being able to keep talking and debating until he'd reached a solution. We don't: we might need to make a telling point in two minutes as prisoners return to their cells. So, as a rule of thumb, if you haven't managed to make your point after three Socratic questions, it may be worth offering some explicit guidance. "I'm just thinking about the consequences myself – I know it isn't easy, but apologising feels like a good idea."

Case Study

Officer Clarkson approaches a cell to respond to an emergency cell bell call. After looking in the cell she can see that the prisoner that occupies the cell is safe and it is not an emergency. She decides to use socratic questioning to help get to the bottom of why the prisoner pressed their emergency cell bell.

- PO: Hello, Steve, is everything ok. I saw you turned your emergency cell bell on.
- Steve: I can't be on this wing any longer gov. Just get me off this wing.
- PO: Ok. What is going on? You need to tell me more.
- Steve: Just get me off the wing!
- PO: Why are you feeling this way?
- (Steve walks around the cell thinking about what to say next.)
- PO: Look Steve just speak to me.
- Steve: Look my life is at risk on here. You need to get me off the wing.
- PO: Are you sure?
- Steve: Yes. I wouldn't just make this up gov.
- PO: What has made you think that you are under threat on this wing? Why would being somewhere else make it better? Erm... Have you told anyone else about this?

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- Steve: Look I am not getting into this now. Just let me out alright...
- PO: You know I can't do that right now. Look I have other things to do now so I will see if I can speak to you later.

This is a **non-example** because the officer doesn't ask enough socratic questions and some of the socratic questions could be improved. For instance the first question they ask is "what is going on?" instead the officer could be more specific to try to clarify the issue and ask: "What has made you feel like you no longer be on this wing?". Also, towards the end of the conversation the officer asks multiple questions at once. It is important when asking socratic questions to only ask one at once. Asking multiple questions at once presents a challenge for people's working memory meaning that they won't be able to respond as effectively to all of the questions.

An example in this situation would start with the officer trying to take a moment to decide what they want the prisoner to do in this situation. In this instance it is likely that the officer would want the prisoner to calm down and open up about what has happened to make them feel the way they do. This would allow the officer to try to select three socratic questions that would allow the prisoner to begin to calm down and open up about what is happening. Furthermore, if the prisoner didn't calm down within a few minutes then the officer should provide the prisoner with some explicit guidance such as: "Ok. I can see that you are stressed out right now, but I can't take any action unless you tell me about what has happened. I am going to give you a bit of space and come back in 5 minutes." Lastly, in this scenario it is clear the prisoner is in distress therefore it would be good practice to ask the prisoner whether they would like to access any formal support available and to ask them directly whether they have had any thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

Mitigations to using this technique

Consider the following questions to think about the circumstances when you would and wouldn't choose to use this technique:

- What kinds of situations is it best to use socratic questioning? On the flip side are there certain situations when it is inappropriate to use socratic questions?
- Would you adapt your use of socratic questions dependent on the prisoner that you are speaking to?

Final Reflection Questions

Answer these final questions to help to consolidate your learning and consider how you will use this technique in your day-to-day practice in your current working context.

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- What is the goal? What are prison officers looking to achieve by using this technique?
- Why should this technique work? How should prisoners behave differently?
- What do you need to do? Outline the key success checks you need to meet to apply this technique?
- What are the pitfalls? When shouldn't we use this technique? What barriers do you foresee to using this technique? How could you overcome them?