



NEWTINKER

NewThinking ...about CONSULTING

:: What's a Consulting Philosopher, and Who Needs One?

Let's start with the answer and reason our way back to the question. *The answer is: ...because philosophers spend their lives thinking about thinking, learning how to do it well, and discovering that the most critical component of productivity – not to mention intellectual satisfaction - is asking the right questions.* The second most important component of productivity is knowing that a reasonable answer is not necessarily the same as an absolutely correct answer. Just ask Descartes about THIS kind of frustration...

I have a theory that if Socrates had been satisfied with some reasonable answers, he might have lived to irritate a new generation of Athenian senators. As it was, however, his habit of questioning answers (which is, in itself, a wise thing to do as long as it doesn't become an obsession) was motivated by his commitment to the idea that there was one wholly complete and true answer to the questions he posed – especially if the *right* question had been posed. The Socratic Method – when employed well – can be profoundly effective. But what does it mean to “employ the Socratic Method well?”

This is a central question in the on-going deliberation on the nature of leadership. *Leadership – like teaching – is an activity in which one individual attempts to inspire another to do or consider something that is unfamiliar.* This effort is successful in direct proportion to the capacity of the leader/teacher to understand the learner's starting point. Such understanding is achieved only through purposeful and thoughtful interaction; the Socratic Method provides one option for potentially successful interaction.

But there's a catch. In order for the Socratic Method to be effective, the teacher has to listen to the student. Questions make sense only if they invite the learner to speak from where she IS. And, usually, steps must be taken before all the circumstances can be known and analyzed. That, of course, is the challenge.

*That's what a consulting philosopher does.....*she listens to the client, and invites the client to speak from where he is. When the client starts from where he is, it's much less complicated to discern where he wants to go. When the destination is identified, it remains to choose a path that provides as many desirable features and as few undesirable ones as possible. It helps, as the trek takes place, to have a sherpa along – someone to share the load ... someone who's traveled this way before.

The difference between a consultant and a consulting philosopher is this: The consultant will tell you what to take, how to pack, and how to make things work as well as possible; the consulting philosopher travels with you, helps you manage when you need it, and offers the occasional piece of wisdom even when you haven't asked. *The consulting philosopher asks the right questions at the right time, and keeps asking ... until you threaten to serve a hemlock cocktail – straight up.*

