Managers Develop Moral Accountability: The Impact of Socratic Dialogue

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How can organisations 'manage for integrity'?[1] Two differing approaches have been called the compliance strategy and the integrity strategy. While the first seeks to instil compliance with standards and systems, the integrity strategy seeks to teach ethical decision-making and values as well, so that 'ethical thinking and awareness...[are]...part of every manager's mental equipment'. In this paper the Dutch consultant philosopher Hans Bolten reports on how Socratic dialogue has helped managers develop ethical capacities and responsibility. Drawing on research with dialogue members he concludes that organisations that care about ethics cannot rely on abstract moral codes and rules. He argues that they need Socratic dialogue as an instrument if their managers are to shape moral guidelines they both agree upon and can apply in practice. And he shows how dialogue can foster in managers the readiness to give an account of their actions, a readiness implicit in the idea of moral action itself. Thus Socratic dialogue can help create a culture in which morally accountable action is the rule, not the exception, and in which the responsibility to give an account of one's actions has its rightful place.[2]

> Socrates, even before I met you they told me that in plain truth you are a perplexed man yourself and reduce others to perplexity. At this moment I feel you are exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell until I am just a mass of helplessness.

These are the words of Meno, one of the participants in Plato's dialogue *Meno*. He has just been in conversation with Socrates about the question 'What is virtue?'. These words describe poignantly what participants in modern Socratic dialogues experience. One of these participants describes this experience as producing a feeling of 'confusion..., at a certain moment you wonder whether you have been thinking at all'. This particular participant is a bank manager who has been taking part in a Socratic dialogue enquiring into the question 'What role does ethics play in banking?'

Feeling confused is not a pleasant experience. However, it is possible to learn something from the experience, as this confusion may be the precursor to a profound change in one's conversational attitude from which a dialogical attitude may follow; an attitude of open mindedness towards what others have to say to us. Without this open conversational attitude it is impossible to deal with ethical issues well; this attitude is the basis of every morally accountable action.

Quite often, participation in a Socratic dialogue helps to develop such an open conversational attitude. Why though is this case? Furthermore, how is such a dialogically conversational attitude related to morally accountable behaviour? This article aims to answer such questions. Its topic is: What contribution can Socratic dialogue make to morally accountable behaviour?[3] In the first section I argue - with the help of a case study - that the willingness to engage in dialogue, and actual participation in dialogues, are the core of morally accountable behaviour. In the second section I sketch the 'ideal' conversation: a dialogue. I outline what dialogue is by contrasting it with another type of conversation, namely discussion. Subsequently, in the third section, I describe the Socratic Dialogue in the tradition of the 20th century German philosopher Leonard Nelson and his pupil Gustav Heckmann. Three Socratic dialogue participants reporting on changes in their professional conduct follow this. Finally, I address the question: How can the learning outcomes of participation

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in Socratic dialogue be explained? I add a note for prospective facilitators about their role and the skills it demands.

1 The Significance of Dialogue for Ethical Action

Ethically it is important to develop systematic forms of dialogue within organisations. Let me clarify this by means of a case study. Imagine the following:

> *You are a bank manager. You have granted credit to a company with four shareholders. Three of them have signed a guarantee in which they each gave security for £90,000. The fourth person has agreed to do the same, but despite repeated requests, he has not yet signed the guarantee. Unfortunately the company's fortunes have taken a turn for the worse and the shareholders come to you with a request for additional financing. You have no intention of meeting this request because you believe that the company is no longer financially viable and as a banker it would be irresponsible of you to finance the company any further. However if you told this to the shareholders the bank would lose the £90,000 already advanced. The company will go bankrupt if you don't provide further financing and, of course, the fourth shareholder will not sign the guarantee knowing that the bank will no longer finance the company.*

Were you to find yourself in this situation your first thought might well be, 'How can I prevent a £90,000 loss to the bank?'. You would start puzzling about this, perhaps even asking your colleagues for advice. In all this activity you are working towards the fixed goal of preventing a financial loss to the bank. To reach this goal you might decide the following: you will tell the shareholders that the bank will almost certainly provide additional financing and that after the fourth guarantor signs the financial situation will be looked into more carefully. Once you have got the signature you will tell the shareholders that on further consideration additional financing is impossible. You may now ask yourself: 'Is it morally acceptable to get the shareholder to sign the guarantee under this pretext?' Now you have this ethical question to consider. What do you do next? Nowadays people no longer believe that there is any moral authority that will simply provide ethical norms. And even if there was what good would it do to you? If you fear anything at all, it probably won't be the moral reproach of an undisputed 'expert' in moral matters (if such an expert exists at all). You are more likely to fear the disapproval of your colleagues and clients, people who matter to you in your daily routine. It is in this context that van Luijk, director of the European Institute for Business Ethics, speaks of the democratisation of morals; we ourselves, he says, as autonomous, right-minded individuals, want to establish the moral accountability of our action. Van Luijk therefore defines ethical action as: 'acting in accordance with those reasoned ethical norms that I feel myself and others obligated to'.

If you don't yet know what the right course of action would be in this dilemma, having a reasoned conversation with colleagues and other people concerned could clarify things. In this way you can find out which norms you 'feel yourself obligated to' in this particular case. Of course it is possible you don't need such a conversation, because you already know what the morally right course of action is. However the truly morally accountable action implies a readiness to give an account of that action. But if this is the case you cannot appeal to a moral authority. You cannot say that it is ethical to get the shareholder to sign the guarantee under this pretext simply because some reputable firm of ethical consultants have said you are allowed to do so.

The ethical content of your action, therefore, depends to a large degree on your readiness to give an account of it.[4] If you are asked why it is acceptable to get the signature under this pretext you will have to enter into a conversation to justify your course of action. In such a conversation the

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[3] In continental philosophy this view is held by, for instance, Karl-Otto Apel. See: Apel K-O *Transformation der Philosophie* 2 Bde Frankfurt a M 1976. For the role of Socratic dialogue in this respect, see: Apel 'Das Sokratische Gespräch und die gegenwärtige Transformation der Philosophie' in: Krohn D (1989) *Das Sokratische Gespräch - ein Symposon* Junius, Hamburg 1989 and Gronke H 'Nelson, Husserl, Apel 'Kontinuität der Letztbegründungsphilosophie' in: Kleinknecht R, B Neißer (Hrsg) *Leonard Nelson in der Diskussion "Sokratisches Philosophieren" Bd 1* Dipa, Frankfurt am Main 1994. Within anglo-saxon philosophy. Charles Taylor expressed the same view in *The Malaise of Modernity* Don Mills, Ontario 1994 pp 26-36 and 42-51 (Published as *The Ethics of Authenticity* Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass and London, 1991)

following questions may arise: What ethical norms are defensible in this case? What is of vital importance in this situation? Is it more important for the bank to be known as trustworthy or for the bank to be known as an organisation that won't be trifled with? Compared to the question 'How can I prevent a £90,000 loss to the bank?' these new questions are of quite another kind. With these questions you are no longer trying to find ways to achieve set goals; instead these goals are themselves brought up for discussion. This new conversation will on the one hand be about which goals you are in fact striving for and on the other hand about the question whether these goals should be striven for at all. It will be an inquiry into the ethical beliefs, frames of reference and motives you actually have as well as an inquiry into the *validity* of these beliefs, frames and motives. It is the inquiry into the validity that makes this dialogue philosophical and ethical, rather than psychological. I will return to this issue below.

In order to have your behaviour stand this test of ethical criticism you and your interlocutor will be conducting an ethical self-examination with the goal of bringing the situation sketched above to a morally good conclusion. Now we can see how the 'thesis' outlined at the beginning of this section has been clarified: organisations that care about ethics need dialogue as an instrument because the shaping of normative guidelines cannot be done without it.

We all know from personal experience how hard it is to get a fruitful exchange of ideas about ethical matters. Conversations that begin well often produce nothing, ending either with reproaches flying back and forth or, less annoyingly, but at least as unfruitful, the whole conversation evaporates into noncommittal grandiloquence. People are not naturally capable of having an effective good moral conversation, as we aren't born with the skills needed for it. Instead we have to acquire and cultivate them through practice. It is only when we have these skills that will we be able to avoid the pitfalls just mentioned. For acquiring these skills the Socratic dialogue is the method par excellence. The use of Socratic dialogue increases the likelihood that organisations will acquire the dialogical processes that produce an organisational culture in which ethical matters can be successfully discussed. That, at least, is what Kessels contends in his book *Socrates op de Markt* and in his article 'Socrates Comes to Market'.[4] Before going into this question, however, I will describe what these skills are and the benefits that can come from using them.

2 Characteristics of Dialogue

In this section I will characterise what dialogue is by comparing it with discussion. To get a clear understanding of what follows it is necessary to keep in mind that a conversation contains elements of both a dialogue and a discussion. An idealised description will nevertheless be useful because it enables us to determine the value of different kinds of conversational contributions.

There is a substantial difference between a dialogue and a discussion.[5] The fundamental desire of 'discussants' is to *convince:* 'listen to me, I have something to say to you'. The main thing I, as a discussant, am concerned with is getting my opinions accepted. In a discussion I try to generate sympathy and understanding for what I think about the subject under discussion. If my fellow-discussant holds a view that I don't think compatible with mine it will be important to me to make this position seem incomprehensible by making it seem untenable. In practice, the consequence of all this is that discussants are chiefly engaged in trying to prove each other to be wrong: 'Of course you should get someone to sign that guarantee under such a pretext. He already promised to do so, didn't he?', says one. To which the other one reacts: 'Come on! You're not supposed to lie, are you?'. Undaunted, the first speaker hits back with: 'But that's not lying. And what about that shareholder, didn't he lie too?'

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[4] Jos Kessels 'Socrates Comes to Market' *Reason in Practice: The Journal of Philosophy of Management* Vol 1 No 1, 2001 pp 49-71 (see especially p 50)

[5] My description of dialogue is supported by De Boer. See: Boer, Th de *Foundations of a Critical Psychology* Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pa 1983 p 78-115. He expresses what a dialogue is by saying that 'in a dialogue I'm willing to look at the other with the eye I'm looking at myself with. We assume the other to have experience-in-the-first-person' (p 82). Kant's three rules for philosophising can be used to provide a similar account of dialogue: 1 think for yourself; 2 think yourself into the position of another person; 3 always think in harmony with yourself. See Kessels *Socrates op de Markt, Filosofie in bedrijf* Boom/Meppel, Amsterdam 1997 pp 115-117

Now this is a discussion. Within a few seconds the conversation goes off track. It has become fairly unclear what the subject of conversation is, what the positions of the speakers are and which premises they are trying to justify. We already know how this will turn out. If the conversation is not taken in hand here there is no chance of a satisfactory outcome.

The fundamental desire of partners in dialogue, on the other hand, is *investigating*: we are engaged in dialogue when we speak with one another on the assumption that there is something we have to say to each other. This description implies several important aspects of a dialogue. When I assume we have something to say to each other, I expect us to be capable of understanding one another. I also expect us to be willing to try to understand one another. I therefore try to understand what it is that someone has to say to me; I listen to him or her and check that I understand. But I, too, have something to say; so I take the trouble to make myself understandable to him. And from my interlocutor I demand a similar conversational attitude: if he is being deliberately incomprehensible I find this morally wrong. In a dialogue, therefore, certain moral principles are implied: we demand a responsive, understanding-oriented attitude from each other.

Partners in dialogue	Discussants
♦ Investigate a matter	♦ Seek to convince each other that they are right
♦ Give each other room to speak	♦ Demand speaking time
♦ Pose questions in order to understand each other	♦ Look upon each other's speaking time as lost time
♦ Reflect back each other's words	♦ Undermine each other's standpoints
♦ Say only what they really mean	♦ Attack each other's arguments
♦ Strive for mutual understanding	♦ Try to make each other's viewpoints seem unintelligible
♦ Have a common understanding of the matter	♦ Strive for approval of their own viewpoint
♦ Make their viewpoint as clear as possible	
♦ Are willing to give arguments that sup	
♦ Investigate differences of opinion	
♦ Strive for consensus	

The moral principles applied in a dialogue can be made clear on the basis of these behavioural characteristics of dialogue. For these are not just 'objective characteristics' by means of which we can determine whether or not two people are engaged in dialogue; they are also, primarily even, formulations of rules which we think we should observe, and which we hold each other accountable for. If, for instance, I am not given 'room to speak' I will, in general, experience this as improper behaviour. If someone does not do his best to speak to me as 'intelligibly as he can' I will find this very improper, as I will not feel that I am being treated well. By contrast, in a real dialogue we find ourselves treated 'with dignity'.

The outcome of a dialogue may be that we gain insight into what it is that we have to say to each other. This means that I can gain not only insight into the ideas and beliefs of the other, but also into my own views, convictions and motives. Strange as it may sound this tallies with our experience. In a real dialogue we often notice that at first we are unable to say what we mean whereas later we succeed in doing so with the help of our interlocutor. Being involved in a dialogue I can find out what it is that I want to say, in a dialogue I can reach self-knowledge.

A dialogue can involve or lead to

♦ Awareness of being taken seriously as an interlocutor
♦ Making convictions explicit
♦ Finding good reasons for convictions
♦ Making tacit knowledge explicit
♦ Exposing pseudo knowledge
♦ Transforming thinking habits
♦ Insight into each other's ideas and viewpoints
♦ Acceptance of each other's viewpoints
♦ Shared vision
♦ Genuine insight into a problem

3 The Socratic Dialogue Process

A Socratic dialogue is a conversation in which a philosophical investigation is carried out. Socratic dialogue as it is described here has its origin in the work of the German philosopher Leonard Nelson (1882-1927) who developed the method for educational purposes at the beginning of the 20th century. Though his original conception of the method was didactic - to teach students to philosophise - it has since developed into a method for investigating philosophical, ethical or general, conceptual questions with groups in any context.

A Socratic dialogue is an exchange of thoughts with the goal of finding an answer to a particular question. It is an attempt to bring about a dialogue within which the demand is made upon the participants to practise the dialogical skills described above. So that the reader can picture this, I will describe the course of such a dialogue below. Note, however, that it is a rather schematic account.

(1) Starting: Participants and the Original Question

A Socratic dialogue has five to eight participants who share a common interest in a single question. They may be people who work together daily, such as members of a works council or a board of directors, but may also be a group of colleagues who don't normally have to deal with each other. The original question may have been formulated in advance, in collaboration with some of the participants or training organisers, but the participants may also decide on a question on the spot. However chosen, the question must, like the ethical question facing the bank managers, be the kind of question that concerns our convictions and world-view. An answer to such questions can be found only by means of thinking. They are 'non-empirical' questions: we do not have to carry out an empirical investigation to find an answer because we already have all the information we need at our disposal. Examples of such questions are: 'What amount of flexibility may one expect of employees?', 'What is it to be customer-oriented?', and 'What social responsibility does our organisation have?'

The facilitator does not contribute to the content of the investigation – often to the initial astonishment or annoyance of the participants - but asks questions and writes on a flipchart statements made by participants. Generally speaking the facilitator ensures the conversation stays, or becomes, a real dialogue. All the possible interventions by the facilitator can be deduced from the characteristics of the dialogue mentioned above. I will say more about this when discussing the role of the facilitator below.

(2) Information Gathering: The Case and the Question for Investigation

At the beginning of the dialogue the facilitator writes the original question on a flipchart, for instance 'What role does ethics play in banking?'. Now a case or example has to be found to form the basis for investigation. Drawing on their own personal experience the participants put forward examples of situations in which the original question became important. They explain where, when and how the question arose in the situation. From the examples put forward one will be chosen for further investigation. In one Socratic dialogue about the question 'What role does ethics play in banking?' participants chose the case that was described in the first section, the signing of the guarantee. The participants in this dialogue, six bank managers, thought it a good example of how they came across 'ethics' in their daily routine.

After a case has been selected the participants are asked whether, bearing in mind the original question, it is clear to them what the facts of the case are. Generally this results in many questions. What, exactly, happened when the guarantee was signed? How much money was involved? How strongly would a financial failure be counted against the manager of the bank? Did things like this occur more often? What were the odds that the company would pull through on its own? Could the manager act as he pleased? If we want to say something about this case ethically such questions seem important. To conclude this information gathering phase the most important aspects of the case are

written on a flipchart. An example was given at the start of section 1, except that everything is written in the first person: 'I am the manager of a bank. I granted credit to...'.

The point of getting this 'data' is that the original abstract question 'What role does ethics play in banking?' can be replaced by a specific, concrete situation which poses a specific question that can then be investigated. The participants are now asked to formulate a question that establishes a connection between the abstract original question and this specific case. What, in this affair, is relevant from an ethical point of view? In this dialogue the result was the question already mentioned: 'Should I get the shareholder to sign the guarantee under this pretext?'. During the rest of the conversation the participants try to find an answer to this specific question.

(3) Argumentation: Answering the Question under Investigation

The method described above, in which an abstract question gets answered by means of a specific, concrete question, characterises the Socratic dialogue. Why though is this circuitous route through specific experience chosen? The reason is that by following it the participants find themselves forced to test their abstract concepts and convictions through practical experience. This prevents them from becoming completely tied up in vague, pallid abstractions, bleached of real experience. I will give a brief illustration of this.

Suppose a participant answers the question 'Should I get the shareholder to sign the guarantee under this pretext?' by saying: 'No, you should not get the shareholder to sign under such a pretext, because you should not lie'. In this answer the general ethical rule, 'one should not lie', is being invoked. Now participants will, in the abstract, probably agree on the rightness of this rule, but when applied to the actual case the crucial question will of course be whether the bank manager, when holding out false hopes to the shareholders, would be lying at all. If the participants differ on this issue, a new question has to be addressed: 'Is this lying?'

So what happens in a Socratic dialogue is this. Every time someone puts forward an argument (such as 'you should not lie') in order to justify a conclusion (such as 'you should not have the shareholder sign in this way'), it will have to be investigated to establish whether the argument does in fact apply (whether it really is a case of lying).

The participants in a Socratic dialogue have to 'read' a real state of affairs through moral glasses instead of having a discussion about which ethical rules should 'generally speaking' apply in banking. Given the demands the dialogue makes upon us this process of argumentation should continue until a consensual answer to the question is reached. Sometimes participants hit upon such a consensus, sometimes they don't. In the case of the signing of the guarantee our six bankers did arrive at a clear consensus. But it did not happen spontaneously.

4 The Results of Socratic Dialogue

Following this sketch of Socratic dialogue I will indicate what can be learnt from such a dialogue and what participants do with this learning afterwards. For real learning implies that certain behavioural changes result from the newly acquired knowledge and skills. The outcomes reported here for the bank managers are typical of the managers in profit and non-profit organisations who took part in Socratic dialogues. The changes noted included: creating room to speak, shifting from convincing others to investigating with them, making tacit knowledge explicit, and developing shared vision. In describing these learning-outcomes I have made two choices.

First, I report the experience of just three managers, whereas seven were interviewed. The learning experiences of these three persons were, though deeper, similar to those of the other interviewees. The differences probably arose from the fact that the group of three took part in a series of eight Socratic dialogues of three and a half hours each, whereas the other four participated in one or two of about five hours. Secondly, while reporting the changes these three interviewees initiated within their organisations I will not mention them all. I mention only those that bring out the profound impact of the Socratic dialogue as a learning-process and reveal something of the structure of the learning-process itself

The three managers quoted below are named Snoeck, Gevers and De Jong. In a three-year training programme for bank-managers they took part in a series of eight Socratic dialogues.[6] In between each meeting was a period of three to four weeks. During these dialogues four cases or examples were used and two meetings were spent on each case. Each case in turn served as 'data' for investigating a different initial question. Three to four weeks elapsed between each meeting.

Snoeck is manager of a bank. In a Socratic dialogue he came up with the case described above two where he was the one who actually had to take a decision about the signing of the £90,000 guarantee. About himself Snoeck says: 'my instinct in meetings is to try to convince people. Usually meetings would go like this: I'd propose something, there would be some discussion about it, questions would be raised, but finally everybody would agree to what I proposed'.

After taking part in Socratic dialogues he reports a change in the way he listens. If someone asks him a question, he now asks another question such as: 'Are you trying to say that..?', or 'Do I understand you correctly if I summarise what you have said as follows…?' Within his organisation he initiated changes that reflect this. At the weekly meeting of his management-team, for instance, he introduced a 'round of views'. In this round all present can give their view on a certain subject, preferably underpinned by arguments. Everything said is then recorded in the minutes and at the next meeting the decision-making begins.

4.1 Creating Room to Speak

Snoeck:

> In this round of views we talk about matters of policy, for instance: 'How long will we continue to support a client?'. Some time ago a client of ours had financial difficulties. From the bank's point of view further financing wasn't justified. That's something we talked about in the management team. Should we back this client up or should we say 'enough is enough'. Every member of the management team had to give his or her opinion on this without anyone saying things like: 'But that's impossible, I don't agree with it!' Everybody got the opportunity to put their views forward. That's how it was done in the Socratic dialogue, that's what had a strong appeal for me. In that way many more ideas and insights are brought out into the open. It improves the support people will give to a decision when it is finally taken.
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> People feel that they have made their own contribution and that they are appreciated for it. Because of that, social behaviour has improved: people listen better and they ask one another more questions. We enjoy our meetings more. In the end we try to reach a consensus by exchanging arguments. We try to reach a point at which we really agree on what to do.

It may seem easy to carry through the 'round of views' that Snoeck describes. It is, however, doomed to fail without a facilitator, because it is not easy for participants to live up to this ideal way of carrying out a conversation. Bearing in mind what has been said about dialogue above, it will be clear that this round of views is a way of making dialogue possible; it is a way of creating, within an organisation, room to speak. This round is not simply an inventory of opinions for participants are expected to give arguments as well. Because of this the participants' views become clearer - even to themselves.

In its simplicity the example Snoeck mentions clarifies the kinds of difficulties that may arise in a conversation about an ethical question such as 'Should we support this client?' From one point of view the matter was obvious: 'Further financing cannot be justified'. On the other hand there was doubt: 'Shouldn't this client be supported all the same?' In practice such financial and ethical matters are interwoven all the time. And it is certainly not the case that matters have to be settled from a financial viewpoint before ethical questions can be dealt with.

Often a conversation breaks down because ethics and practice, money and morals are interwoven; financial and ethical arguments tumble over each other. When interlocutors cannot distinguish these matters, a conversation soon reaches total deadlock. If, in addition, the participants' main goal

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[6] These Socratic dialogues were facilitated by Jos Kessels

is to have their own opinions accepted a cacophony of voices will result. A successful conversation requires an attitude completely different from the usual one. We may often wish to fight with people but you cannot dance with someone you are fighting.

So ethical decisions aren't made in some financial vacuum. The same goes for acquiring a different conversational attitude because it has consequences for how one sees one's own day to day work: a different *conversational* attitude implies a different *professional* attitude.

In the next section I will show how Snoeck and Gevers discovered a different, investigating conversational attitude by taking part in a Socratic dialogue. But first I want to describe in more detail what this dialogical attitude means in practice.

4.2 From Convincing to Investigating

Gevers:

> I think I'm an ambitious man. I'm in charge of a bank with eighty employees. I enjoy running the bank. I mean well by the people and the bank, but in all honesty I must say that, when in discussion with others, I very often just looked for affirmation of my own views. I paid special attention to the people who seemed to agree with me. My fundamental attitude was 'a manager has to know it all'. You read a lot of documents and you just have to know it; that's what you're responsible for. Well, after these Socratic dialogues I have a different attitude and I must honestly say that I enjoy chairing a meeting of the management team much more than before. This is because I do it in a more relaxed manner. I'm still ambitious, but I listen to people, because they may have things to say that I hadn't thought of. I don't see that as a shortcoming. Now I look at it this way: we toss around policy ideas together. I see this as enrichment. Many more things are brought into the discussion. I have noticed that policy that is made together is made more thoroughly.

Here Gevers brings out the contrast between a dialogical attitude and the attitude of a discussant quite strongly. In the past he had a conversational attitude that fitted his view of his profession: 'a manager has to know it all'. A manager who really thinks he knows it all will spend his time in meetings trying to convince other people; he will be discussing.

Apparently Gevers has changed in his conversational attitude and in his view of his role as a manager. He listens more carefully and he doesn't see it as a shortcoming when there is something he doesn't know. This attitude does not result in a benumbing sense of ignorance or an uncritical openness, but in a more agreeable way of working and an improvement in policy.

In practice what has happened is this: like Snoeck, Gevers is now trying to make room for dialogue in his organisation. As chair of the management team meeting that takes place once every two weeks he has seen to it that in each meeting an hour and a half (!) is devoted to what he calls 'a discussion about issues'. These issues vary from organising a work get-together to investigating questions such as 'should our bank make political statements about certain matters'. Usually there is no practical urgency to exchange thoughts on such subjects, but the feeling emerges that a certain question 'needs to be thought through'. Often subjects come up which otherwise would not have been addressed at all. Here is an example.

4.3 Making Tacit Knowledge Explicit

Gevers:

> We have this employee who isn't performing well and this has been dragging on for some time. Something had been brewing, but nothing was done about it. I talked about this with the management team. I asked: 'What's wrong with Bert Scholten? What's the matter with him? What are his good and bad points? How come that they are mostly bad and what can we do about it?' Some people had the feeling that he was shirking. They were quite frank about it.

> *That's quite something to say, so I asked: 'How? What does he do?'. We dealt with it in a very concrete and specific way. Things were brought out into the open that wouldn't have come out otherwise. Without this the whole affair would have gone on rumbling away under the surface.*

Apparently an investigating conversational attitude makes it possible to bring up hitherto undiscussed matters. In this way knowledge is made explicit that is already present within the organisation. In the situation above, for instance, all kinds of beliefs and assessments concerning the employee's behaviour were buried somehow, somewhere within the organisation ('something had been brewing'). By making these explicit, knowledge of what it is to 'perform well' is uncovered. Policy and vision can then be developed in the light of this knowledge. Some of the subtle skills that are part of an investigating attitude can be seen in Gevers' approach. First, the conversation topic is carefully formulated. The vague 'something had been brewing' is transformed into a clear question: 'What's wrong with Bert Scholten?' In the conversation that follows an abstract ethical discussion is carefully avoided by means of the seemingly simple technique of asking questions. There is no need to engage in this abstract discussion, for it is very unlikely that the management team will differ over questions like 'Is it right to be a shirker?' or 'Do we want to have shirking employees?' Moreover, an abstract stand in these matters wouldn't yield anything. In this situation the question with practical significance is: 'Is *this* person shirking?' By practising the dialogical skills mentioned above, members of the management team are 'compelled' to give arguments: Why do they say this employee is shirking? Thus an abstract concept such as 'performing well' is filled out concretely. Here is another example of this way of speaking.

4.4 Shared Vision

Gevers:

> *What I do as a chair of the management team is this. When we are discussing some item I let the discussion go on for a while. Because people are enthusiastic about their work they want to discuss it, everybody speaks at the same time, there is a lot of strong feeling and everyone has their own view. At a certain moment people start to take up positions. I then say: 'I heard what you said and you think that we should move in that direction. Why is that?' I frequently write down the pros and cons on a flipchart and that's how it goes into the minutes. We then let things sink in by leaving the subject for the next meeting. There is more of a structure in our conversation then and more probing questions are asked like: 'What exactly do you mean, what's behind it, where did you get that idea?'. So we talk better with each other.*
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> *Some time ago, when I asked the members of the team what they thought of our meetings they said something had improved. They couldn't say what had caused the improvement but they felt we were discussing things with each other in a better way. Now we not only take decisions more quickly, but we also make better ones. You should see what a clear view you get of an issue once you've discussed it properly for an hour and a half! In the last few months we've taken some crucial decisions that in the old way would have taken us at least a year. They are 'better' decisions too, as well as faster. If you ask people a month later why a decision was taken they still know why. So our decisions are better understood and better founded.*

Above I mentioned Gevers' former professional attitude: 'a manager has to know it all'. Someone who holds such a view will look upon a considered decision-making process as something that delays energetic action. It therefore surprises Gevers to see that decisions are taken faster now - even 'crucial decisions'. Previously when poorly performing employees were discussed there was much beating about the bush, with no solutions found to deal with the problem. Now, by making use of dialogical techniques - such as: carefully formulating the subject of conversation, listening, continuing to ask questions and listing pros and cons - the management team have succeeded in formulating a clear policy. Now there is a six month programme for employees who 'can't keep up'. During the six months, in co-operation with a temporary employment agency, new possibilities are sought. 'We chose this solution', Gevers says, 'because we want to serve our customers well and therefore cannot have poorly performing employees. But we are responsible for our employees as well. In collaboration with our employees we want to find suitable new work for them'.

It can be seen here how managers can think and talk from a practical point of view about the responsible management of their people. The management team at Gevers' bank has not in the first place occupied itself with formulating abstract moral principles for good personnel management, but rather with sharpening their abilities to make moral decisions about concrete cases (such as the above example of the poorly performing employee Bert Scholten). Unfortunately, this is often thought of as being superfluous. And as a result in many organisations the view is held that what really matters is that general moral rules should be formulated. So in many a boardroom there lies, somewhere in a drawer, a moral code. Quite often nobody knows of its existence. The reason for this is that the code has been developed in abstracto without attention paid to questions like 'how should this code be applied in practice?' It is one thing to lay down a general moral rule concerning responsible personnel management, but something else again to follow it in practice. Skill is needed to 'read' a situation through moral glasses. It is quite useless formulating general ethical rules in an organisation if its members cannot reach a consensus on how the rules should be applied.

We can see now what the practice of dialogical skills can lead to. Well-founded joint decisions can be taken on matters that formerly never surfaced. In the main these are matters with an ethical dimension. Dialogical skills equip members of an organisation to shape a culture in which ethical dialogue can take place, a culture in which morally accountable behaviour can survive and develop.

5 The Socratic Dialogue as a Place to Learn

Snoeck as well as Gevers are convinced that their attitude of investigating and listening sprang directly from their experience of Socratic dialogues. Below they will say something about that. Another participant in the same series of dialogues is De Jong. He too is putting the things he learned into practice.

The way in which he does so strongly resembles what was described above. He too chairs meetings in a different way, takes moral considerations much more explicitly into account in dealing with clients, talks differently with employees about the way they are working, and so on. To him the most important aspect of all these changes is better listening and being more open to other people and what they tell him. And he sees a direct link between this new conversational attitude and his participation in the Socratic dialogues. So how did this come about?

5.1 Questions That Matter.

De Jong:

> It's like this: the open-mindedness and the listening are things you actually do in those dialogues. It's different from reading a book, attending a lecture or doing a one-day workshop. It's not just a matter of having it said to you, you also do it! You're very intensively involved in the conversation and with the other person. You're always thinking things like 'Why does she hold that view? Can she state it more clearly? What's behind it?' A year has passed since these dialogues, but I still have the cases, bits of the discussion and complete arguments pretty clear in my mind. You're so absorbed by it that the listening attitude just creeps up on you. You then adopt it more readily in other circumstances though I must say that even then it's very difficult. Snoeck's case interested me so much because I too have to deal with similar cases. The analysis of it has made me think very hard. I have been thinking a lot about the whole moral aspect and the role it plays in that kind of situation.

Here De Jong 'just' says that in the Socratic dialogue he has been involved in a real dialogue, in which he made the dialogical skills his own. That sounds pretty obvious. A real dialogue can however not be simulated. People get involved in a dialogue only when there is a question that matters to them. A dialogue is not an exercise in mutual listening skills; in a dialogue we really want to listen, because something of importance is involved. For this reason all kinds of exercises in listening skills, in which students question each other on random subjects, are not suited for developing a really investigative conversational attitude. Such exercises are useful for teaching people smart ways to obtain information, but that is different from adopting an investigating attitude. In the series of Socratic dialogues in which De Jong, Gevers and Snoeck participated, all

the participants were bank managers. The main questions were therefore geared to their professional practice and the cases discussed stemmed from this same practice. In short, something was at stake; they were about subjects that mattered to them. There was a real case, with all the incidental details that reality contains. And then the question was asked: 'What would you do in this case?' That dialogue was far from detached; the participants were in it with everything they had, with all their experience and expert knowledge, with all their personal and professional norms. A Socratic dialogue, therefore, differs as much from a role-play as mountaineering from watching a nature film. A Socratic dialogue is real life. It is a conversation about something that matters, where something is really at stake, where you have to give everything you have got and where you have to put yourself on the line. That is how Snoeck and Gevers experienced it also.

In two sessions of four hours each, a case of Gevers was investigated. This dialogue enquired into the question 'Should the bank take a public stand in political debates?' Gevers experienced this dialogue in a very special way.

5.2 Having Something to Say to Each Other

Gevers:

> I brought this case to the dialogue. I had been thinking it over a lot and my view was that the bank should, on this occasion, not take a public stand in the political debate. Well, it has been quite an experience for me! I described the situation and the participants asked me critical questions. I then got confused. I thought I had my view clearly thought out, but with these questions I thought after a while: 'Lord, yes, there's something in that, too'. You want to stick to your view and there's pressure being put on you and that stirs up all kinds of feelings. At one moment you even wonder if you have been thinking at all. In these conversations a consensus has to be reached. For me that was the real difficulty, because it's make or break. Previously one has been able to go through all the points and say: 'Well, all things considered, this is my conclusion'. Then you go through the issue in a Socratic manner and feel cut to pieces because critical questions are put to you.

This is an experience typical of someone who has a discussing attitude, someone who, unsuccessfully, tries to convince others that he is right. Gevers wanted at first to stick to his own view. And then there came a moment when this discussing attitude was no longer satisfactory. 'All kinds of feelings' came up. This taught him that persisting in his attitude was not productive. To put it more precisely: he experienced the shortcomings of his discussing attitude, because he discovered that it was based upon pseudo knowledge; he came to realise that he just didn't know it all.

He even began to wonder whether he 'had been thinking at all'! For a banker who thinks that he 'has to know it all' this is a shocking discovery. Apparently, the transition from a discussing attitude to a dialogical attitude, from convincing to investigating, is something that Gevers experienced in this Socratic dialogue. Somehow he was forced to see the inappropriateness of his discussing attitude.

Another case that was talked about in two sessions was the case about the signing of the guarantee. Snoeck, whose case this was, even more clearly puts into words what happened to him in this Socratic dialogue when he discovered that his discussing attitude was a failure. After he had been requested to provide further financing Snoeck had decided to suggest to the shareholders that he would possibly meet the request. In fact he had no intention of really doing so but he was only going to reveal this once the guarantee had been signed. He would thus spare the bank a £90,000 loss and save himself from suffering a loss of face within the bank.[7] For Snoeck, too, the conversation about his case was an exceptional experience.

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[7]As It happened the shareholders rejected his proposal when it was put to them

5.3 Acknowledgement of Interlocutors

Snoeck:

> *I brought in my case to the dialogue. I didn't feel I'd been up to anything improper: I'd been waiting long enough for this guarantee, I'd been asking for it often enough. But the participants in the conversation came up with a lot of arguments that I hadn't thought about. My first thought was 'Well, that doesn't suit me, so I'll just disregard it'. I looked for the person who was on my wavelength and listened to him. But when I was questioned by my colleagues and, I haven't forgotten, the facilitator, I thought: 'Well now, you can quickly put all this to one side, but that's just trying to make things easy for yourself. You're hiding yourself from others so they cannot see you.' It made me feel very hot under the collar. In these dialogues I discovered that I'd had blinkers on and because of that I had missed the arguments that my interlocutors came up with. You can't just ignore that, you have to do something about it. Sure enough, I've been in a cold sweat since.*

With Snoeck the change in conversational attitude was accompanied by real physical sensations: he got hot and was then in a cold sweat. It was this experience that taught Snoeck to listen. More precisely: he found out that he was 'hiding himself', and that he 'had blinkers on'. At the beginning this approach seemed to work, but gradually it failed him, it became less and less appropriate to switch off from what others had to say. Snoeck came to realise 'You have to do something about it'. Now that is a moral consciousness: Snoeck experienced the obligation to listen to what his interlocutors had to say to him, to respond to their arguments.

How does such an experience come about? What happens in it? One can ask a lot of questions here, not all of them equally sensible, some of them not even answerable. How does one 'learn' that one is obliged to listen? Didn't Snoeck already know that he had to listen to other people? 'Well, sure', he says, 'you attend a course some time and then you are told that you have to listen. But here I experienced it myself, because I was the centre of attention. Everyone questioned me and at a certain point I was all-alone in my position. That has been an experience I will never forget. That's what caused it'.

6 Summary and Conclusions

A Socratic dialogue is suitable for learning dialogical skills because, as shown above, people who participate in such a dialogue go on to try to use these skills in their work. This is because they have *experienced* that dialogue is preferable to discussion. When organisational forms are created that possess certain characteristics of a dialogue it becomes apparent that it is possible to decide on matters that could not be dealt with fruitfully before. Thus the Socratic dialogue can make an essential contribution to the creation of an organisational culture in which morally accountable actions are the rule rather than the exception, a culture in which the dialogue, as an essential part of morally accountable action, has its rightful place.

The extent to which the reported learning outcomes occur depends on several things. First, the Socratic dialogue should inquire into a question that is of crucial importance to the participants, it must be a question that matters to them. Secondly, at least a few daily periods should be spent on a dialogue, preferably with an interval of some days or more. As for the facilitator, he or she needs a range of knowledge and abilities. He must be able to use the dialogical skills himself because he has to demonstrate the kind of behaviour expected from the participants. In addition, he must be schooled in the fields of logic and the theory of argument. When these conditions are met it is likely that participants in a Socratic dialogue will gain something truly valuable from it: attention to what others have to say to us and the desire to enter into dialogue with them.

A Note for Facilitators

I comment here on the tasks and competencies of the facilitator. As a rule he or she tries to get participants to adopt the conversational attitude that is appropriate for a dialogue. At the same time he sees to it that all abstract statements are connected with the concrete example. As mentioned

above, the two phases of information gathering and argumentation are continually intertwined. Because of this, statements made by the participants are usually ambiguous. Very often it is not clear, prima facie, whether someone is arguing in support of an - in itself unmentioned - viewpoint or is just remarking about what was actually going on in the case described. This shows itself in the fact that after the question to be investigated has been formulated, participants hardly ever make statements like 'No, you should not get the shareholder to sign under such pretexts, because you should not lie'. Instead it is much more common for someone to say something like: 'You are lying when you do that'. What such a person is trying to say is not all that clear, even when we know the context of the conversation. Does he mean to say 'That is lying, which is wrong and therefore the bank manager is not allowed to use this pretext'? Or is he merely trying to draw attention to the fact that the pretext involves a lie? Or is he saying something else again? Now the facilitator has to be aware of such possible ambiguities all the time and continually distinguish the different possibilities. He has to assess the various contributions in two respects: what could a participant be trying to say on a factual level and what could he be trying to say on the level of argument? This is not an easy task when six or seven people are in conversation with one another, and is even less so when the conversation goes on for several hours.

Another task for the facilitator is to ensure that the original question is a sound one. It should contain no more than one or two different concepts and must be a non-empirical question; that is, it must be possible to find an answer to it through mere reflection. An inexperienced facilitator will easily make mistakes here.

During the information-phase, then, two investigating skills are of great importance: 'questioning' and 'listening'. Since at the outset participants lack the full account they need of the case if they are to tackle the question for investigation, the facilitator must see that they are clear about what really transpired. Usually some 'pressure' from the facilitator is needed here. Participants often venture all manner of opinions, ideas, beliefs and practical tips, even before they have gone into the facts of the case in some depth. This may result in statements like:

- 'I think you should just present the whole case to the management-team'
- 'You shouldn't have let things reach this stage'
- 'You should have a talk in private with this one shareholder'
- 'What makes you so sure the company isn't viable any longer?'
- 'You should see to it that you come through'
- 'The fact that there is no good communication within the bank plays an important role here'

It is the task of the facilitator to 'block' such statements. He obviously should not do this by issuing a prohibition. That would not stimulate the participants and would not be instructive. The facilitator has to *show* how the conversation can become productive through the use of listening and questioning skills. Through this modelling he may inspire the participants to practise the same investigating skills. Here is an example of how he could handle the first of the remarks above.

Participant P	*I think you just should present the whole case to the management team.*
Facilitator	*Why do you think that should be done?*
Participant P	*Because it's such a delicate matter; it's unwise to take such a decision all on your own.*
Facilitator	*Which decision?*
Participant P	*To comply with the request for further financing.*
Facilitator	*So you are saying that you would confer with the management-team about the question of whether further financing should be supplied?*
Participant P	*Yes*
Facilitator to C (who came up with the case)	*Did you consider presenting the whole affair to the management-team?*
Participant C	*No, as a matter of fact I didn't. Because it was my mistake the guarantee hadn't been signed. I'd rather not bring it up. Besides, some members of the management team took the view that we should have stopped financing at a*

> *much earlier stage. They would have enjoyed that a lot. I didn't want to give them that fun. The problem I had wasn't whether or not to continue financing. I had already decided not to do so. The problem was that to put a stop to the financing would cost the bank so much. How could I prevent this happening? That's what bothered me.*

Facilitator to P   *You just said that you would present the whole affair to the management team. Are you still inclined to do so, after having heard C?*

Participant P   *No, if things were like that I wouldn't do it either.*

Facilitator   *Things are like that.*

A specific task of the facilitator is to see to it that the investigation remains philosophical. One has to have a very clear idea of what is at stake in a philosophical as opposed to a psychological investigation. Normally participants tend to slide off into psychological questions or into problem-solving. But in a philosophical dialogue neither the 'causes' for one's behaviour nor the solution to a problem are sought. What is at stake are the *reasons* participants give to support their points of view, their answer to the question for investigation in relation to the case that is investigated. Take, for instance the above fragment, where the person who put forward the case, says: '*I'd rather not bring it up. Besides, some members of the management team took the view that we should have stopped financing at a much earlier stage. They would enjoy themselves a lot. I didn't want to give them that fun'.* At this point it may very welll happen that participants raise questions like: Why do you have such difficulty in admitting your mistake? Why don't you want to be made fun of?

These questions, in turn, can easily give rise to more questions of the same type, evolving into a (pseudo-)psychological investigation. Very often the participants asking such questions are trying to *help* the person who put forward the case to deal with such situations in a more satisfactory way. Praiseworthy as this aim may be, it is *not* what a philosophical investigation is about. What *is* at stake is what the participants think *should have been done* in the situation as it is. Or, in other words, *which description fits* the action of the bank manager in the case? Should it be called 'right' or 'wrong'? Or neither? The facilitator here has to help participants focus on the philosophical instead of the psychological questions.

Furthermore it is important that the facilitator keeps his opinions to himself. He has to concentrate on whether or not the participants understand each other. This is all the more difficult because he too has to 'go into' the case all the time; otherwise the conversation would become incomprehensible to him. In extreme cases this means that he has to try to understand views taken by the participants which he himself does not agree with. In order to be able to fulfil all these tasks it is necessary to be thoroughly schooled in the fields of ethics, theory of argumentation, and formal and informal logic. Besides this, and of even more importance, is that one must be able to exercise a 'Socratic', that is a philosophical, questioning attitude.

Hans Bolten

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