

QBQ!

The Question Behind The Question

By John G. Miller

The Big Idea

This book QBQ! advocates the practice of personal accountability in business and in life. It helps eliminate finger pointing or blaming, complaining, and procrastination. The lack of personal responsibility goes right to the core of the many problems people encounter each day. The Question Behind the Question or QBQ is a powerful tool that can be used to turn around peoples' thinking to ask personally accountable questions that will lead to improved business organizations and personal lives. By practicing QBQ thinking, things seem to run smoothly, and people have more fun and satisfaction.

Chapter 1 - A Picture of Personal Accountability

This chapter describes John Miller's encounter during a jam-packed lunch in a Minneapolis diner. A server, Jacob Miller, *asked his manager* to buy a Coke at the corner grocery to satisfy the needs of a customer, who wanted the soft drink even if it was not available in the menu,

John Miller explains that Jacob did not ask the negative questions called IQs or Incorrect Questions which others in his position would have asked like: "Why do I have to do everything here?"; "Who is supposed to be covering this area anyway?"; "When is management going to provide us with more products?"; "Why are we always short-staffed?"; "When are the customers going to learn to read the menu"?

These negative questions that pop out due to frustrations can actually work in our favor. We can choose to ask better questions that lead to personal accountability such as: "What can I do to make a difference?" and "How can I support the team?"

With personal accountability, everyone wins - the customers, co-employees, and the entire organization.

Chapter 2 - Making Better Choices

What is fundamental to QBQ is the idea that people are accountable for their own choices and that they are free to make those choices. Knowing that people are free to make choices and must take responsibility for their choices is the first big step toward making things happen in their lives.

Choosing the wrong thought could drive people into the emotional goat heads of blame, complaining, and procrastination. To avoid goat heads, one must make better choices.

Chapter 3 - QBQ! The Question Behind The Question

QBQ is premised on the observation that our first reactions are often negative reminding us of the IQ's or Incorrect Questions. But the one guiding principle of the QBQ is that "The answers are in the questions".

Asking better questions gets us better answers.

Three simple guidelines for QBQ's are:

1. Begin with "What" or "How" (not "Why", "When", or "Who").
2. Contain an "I" (not "They", "them", "we", or "you".)
3. Focus on action.

"What can I do" follows these guidelines perfectly since it begins with "What", contains an "I" and focuses on action.

Chapter 4 - Don't Ask "Why?"

Asking "Why me? Or Why is this happening to me?" puts us in the victim's role and into the pity party. This victim thinking mentality should be rid from people's minds.

For example, starting questions with "What or How" instead of "Why" gives us a better perspective. Examples are:

"How can I do my job better today?"

"What can I do to improve the situation?"

"How can I support others?"

Chapter 5 - The Victim

John Miller advises people to be on the lookout for themselves falling into the "victim" mindset. These cannot be avoided sometimes but one has to be very conscious of this to avoid falling into the victim trap.

Chapter 6 - "Why Is This Happening To Me?"

People usually think people and events in our lives stress us out. But this is simply not true. *Stress is a matter of choice*. When bad things happen, people feel stressed out. But the same people have a choice in responding to these "trigger events" and the reaction is usually an angry response.

People sometimes choose to block their emotions and or choose to worry.

People react differently to the same situations. Stress is the result of choices. When asking, "Why this is happening to me", this leads people to fall into the victim mindset which is extremely stressful. "Why me?" thinking adds to stress.

Chapter 7 - "Why Do We Have to Go Through All This Change"

John Miller explains that people have to adapt and respond to changing conditions or events. In fact, people have to be ready to respond using a repertoire of responses.

He gives us an example: a pilot and his daughter were flying on a single engine Cessna over Lake Michigan when the engine quit. The pilot told his daughter, Stacey, that he would attempt to fly the plane differently, meaning let the plane dive in order to gain more speed, enough to restart the engine. He failed on his first attempt and succeeded on the second.

The better question that people should ask is, "How can I adapt to the *changing* world?"

Chapter 8 - "Why Don't They Communicate Better?"

In most of his workshops, John Miller asks the question "What is the critical issue facing your organization?" The response is not change or competition but communication.

Communication does not only mean being understood but also understanding the other person. Thus the QBQ should be asked "How can I better understand you?"

Chapter 9 - Don't Ask "When?"

When people ask "When?" this leads to procrastination since they admit that they have no choice but to wait and put off action until another time. Procrastination leads to major problems since precious time is lost. As things pile up, people begin to be overwhelmed. It takes the joy out of work and the bottom line, and increases stress. Procrastination is expensive to all involved

For a solution, John Miller suggests that people ask: "What solution can I provide?"; "How can I creatively reach the customer?" and, "What can I do to find the information to make a decision?"

He also tells us to remember that the answers are in the questions.

Chapter 10 - Procrastination: The Friend of Failure

Putting off what needs to be done could lead to disaster. John Miller gave us an example of his leaving a large glass plate sitting at the edge of his driveway instead of putting it away and keeping it in a safer place.

He kept on procrastinating until his son met with an accident with the glass plate later in the evening. We should take care of little things while they are still small.

Chapter 11 - "When Will We Get More Tools and Better Systems?"

John Miller says that true creativity is succeeding within the box and not thinking outside the box. Focusing our energies on what we don't have is a waste of time and energy. He suggests instead to focus our energies on succeeding within the box.

The QBQ should be "How can I achieve with the resources I already have?"

Chapter 12 - "When Are We Going to Hear Something New?"

John Miller tells us that there is no shortage of new ideas but a lack of understanding that old ideas still work.

If salespeople can consistently practice the fundamentals of getting up early, contacting prospective clients, share their belief on the products and services, and following them up -- then they will be successful.

Again, Miller tells us that technology could change every five minutes but when it comes to principles where we base our organizations and our lives, the old stuff is still the good stuff. What is needed is to practice the fundamentals like personal accountability --day in and day out.

The right question to be asked under QBQ is "How can I apply what I am hearing?" -- even if I've heard it before.

Chapter 13 - Don't ask "Who?"

Asking "Who" questions actually is looking for scapegoats and someone else to blame. Blame is the most pervasive and the most counterproductive of all ideas.

The Blame Game and "whodunit" questions absolutely solve nothing.

To reach our full potential, Miller tells us to stop blaming each other and start practicing personal accountability with questions like:

"What can I do today to solve the problem?"

"How can I help move the project forward?"

"What action can I take to 'own' the situation?"

Miller tells us to try these questions to break the Circle of Blame.

Chapter 14 - A Poor Sailor Blames The Wind

Who do accountable people blame? No one. Only a poor teacher, a poor salesperson, a poor parent, a poor manager, a poor employee, and a poor teenager blame everyone else but themselves.

Chapter 15 - Silos Spirit

When people can be heard claiming that it is not their job, then the walls keep on growing taller and become more difficult to overcome. It is an "us" against "them" situation when everyone should be part of a team.

This kind of infighting and compartmentalization is a drain to the life of an organization. It is like a tandem bike with riders facing in opposite directions.

Can we afford not to work against each other when competition is working to beat us every day? Miller says that we are all in the same team.

Chapter 16 - Beat The Ref

John Miller says to win, you must not complain about things beyond your control. You just have to work to become so good that whatever the ref or that barrier throws at you, you will simply win. Don't focus on the barriers that are beyond your control. Instead focus on what is controllable and focus on winning.

Chapter 17 - "Who Dropped The Ball?"

John Miller says the better question to ask is "What can I do to make a difference?" instead of blaming or finger pointing.

He described this situation with a delayed and fully booked flight out of Houston. Bonita, the flight attendant, made a simple choice of making the best of the situation out of a bad situation. Bonita made a difference for Miller and every one on board that plane

When people make a better choice, they get high on life. And this is how personal accountability changes the world -- by one good choice at a time.

Chapter 18 - Ownership

Miller says that ownership in organizations is a commitment of the head, heart, and hands to fix the problem and not to affix the blame. His example of the telephone repairman fixing the static on his line tells us that ownership is a commitment.

Chapter 19 - The Foundation of Team Work

What makes a team work according to John Miller is that a "teammate is someone who can look right through you and still enjoy the view." Appreciating their gifts and strengths is the foundation for team work.

Chapter 20 - Making Accountability Personal: All QBQs Contain an "I".

Personal accountability begins with one's self and not with others. It is holding ourselves accountable for our own thinking and behaviors and the results they produce.

Miller says we cannot change other people but we sure can change ourselves. We cannot often control events and circumstances but we do have real control on our own thoughts and actions. Focusing our efforts and energy on what we can control can make us more effective, happier and less frustrated.

The power of accountability comes from questions that begin with "What" or "How" and contain an "I".

Chapter 21 - I Can Only Change Me.

Miller says the only person you can change is yourself. Managers can coach, counsel, teach, and guide but no one can change a person. Change comes only from the inside of the individual as a result of decisions that he made.

Things could be better if we can mold and shape our thoughts and actions rather than of others.

QBQ works because it is based on this truth: "I can change only me."

Chapter 22 - "He didn't, I did."

John Miller tells us of a branch manager who had difficulty working with a guy who had difficulty managing. The guy transferred to another location and the branch manager felt relieved.

But then a couple of years later, the guy is reporting again to the manager and got along communicating and cooperating well on their projects. The manager realized it was not the person that changed but herself. When asked "how did you change him?" -- Her response was "I stopped trying to change him."

Chapter 23 - "When Will Others Walk Their Talk?"

John Miller tells us of a story where executives went on a mountaintop for a senior management retreat for 3 days discussing critical issues, filling and flipping charts, and finally coming out with mission, vision, values which then was reproduced in little laminated pocket cards that can be stuffed in briefcases.

Not long after people begin to whisper that they will practice those values when senior management does. It would definitely not be good if a manager says "I am here to help you reach your personal goals" and dresses down people in front of others; or if an executive says "You are all empowered. It's our new program! But before you do anything substantial, check with me first".

These examples sure show the gaps in integrity in others.

Integrity is defined as "Being what I say I am by acting in accordance with my words." QBQ thinking leads to integrity because integrity begins with oneself not with others by practicing the question "How can I practice the principles I espouse?"

Chapter 24 - An Integrity Test

John Miller suggests a simple integrity test. If the company we work with is positive in the office and negative at home, then we have a choice to make: Believe or Leave.

Why do we have to stay if that organization is no longer a vehicle to help us reach our life goals? Answering the question honestly is practicing personal accountability where it counts most.

Chapter 25 - The Power of One

When learning the QBQ, the problem is that teams, departments and organizations don't change. People change one at a time through their own choices.

John Miller says personal accountability is not about changing others. It is about making a difference by changing ourselves. Personal accountability is therefore the power of one.

Chapter 26 - A QBQ Twist

The Serenity Prayer with a QBQ twist will read as follows: "God grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can and the wisdom to know it's me."

Chapter 27 - Will The Real Models Please Stand Up!

'In truth, "No public figure is a role model for our kids. That role belongs to you and me." Modeling is the most powerful of all teachers.

However, no matter what a person's role is someone is always watching and emulating this person's behavior.

Chapter 28 - Practicing Accountability: All QBQs Focus on Action

Once a person figures out what needs to be done using the QBQ guiding principles, then solving problems becomes easy.

All QBQs focus on actions by adding verbs such as "do", "make", "achieve", and "build" to questions that start with "What" or "How" and contain an "I." Miller suggests adding "can" or "will" and "now" or "today".

This enables people to ask excellent sounding questions like, "What can I do right now?" or "How will I make a difference today?"

Only through actions is anything accomplished. The practice of personal accountability allows people to discipline their thoughts and ask better questions and take actions.

Chapter 29 - The Risk of Doing Nothing

Today no one has a guaranteed job security. Taking action may seem risky but doing nothing is a bigger risk.

There are risks involved in taking action but the alternative of inaction is almost never the better choice since:

- Action, even when it leads to mistakes can bring learning and growth. Inaction brings stagnation and atrophy.
- Action can lead to solutions while inaction can hold us up or put us on hold in the past.
- Action requires courage while inaction shows fear.
- Action builds confidence while inaction shows doubt.

Decide what to do then take action.

Chapter 30 - "Thanks For Shopping At The Home Depot"

John Miller gives us a concrete example of QBQ service in action when a young man purchased some merchandise valued at \$2.89 with a hundred dollar bill at Home Depot. Judy, the cashier asked the young man if he had a smaller bill. Saying none, Judy did not hesitate to punch the bill paying the \$2.89 herself out of her purse and sending the young man on his way.

The young man sent her a \$50 tip and then brought his dad who is a contractor in the area to buy his stuff in the store.

Instead of asking herself why this is happening to her or simply saying sorry it is our policy, Judy kept her cool and served her customer. That's QBQ service and it is worth the risk.

Chapter 31 - Leaders At All Levels

John Miller says "Leadership is about the way we think. It is a moment-to-moment disciplining of our thoughts. It is practicing personal accountability and choosing to make a positive contribution no matter what our role or level is."

"If we think like leaders, then we are leaders" according to John Miller.

Chapter 32 - The Cornerstone Of Leadership

Servant leadership is the QBQ way requiring a humble spirit combined with a servant's heart.

John Miller says humility is the cornerstone of leadership.

Chapter 33 - Leaders Are Not Problem Solvers

The author states that "When managers step in to close the sale, when project leaders carry the team's ball or when the parents clean the child's room, it teaches nothing positive and adds no real value"

Leaders are not problem solvers but are problem givers. Leaders let others tackle the problem, design their own solutions, and take action.

Chapter 34 - A Great List of Lousy Questions

John Miller lists some of his QBQ questions as follows:

- "How can I serve them?"
- "What can I do today to be more effective?"
- "How can I add value for my customers?"
- "How can I better understand the challenges in the field?"
- "How can I be a more effective coach?"
- "What can I do to better understand each person on the team?"

Miller says it is up to us to make a choice whether we will QBQs or IQs when asking questions behind the questions.

Chapter 35 - The Spirit Of the QBQ

QBQs begin with "What" or "How" (not "Why", "When" or "Who". It contains an "I" and focuses on action). If a question conflicts with the spirit of the QBQ, then it is not a QBQ.

Chapter 36 - Wisdom

John Miller says "Wisdom is what we learn after we know it all."

Chapter 37 - We Buy Too Many Books

If we have not changed then we have not learned. Miller says we attend seminars, read all the books we want, and play too many audio tapes in our cars.

All of these go to waste if we are unclear on what learning is.

According to Miller, "Learning is not attending, listening or reading. It is really translating knowing what to do into doing what we know. It is about changing."

Chapter 38 - A Final Picture

"My mess, my responsibility" -- this is a powerful picture of personal accountability.

Miller advocates the use of QBQ in organizations where instead of finger pointing, procrastination, and "we" against "them", people can bring the best in each other, work together as a team the way teams are supposed to, and make great things happen.

Chapter 39 - The Motor of Learning

John Miller concludes that repetition is the motor of learning. If we keep doing things over and over again, it becomes innate. Soon, all of these will come to us naturally.