QBQ! The Question Behind the Question®
What to Really Ask Yourself to Eliminate Blame, Complaining and Procrastination

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

The lack of personal accountability is a problem that has resulted in an epidemic of blame, complaining and procrastination. No organization — or individual — can achieve goals, compete in the marketplace, fulfill a vision, or develop people and teams without personal accountability.

The troubles that plague organizations cannot be solved by pointing fingers and blaming others. Rather, the real solutions are found when each of us recognizes the power of personal accountability. In QBQ!, author and consultant John G. Miller explains how negative, inappropriate questions like “Why do we have to go through all this change?” and “Who dropped the ball?” represent a lack of personal accountability. Conversely, when we ask better questions — QBQs — such as “What can I do to contribute?” or “How can I help solve the problem?” our lives and our organizations are transformed.

QBQ! provides a practical method for putting personal accountability into daily action with astonishing results: problems are solved, internal barriers come down, service improves, teamwork thrives and people adapt to change more quickly. QBQ! is an invaluable resource for anyone seeking to learn, grow and change.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

• How to add tremendous worth to your organization and life.
• How to make personal accountability a core value in your organization.
• How to practice personal accountability at work and in life.
• How to eliminate blame, complaining and procrastination from your life.
• How asking the question behind the question can make a real difference.

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever heard questions like these?
“Why is that department going to do its job?”
“Why don’t they communicate better?”
“Who dropped the ball?”
“Why do we have to go through all this change?”
“When is someone going to train me?”

These questions may seem innocent enough, but they indicate a lack of personal responsibility — or “personal accountability” — and go right to the heart of many of the problems we face today.

Conversely, turning our thinking around and asking more personally accountable questions is one of the most powerful and effective things we can do to improve our organizations and our lives.

The Question Behind the Question® (QBQ®) is a tool that’s been developed and refined over the years that helps individuals practice personal accountability by asking better questions.

The benefit people enjoy the most about the QBQ is a personal one: Once they start practicing QBQ thinking, things just seem to go better. People have more fun. Life is simply more satisfying and enjoyable for those who choose the way of personal accountability.

Why are we always so short-staffed?”

It’s understandable that someone would feel and think that way, especially when frustrated, but the truth is that these are lousy questions. They’re negative and they don’t solve any problems. Questions like these are Incorrect Questions, or IQs, since nothing positive or productive comes from asking them. They’re also the complete opposite of personal accountability, because in each one, the implication is that someone or something else is responsible for the problem or situation.

Unfortunately, though, they’re often the first thoughts that come to mind. It’s a sad fact that when most of us are faced with a frustration or challenge of some kind, our first reaction tends to be negative and defensive, and the first questions that occur to us are IQs.

The good news is this: That moment of frustration also presents us with a tremendous opportunity to contribute, and the QBQ can help us take advantage of it. The moment the IQs pop into our heads, we have a choice. We can either accept them — “Yeah, when are we going to get more help around here?” — or reject them, choosing instead to ask better, more accountable questions, such as “What can I do to make a difference?” and “How can I support our team?”

This, in a nutshell, is the essence of the QBQ:

Making better choices in the moment by asking better questions. Practicing personal accountability makes a difference. Everyone wins: customers, co-workers, the organization, everyone.

Making Better Choices

Each day, as we journey into the unexplored wilds of our personal and professional lives, we have countless
choices to make. And what are we choosing? Not our next action but our next thought. Choose the wrong thought and we’re blaming, complaining and procrastinating. But the right thoughts lead us to a richer, more fulfilling life and the feelings of pride and accomplishment that come from making productive decisions.

The idea that we are accountable for our own choices and are free to make better ones is fundamental to the QBQ. Sometimes people think they have no choice. They’ll say things like “I have to” or “I can’t.” But we always have a choice. Always. Even deciding not to choose is making a choice. Realizing this and taking responsibility for our choices is a big step toward making great things happen in our lives.

Want to make great things happen? Make better choices.

QBQ! The Question Behind the Question

The Question Behind the Question is built on the observation that our first reactions are often negative, bringing to mind Incorrect Questions (IQs). But if in each moment of decision we can instead discipline our thoughts to look behind those initial questions and ask better ones (QBQs), the questions themselves will lead us to better results.

One of the guiding principles of the QBQ is “The answers are in the questions,” which speaks to the same truth: If we ask a better question, we get a better answer. So the QBQ is about asking better questions. But how can we tell a good question from a bad one? What does a “better” question sound like?

For starters, here are the three simple guidelines for creating a QBQ:

2. Contain an “I” (not “they,” “them,” “we” or “you”).
3. Focus on action.

For example, “What can I do?” follows the guidelines perfectly. It begins with “What,” contains an “I” and focuses on action: “What can I do?” Simple. But don’t let its simplicity fool you. Like a jewel, the QBQ is made up of many facets. Let’s explore these facets and see the powerful effect asking QBQs can have on our lives.

Don’t Ask ‘Why?’

Ever heard these questions?

“What don’t others work harder?”

“Why is this happening to me?”

Say them aloud. How do they make you feel? When they are said aloud, they can make you feel powerless, like a victim. Questions with a “Why me?” tone to them say, “I’m a victim of the environment and the people around me.” Not a very productive thought, is it? But we ask them all the time.

The first QBQ guideline says all QBQs begin with “What” or “How,” not “Why,” “When” or “Who.” Take another look at those “Why” questions and consider what would happen if we asked these instead:

“How can I do my job better today?”

“What can I do to improve the situation?”

‘Why Do We Have to Go Through All This Change?’

When Stacey was 12 years old, she and her father, a pilot, took off on a Sunday afternoon joyride in their single-engine Cessna. Not long into the flight, and about a mile up over Lake Michigan, the joy of their father-daughter adventure came to an abrupt halt. The engine quit.

Stacey’s father turned to her and in a calm, reassuring tone said, “Honey, the engine has quit. I’m going to need to fly the plane differently.” Interesting phrase: “Fly the plane differently.”

Her father understood that new challenges and changing conditions often require different strategies. Conditions change, markets change, people change. What works one day in a given situation does not necessarily work the next. We need to develop a repertoire of responses so we’re prepared when our engine unexpectedly quits.

Dad’s Plan

In order to restart the engine, they needed more air speed. Stacey’s father told her he would be hitting switches in the cockpit while he steered the plane downward. Stacey understood, and sensing the gravity of the situation, quickly nodded her approval of the plan.

Her father put the plane into a dive and fiddled with the switches, but nothing happened. He leveled off closer to the water. “Stacey, we’re going to try that again,” he said. “Hang on!” They dove a second time. He hit the switches again as the plane gained speed, and this
time the engine fired, first with just a few hopeful sputters, but finally with a secure, familiar hum.

About 20 minutes later, they landed safely. At that point, this fearless father turned to his young daughter, lovingly patted her shoulder and said, “Now honey, whatever you do, don’t tell Mom!”

Handling Change

When faced with a new situation, Stacey’s dad took action and solved the problem. But if he had resisted the change and instead spent his time whining and complaining, having thoughts like “Well, I’ve never done it that way before!” or asking IQs such as “Why do we have to go through all this change?” things might have turned out much differently.

Are you facing change? Any engines quit in your life lately? If so, ask a better question. Here’s one that really works: “How can I adapt to the changing world?”

Don’t Ask ‘When?’

“When will they take care of the problem?”

“When will the customer call me back?”

When we ask “When?” we’re really saying we have no choice but to wait and put off action until another time. Questions that begin with “When” lead to procrastination.

Most people don’t intend to procrastinate. No one ever gets out of bed and says, “Today, I’m going to procrastinate!” But procrastination is a sneaky problem. We put something off until a little later, and then a little later and a little later again until, before we know it, the action has been postponed so long that it has become a serious problem.

Is any procrastination going on in your life? Most people don’t hesitate to admit that procrastination is a problem for them. And if it’s a problem for most people, it’s also a problem for most organizations. What are the consequences? Putting things off means precious time is lost. Productivity suffers. The team may not progress toward its goal. Deadlines are missed.

Procrastination Increases Stress

Procrastination also increases stress. As things pile up, we begin to feel overwhelmed, which takes the joy out of our work. Bottom line: Procrastination is costly to all involved.

One solution is to stop asking externally focused questions that begin with “When?” Instead, we need to ask QBQs such as:

“What solution can I provide?”

“How can I more creatively reach the customer?”

“What can I do to find the information to make a decision?”

Remember: The answers are in the questions.

‘When Will We Get More Tools and Better Systems?’

Most of us have heard the saying “Creativity is thinking outside the box.” There’s a lot of truth in that, but true creativity is this: Succeeding within the box.

Hitting targets, reaching goals, doing the job well and making a difference with what we already have is the QBQ way. Every organization has imperfect systems and finite resources. We may wish we had newer tools, better systems, more people and bigger budgets. But thinking too much about what we’d like to have is another cause of procrastination. Managers, for example, won’t take their group through team building until “All the right people are in place.” Individuals won’t make a decision until they have all the information, or take action until all the questions are answered.

Ironically, succeeding with what we have makes us more likely to get the things we wanted in the first place. Listen to the wisdom of Deb Weber of State Farm Insurance: “I find that every time I do the job with the tools I have, I tend to receive more tools.” It’s the truth: We sow, then we reap.

Focusing on what we don’t have is a waste of time and energy. To really make a difference, let’s focus our energy on succeeding within the box. Let’s ask the QBQ “How can I achieve with the resources I already have?”

Don’t Ask ‘Who?’

“Who made the mistake?”

“Who missed the deadline?”

“Who dropped the ball?”

When we ask “Who” questions like these, what we’re really doing is looking for scapegoats, someone else to blame. And blame may well be the most pervasive and counterproductive of all the ideas mentioned so far.

The Circle of Blame

From the smallest group to the largest corporation, from the lowest rung on the ladder to the highest office in the land, there’s an epidemic of blame going on — and no one seems immune. The CEO blames the vice president, who blames the manager, who blames the employee, who blames the customer, who blames the
government, who blames the people, who blame the politicians, who blame the schools, who blame the parents, who blame the teen, who blames the dad, who blames the mom, who blames her manager, who blames the vice president, who blames the CEO, and on and on it goes. This is the “Circle of Blame,” and it would be kind of funny if it weren’t so true.

Blame and “whodunit” questions solve nothing. They create fear, destroy creativity and build walls. Instead of brainstorming and working together to get things done, we blame-storm and accomplish nothing. There’s not a chance we’ll reach our full potential until we stop blaming each other and start practicing personal accountability.

Try these questions instead of the “Who?” questions and see how fast you can break the Circle of Blame in your organization:

“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?”

A Gift from Bonita

It was a humid day in Houston. As John boarded the plane, he could feel the heat in the steamy, crowded cabin. The flight was obviously overbooked and every passenger seemed to have three pieces of large carry-on luggage. On top of that, several people had apparently been assigned the same seats and weren’t taking it too well. Tension in the cabin was high.

The doors finally closed and they taxied to the runway only to sit for another hour with no explanation from the crew. John couldn’t help but think this gave a whole new meaning to the term “pressurized cabin.” Mercifully, they did finally take off, and that’s when John met one of his QBQ heroes.

Bonita was a flight attendant. When John first saw her, she was prancing down the aisle with an armload of headphones, smiling broadly and having great fun. It was the week before Christmas, and she was wearing one of those red-and-white Santa Claus caps, which draped down her shoulder and off to one side.

As she handed out the headphones, she wasn’t saying, “We held you up for an hour, but give me five bucks anyway!” She was offering them at no charge. She turned to a young man and said, “I’m sure you’ll enjoy our sports programming, sir.”

“What Can I Do Right Now to Make a Difference?”

When she got to John, he stopped her and said, “You know, Bonita, I really appreciate your attitude!” As she sashayed away with that big smile on her face and the Santa Claus cap on her head, she said, “Well, whatever you do, don’t drug test me!”

John didn’t need to test her. He already knew she was high — on life. And that’s one of the great things that happens when we make better choices: We get high on life.

It’s not about “us” versus “them” or “Why did they overbook the plane?” or “Who dropped the ball?” The better question is “What can I do right now to make a difference?”

With one simple choice, making the best of a bad situation, Bonita made a difference for John and every other person on that flight. That’s how personal accountability changes the world: one choice at a time.

Making Accountability Personal: All QBQs Contain an ‘I’

Personal accountability does NOT begin with you. It begins with me. That’s why it’s called personal accountability. It is not about you or me holding each other accountable, as a manager does in setting standards, defining consequences, helping set goals and then holding people accountable for their performance. Nor is it a group thing, where people get together, make public professions of commitment then come back a week or a month later to discuss what did or did not happen.

Personal accountability is about each of us holding ourselves accountable for our own thinking and behaviors, and the results they produce.

This is why the second QBQ guideline is: All QBQs contain an “I,” not “they,” “them,” “we” or “you.” Questions that contain an “I” turn our focus away from other people and circumstances and put it back on ourselves, where it can do the most good. We can’t change other people. We often can’t control circumstances and events. The only things we have any real control over are our own thoughts and actions. Asking questions that focus our efforts and energy on what we can do makes us significantly more effective, not to mention happier and less frustrated.

Accountability groups are great tools. Managers and executives do need to define and communicate standards, but the power of personal accountability comes from questions that begin with “What” or “How” and contain an “I.”

I Can Only Change Me

“What’s the one thing you would change to improve
the effectiveness of your organization?”

People’s minds fill with all kinds of ideas when asked what they would change to improve things. But guess what? Nobody ever says, “I would change me to make our organization run more effectively.” It’s not a trick question. Read it again. Our minds simply don’t go there. Our thoughts almost always focus elsewhere first. Asking questions that begin with “What” or “How” and contain an “I” bring our focus back to ourselves.

How much better things would be if we all tried to mold and shape our own thoughts and actions rather than those of others. The bottom line is that the QBQ works because it’s based on the truth “I can only change me.”

‘When Will Others Walk Their Talk?’

Up to the mountaintop go the executives for a senior management retreat. For three days they debate the critical issues, filling flip charts with brightly colored ink. Finally, “mission, vision and values” in hand, they return to the valley below where the people wait to receive the stone tablets, which have been magically transformed into little laminated pocket cards for men to sit on and women to stuff in their briefcases.

Not long after, people huddle near a water cooler, pull out their cards and whisper, “Well, I’ll practice these values when they do!”

Careful. The easiest thing to spot is gaps of integrity in others:

• The manager who says, “I’m here to help you reach your personal goals,” and then dresses people down in front of others.

• The executive who says, “You are all empowered. It’s our new program!” and then adds, “But before you do anything substantial, check with me first.”

• The teammate who says, “I appreciate my colleagues just the way they are … but if only they’d be a bit more like me.”

• The organization that proudly declares on the lobby wall its guiding value, “People are our greatest asset!” yet the training dollar is the last one budgeted and the first one cut.

Integrity

The definition of integrity is: “Being what I say I am by acting in accordance with my words.”

QBQ thinking leads to integrity because integrity begins with me — not others — asking the question “How can I practice the principles I espouse?” instead of asking “When will others walk their talk?” let’s walk our own talk first.

An Integrity Test

Here’s an integrity test for anyone who’s part of an organization: Does what we say about our organization while we’re at work match what we say at home? If it’s positive at work and negative a few hours later at home, we have a choice to make. Here’s an idea we should all consider: Believe or leave.

Sound harsh? Maybe. But if the organization is no longer a vehicle to help us reach our life goals, why would we stay?

Answering that question honestly is part of practicing personal accountability.

Practicing Personal Accountability

Our third guideline is: All QBQs focus on action. To make a QBQ action-focused, we add verbs, such as “do,” “make,” “achieve” and “build,” to questions that start with “What” or “How” and contain an “I.”

We end up with excellent-sounding questions like “What can I do right now?” and “How will I make a difference today?”

If we don’t ask what we can do or make or achieve or build, then we won’t do or make or achieve or build. It’s that simple. Only through action is anything accomplished.

The practice of personal accountability: We discipline our thoughts. We ask better questions. We take action.

The Risk of Doing Nothing

Even though there are risks involved in taking action, the alternative, inaction, is almost never the better choice. Here’s why:

• Action, even when it leads to mistakes, brings learning and growth. Inaction brings stagnation and atrophy.

• Action leads us toward solutions. Inaction, at best, does nothing and holds us in the past.

• Action requires courage. Inaction often indicates fear.

• Action builds confidence; inaction, doubt.

Decide what to do. Then take action.

‘Thanks for Shopping at the Home Depot!’

One morning a few weeks into Judy’s new job as a
cashier at Home Depot, a young man came through her line, obviously in a hurry. He quickly plunked down a few items and a $100 bill, but the total came to only $2.89. “Do you have anything smaller?” Judy asked. “No, I’m sorry, I don’t,” he said. At that moment, Judy had a choice to make.

So here’s what she did: She handed the young man back his bill, reached for her purse, took out the $2.89, put it in the register and tore off the receipt. She turned to her customer with a smile and said, “Thanks for shopping at the Home Depot!”

**Stunned**

The man stood there a few moments before he figured out what she’d done. Finally, somewhat stunned, he thanked her several times and took off. As far as Judy was concerned, that was the end of it.

Two days later, her supervisor, looking both confused and amused, approached her holding an envelope. “Judy, I need to get this straight,” he said. “Did you actually buy the merchandise for one of our customers the other day?”

She had to think. “Yes, I guess I did.”

“Well, he’s sent you a tip,” he said, “and as a Home Depot employee, I’m sure you know that you can’t accept tips.”

“I don’t want a tip,” she said, then abruptly added, “How much?”

“He wrote you a check for $50.”

“Wow! How about if I endorse it and put it in the pizza fund so we can all share it?” she asked.

“OK,” he said. “We can do that.” So the money went into the pizza fund, and no one thought any more of it.

**Worth the Risk**

The next day, though, the young man showed up in her line again. This time, he had his father, Bob Johnson Sr., owner of Johnson Construction Co. with him. Question: What do contractors need? Answer: Stuff! And the better answer from Judy’s perspective: stuff from the Home Depot.

The elder Mr. Johnson said to Judy, “I want you to know that because of what you did to serve my son the other day, we’ve decided to start getting everything we need from you folks.”

Never let it be said one person can’t have an impact, especially if he or she is willing to take risks. Remember, Judy was in kind of a tight spot. The young man was in a hurry, people were lined up behind him and standard procedure said she’d have to make them all wait while she got change. But she didn’t get stressed out, thinking, “Why is this happening to me?” or just say, “Sorry, it’s our policy,” and make them wait. She kept her cool and decided to take action and serve her customer. That’s QBQ service, and it’s worth the risk.

**Leaders at All Levels**

Are you a leader? Many people wrestle with this question. “Am I a leader or is my manager the leader? Is the company president the leader? The vice president of my division?” Or they think, “Maybe the leader is my peer who was granted the title of ‘Team Leader.’”

Too often, we think leadership is about title, position, tenure, or the number of people or dollars we manage. But the number of years one has been around does not automatically equate with being a good leader, any more than does merely having the title of manager or vice president. And, certainly, the things we acquire — fine cars, nice homes — are not measures of our leadership ability.

Leadership, more than anything else, is about the way we think. It’s a moment-to-moment disciplining of our thoughts. It’s about practicing personal accountability and choosing to make a positive contribution, no matter what our role or “level.” A receptionist, an engineer, a salesperson, a temp worker, a cashier: They can all be leaders. Judy certainly was. If we think like leaders, we are leaders.

**A Great List of Lousy Questions**

Each of us plays many different roles in our lives, and each of those roles has its own particular challenges and frustrations. As you read the following list of roles with IQs and QBQs, think about what IQs **you** might be asking, and more important, what QBQs **you** could use instead.

**Customer service:**

“Why does the customer expect so much?”

“When will the field do it right the first time?”

“Why don’t customers follow the instructions?”

**QBQ:**

“How can I serve them?”

**Sales:**

“Why are our prices so high?”

“When won’t the customer call me back?”

“When will marketing give us better brochures?”

**QBQs:**

“What can I do today to be more effective?”
“How can I add value for my customers?”

Management:
“When am I going to find good people?”
“Why aren’t they motivated?”
“Who made the mistake?”

QBQs:
“How can I be a more effective coach?”
“What can I do to better understand each person on the team?”

Executive:
“Who dropped the ball?”
“When are they going to catch the vision?”
“When will care as much as I do?”
“When will the market turn around?”

QBQs:
“How can I be a better leader?”
“What can I do to show I care?”
“How can I communicate better?”

The Spirit of the QBQ

There’s a well-established legal principle that says there’s a difference between the “letter” and the “spirit” of the law. The letter of the law refers to the specific words used in the law itself. The spirit refers to the underlying concepts and intentions behind the law. The general idea is that compliance with the letter of the law should be in alignment with the spirit of the law.

Using the same concept in our case, the letter of the QBQ would be the guidelines:
2. Contain an “I” (not “they,” “them,” “we” or “you”).
3. Focus on action.

The spirit of the QBQ is personal accountability:
• No more victim thinking, procrastinating or blaming.
• I can only change me.
• Take action!

It’s possible to construct a question that follows the letter of the QBQ but conflicts with the spirit. Consider these:
“What can I do to make you change?”
“How can I avoid responsibility in this matter?”
“What action can I take right now to do the wrong thing?”

These questions are clearly not QBQs. The principle is this: If a question conflicts with the spirit of the QBQ, it isn’t a QBQ.

When the time comes to construct a meaningful question, remember that the only questions that will help us practice personal accountability are those that follow both the letter and the spirit of the QBQ.

A Final Picture

Personal accountability is not blaming, complaining and putting things off, but instead asking questions like “What can I do?” and taking action.

Asking QBQs is the way to start disciplining our thoughts and making better choices.

As we go out now and apply the QBQ in our own lives, let’s always remember the real reason we’re doing it. We’re doing it so we can be more like Stacey’s father, the pilot; Bonita, the flight attendant; and Judy, the cashier at the Home Depot.

None of these people knew about the QBQ, but each embodied its spirit. The rest of us, though, need the QBQ. We may not need it every minute of every day, but we need it often enough for it to make a real difference in our lives.

Make Great Things Happen

We need the QBQ so our organizations can be places where, instead of finger-pointing, procrastinating and we-they-ing ourselves into the ground, we bring out the best in each other, work together the way teams are supposed to and make great things happen.

It’s an exciting vision because if more people practiced personal accountability, the world would be a far better place.

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked QBQ!, you’ll also like:
1. Fierce Conversations by Susan Scott. Learn the methods of positive change through powerful communication. Scott provides the steps to open dialogue between you and others.
2. Executive Presence by Harrison Monarth. People reach highly influential positions because they deeply understand the power of perception and know how to leverage it in their favor. Monarth provides the key tactics.
3. Just Listen by Mark Goulston. Veteran psychiatrist and business coach Mark Goulston reveals the secret to how to get through to anyone, even when productive communication seems impossible.