

"QBQ! The Question Behind the Question", John G. Miller, Penguin Books, 2005, ISBN: 0-141-02105-5.

After a bit of a break, StaffDev emails are back! Towards the end of last term, we wrapped up our look at John Maxwell's book: *Today Matters*. This next series is based on a great little book I read a while ago by John G. Miller. It's entitled "QBQ! The Question Behind the Question" (John G. Miller, Penguin Books, 2005, ISBN: 0-141-02105-5). In fact I first read the follow-up to this ("*Flipping the Switch: Unleash the Power of Personal Accountability Using the QBQ!*", G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2005, ISBN: 0-399-15295-4), which inspired me to get the first one. In these books Miller tackles the problems of victim-thinking, complaining and procrastinating, advocating a philosophy of personal accountability. I should probably make it very clear at the outset that I most definitely do not think that these are problems in the Department, but I enjoyed Miller's books and thought that they might be interesting as the next series. I hope they have made me a little less likely to view myself as a victim of circumstance. The books are an easy read, and have many great anecdotes. They are based on Miller's more than ten years of experience in the field of personal accountability.

Miller wrote the book as a reaction against the all-too-common questions that one encounters in organisations:

"When 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?"

Superficially, these might look like good questions, but they point to a lack of personal accountability. The Question Behind the Question, or QBQ (both trademarks of QBQ, Inc., by the way!) tries to go beyond these kinds of questions to more helpful approaches, based on the principle of personal accountability. Miller recounts how the QBQ approach can lead to "improved productivity, greater teamwork, reduced stress, healthier relationships, and better customer service". More directly though, he mentions the personal benefits that are found in his approach: "things just seem to go better. People have more fun. Life is simply more satisfying and enjoyable".

He opens the book with a personal anecdote of how he stopped for lunch at a very busy restaurant. A waiter carrying a pile of dirty dishes went past, but then noticed Miller sitting there, turned back and asked if Miller had been served. Miller asked for a salad and rolls. The waiter then asked if he wanted anything to drink with his meal and Miller asked for a Diet Coke. The waiter apologised and told him they only served Pepsi. Miller then asked for a glass of water. The waiter returned quickly with the salad, rolls and water, and Miller proceeded to enjoy his meal, "a satisfied customer". A little while later the waiter reappeared... with an ice-cold bottle of Diet Coke. Miller thanked him, and he rushed off again. Miller was now considerably more than a satisfied customer! When he got an opportunity he called the waiter over and asked the waiter what had happened. The waiter confirmed that they didn't stock Coke, and told how the Coke had been bought with the waiter's money, from a nearby grocery store. Miller was puzzled that he had found time to run this errand when the restaurant was so busy. It transpired that he hadn't gone himself, he had sent his manager!

Miller proceeds to unpack this remarkable incident. The waiter, although busy, had noticed a customer that appeared not to have been served and made a point of helping. He could have asked all manner of unproductive questions ("Why do I have to do everything around here?", "Who's supposed to be covering this area, anyway?"), what Miller refers to as Incorrect Questions, or IQs. Instead he chose to take responsibility for the customer himself. Many people when faced with some difficulty will react negatively or defensively, and ask IQs. At this moment we can choose to "better, more accountable questions" - for example, "What can I do to make a difference?", "How can I support the team?".

This is the key principle in QBQ:

Making better choices in the moment by asking better questions.

Miller's waiter clearly followed this principle. Perhaps even more impressively, so did his manager who went to the grocery store to get a Coke when asked to do so by the waiter.

Needless to say, Miller gave the young man a generous tip that day. Some months later Miller returned to the same restaurant and asked for the waiter by name. His waitress explained that the waiter had been promoted to management - no great surprise!

Miller points out that while the waiter's attitude had direct benefits for his organisation and direct benefits for himself (happy customers and better tips!), probably the greatest benefit was the sense of fulfillment that the waiter would have had at the end of each day, reflecting on a job well-done.

Some things to think about:

- 1) Can you think of any situations where someone (perhaps a waiter, bank teller, worker in admin) had clearly been asking IQs, and thus giving poor service? Or can you think of an example like that of Miller's waiter?
- 2) What is your first reaction when faced with some difficulty or frustrating circumstance? IQs or QBQs?

Our next installment of "QBQ! The Question Behind the Question" starts to get to the heart of the QBQ idea.

Miller stresses the fact that we are always able to make choices in how we react to situations (again, this is similar to the ideas underlying Stephen Covey's first "habit": Be Proactive). He points out that we are not so much choosing our actions as choosing our thoughts, from which our actions flow. "Wrong" thoughts lead to "blame, complaining, and procrastination". Choosing differently leads to far more positive ends: "feelings of pride and accomplishment that come from making productive decisions".

People often feel that do not have choices, but this is generally not true. Covey gives the example of Victor Frankl who realised that he had freedom to choose his responses even in the worst of Nazi concentration camps during World War 2. Miller points out that a decision to not make choice is in itself a choice! We have to take responsibility for our own choices. He sums up this short chapter: "Make better choices"!

Last week we introduced the idea of IQs: Incorrect Questions. Miller originated the QBQ idea from observing that an individual's first reaction to many situations is to ask IQs. He suggests that we try to recognise these moments and the impulse to ask IQs, and rather ask better questions. Better questions "will lead us to better results". Miller states that one of the keys in QBQ is that "The answers are in the questions".

So, how do we distinguish good questions (QBQs) from bad questions (IQs)? Miller presents the following three guidelines for asking QBQs:

- 1) Begin with "What" or "How" (NOT "Why", "When", or "Who")
- 2) Use "I" (NOT "they", "them", "we", or "you")
- 3) Focus on action

A very simple example he gives is "What can I do?", which exhibits all three of these properties. While "What can I do?" is a very simple question, it should be apparent how it takes one out of a blame-focussed, victimised viewpoint to a proactive, positive viewpoint. Miller warns against discounting the simplicity of the QBQ, and the rest of the book uncovers more of the subtleties of the concept.

The next section is entitled "Don't Ask 'Why?'". He gives some examples of negative "why" questions: "Why is this happening to me?", "Why don't others work harder?", "Why do they make it so difficult for me to do my job?". I'm sure we can all think of many more examples: "Why don't students just do what they're told?", "Why can't the University management just make a decision?!" The problem with all these questions is that they create a victim mentality: I am the helpless victim of my circumstances. (Miller also points out that there are good questions with "why" in them - e.g. "why is this situation the way it is?" - that are intended to guide problem solving or are investigative; the problem comes when they turn towards self-pity). He believes that "there is too much [victim thinking] in the world already".

Miller tells a humorous anecdote about chatting to a stranger on an aeroplane. As one does, he asked the man what he did. It turned out he was a "personal injury attorney"! Naturally, he then asked Miller what he did. Miller started off with a relatively innocuous self-description as "author, speaker", but when the lawyer asked for more details decided to let him have it: "Personal accountability... What I really do is help people - including myself - eliminate victim thinking from their lives". Apparently, the lawyer looked rather uncomfortable and then moved to another seat!

As funny (and ironic) as this encounter was, the lawyer was simply meeting a need of our modern society, which often seems to be increasingly determined to sink into victim-hood. Miller's response to this apparent trend is that the only way to change our society is to change ourselves, one individual at a time.

He ends the section with some QBQs that address the three IQs it started with:

"Why is this happening to me?"
"What can I do to improve the situation?"

"Why don't others work harder?"
"How can I do my job better today?"

"Why do they make it so difficult for me to do my job?"
"How can I support others?"

Some things to think about:

- 1) Have you had an IQ moment recently? What QBQ would have been a better response?
- 2) Look out for opportunities to ask yourself QBQs: begin with "What" or "How"; use "I"; focus on action.

John G. Miller's book "QBQ! The Question Behind the Question" often consists of very short chapters and contains many anecdotes illustrating personal accountability in action (positively or negatively). Today we continue with a number of these short sections.

The first anecdote is of a former military man who had spent ten years in the army. During this time, his mantra had been "No excuses, sir!" when things were going wrong. After leaving the army he joined a company as a mid-level manager. When his performance fell below expectations he went to his boss and asked a bunch of IQs: "Why don't you coach me more?", "Why don't we get some new products?", "Why doesn't marketing support us more?", etc. The very next day he went to a company training programme: the QBQ! He realised that, since leaving the military, he had quickly slipped into a victim mentality. Miller's point is that if this can happen to someone after ten years of "no excuses", it can easily happen to anyone.

"Stress is a choice": an interesting, perhaps controversial, statement! Many people blame their circumstances, external factors, etc. for the stress that they experience. Miller argues that we choose our own responses to our circumstances (which may genuinely be bad), including choosing to let them stress us or not. "We choose to react angrily. We choose to stuff our emotions and keep quiet. We choose to worry... Stress is a choice". I had this experience just yesterday, faced with a very difficult meeting which was not going the way I had hoped, and the odds seemed stacked against us. I found myself reminding myself in the midst of the discussions that it was not "life and death" that was at stake, and consciously trying to calm myself (semi-successfully!) - perhaps some of what I have read in Miller's book has actually sunk in! Miller also makes the point that stress can be the result of our choices. Allowing ourselves to feel like victims can add to the stress levels, reinforcing a sense that we are not in control. "Even in cases where we actually are victims and our feelings seem justified, 'Why me?' thinking only adds to our stress".

His next anecdote focuses on change, and how we react to it. The story is of a young girl, flying in a single-engined plane with her father (the pilot). Shortly after take-off the engine stopped! The father remained calm and explained that he was "going to need to fly the plane differently". Faced with changed circumstances he changed his strategy. In order to try to restart the engine he needed to put the plane into a dive to increase the airspeed, while fiddling with the engine controls. He tried this, but nothing happened (except that they were considerably closer to the surface of the lake they were flying over!). He tried a second time, and, after a few hesitations, the engine finally restarted. They made their way back to the airfield, where they landed. He turned to his daughter and said "Now honey, whatever you do, don't tell Mom!". "We need to develop a repertoire of responses so we're prepared when our engine unexpectedly quits". The QBQ here is "How can I adapt to the changing world?".

The next (very short) section cover communication. In his training workshops, Miller often finds that people in organisations identify poor communication (inevitably, by the other party!) as the most critical issue facing their organisation. The QBQ here is "How can I better understand you?".

He then turns to "When" questions (you'll remember from last week that QBQs usually begin with "What" or "How" rather than "Why", "When", or "Who"). "When" questions often suggest that we are (again) victims waiting for the circumstances to change, or for someone else to do something. They lead us to putting off action, or procrastinating. Most people procrastinate at some stages of their life, and, if individuals are procrastinating at work then it is a problem for the organisation. "Productivity suffers... Deadlines are missed". Putting things off can also increase stress as the workload piles up, undone. Suggested QBQs are:

"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?"

Miller then shares a personal story about procrastination. He had given away a large desk, which had a glass sheet on

top. The friend who took the desk didn't want the glass top, so Miller left the sheet of glass propped against a basketball hoop pole beside his driveway after the desk had been loaded onto the truck. The friend pointed out that he should put the glass away somewhere safer. Miller agreed, but thought he would do it later. Needless to say, he got busy working around the garden and left it. That evening, as they drove out to dinner, his wife pointed out that the glass should be moved. Miller told her he'd do it later! When they got home from dinner, he noticed a pair of clippers lying in the garden, and asked his son (aged nine) to put them away in the garage. A few moments later, "the silence was broken by the most terrifying sound I have ever heard: the shattering of a large piece of plate glass". Miller ran to the driveway and found his son lying, crying amidst the shards of broken glass. Fortunately, he had landed flat on top of the sheet of glass as it hit the ground, and didn't have a single scratch. While they were incredibly lucky, Miller's procrastination could have been disastrous.

"Let's take care of the little things while they're still little".

Some things to think about:

- 1) Would you agree that "stress is a choice"?
- 2) How well do you react to change?
- 3) Are you procrastinating about something at the moment? Is there a QBQ that might help you look at the situation differently (see the examples above)?

We continue with some thoughts from John G. Miller's book "QBQ! The Question Behind the Question", but first a small correction from the previous session. The closing quote should have read "Let's take care of the little things while they're still little".

The next section of Miller's book deals with creativity. He takes a new spin on the old saying about "thinking outside the box", preferring to define creativity as "Succeeding within the box": can we succeed with what is already available to us. This hinges on the QBQ approach to making the most of our circumstances, rather than his avoiding our personal responsibility. No organisation is perfect or has limitless resources (this is perhaps especially true of universities!). Focusing too much on what we need in order to succeed can lead to procrastination: "we'll succeed when we have...". Miller points out that success with what we have will often release further resources, quoting an insurance worker: "I find that every time I do the job with the tools I have, I tend to receive more tools"! He makes the point that worrying about the resources we don't have is counter-productive. We need to "[succeed] within the box". The underlying QBQ is "How can I achieve with the resources I already have?".

Miller then turns to considering the basics: fundamental principles for success. He uses sales as an illustration, listing the fundamentals in this field as "getting up early, contacting prospective clients, sharing their belief in the value of their products and services, [and] following up". However, in his experience, many salespeople are searching for a "silver bullet", or a "magic wand": some new technique or advanced skill that will bring great success. "The problem is not a shortage of new ideas but a lack of understanding that the 'old' ideas still work". He is quick to admit that this (obviously!) doesn't apply to technology, but points out that often the oldest, best-established principles are the best. New programmes and faddish techniques are often very poor substitutes for tried-and-tested fundamental principles. He points out that the principle underlying QBQ (i.e. practising personal responsibility) is itself a great example. Rather than the IQ "When are we going to hear something new?", we should ask "How can I apply what I'm hearing [or have heard before]?".

He next turns to another set of very prevalent IQs: "who" questions. "Who made the mistake?", "Who missed the deadline?", "Who dropped the ball?". These questions attempt to lay blame for our lack of success on someone else, "looking for scapegoats... blame may well be the most pervasive and counterproductive of all the ideas we've talked about so far". Particularly in organisations, the blame game ("blame-storming" rather than "brainstorming" as Miller succinctly expresses it) is often played to the death. This is true even of small companies. He quotes a conversation with an individual (both a driver and sales manager for a small transport company) who identified blame as a major problem - in a company with only twelve employees! "[T]here'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 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"! The blame-focused "who" IQs are incredibly counter-productive, weakening, rather than building up organisations and groups. Rather than the IQs at the start of this paragraph we need to start asking QBQs 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?". Questions like this can help break the blame-cycles in organisations.

Following this theme, he digresses to a fun quiz. We've all heard the expression that a poor workman blames his tools. Well, fill in the following blanks:

- A poor teacher blames the _____
- A poor salesperson blames the _____
- A poor parent blames the _____
- A poor manager blames the _____
- A poor employee blames the _____
- A poor coach blames the _____
- A poor teenager blames the world!

On the other hand accountable people blame no one, "[n]ot even themselves".

The next section then focuses on the dangers of institutional "silos": the "us against them" thinking that often permeates organisations, and often incorporates a dangerous defensiveness against other departments/sections. In commercial enterprises these silos may be organisational structures like sales, research, finance, IT, headquarters, etc. Good examples in a university might be the admin and academic structures. The barriers between structures are easily reinforced by a lack of personal accountability ("That's not my job") and little recognition of the common goal of the organisation's success. Miller tells of a company where the sales people refer to their headquarters as the "Sales Prevention Club"! How often have you heard a front-line employee blame their head-office, the IT department, the people in accounting, etc.? Miller points out the counter-productive nature of this kind of approach, using the analogy of a tandem bicycle with the two riders facing and pedalling in opposite directions: "lots of activity, lots of exertion, but no forward movement" (not even agreement on where "forward" is)! The solution: to remember "We're all on the same team".

Some things to think about:

- 1) Are you frustrated by a lack of resources, support, or something similar? Try the QBQ: "How can I achieve with the resources I already have?"
- 2) Would you agree that "blame may well be the most pervasive and counterproductive of all the ideas we've talked about so far"?

The next section of John Miller's book, "QBQ! The Question Behind the Question", deals with a lesson he learned from his father, a wrestling coach. His father would always tell him that he had to be good enough to beat the referee. What he meant by this was that referees are human and will make mistakes, but that Miller had to be good enough at his wrestling that no mistake that the ref made would matter to the outcome of the match. In QBQ terms, this is a matter of not placing the blame for our performance on external factors. The "referees" in our lives may take many forms (e.g. micro-managing bosses, inefficient systems in our organisations, personal circumstances that take a lot of our attention, etc.). When faced with these kinds of barriers that are outside of our control, there is little point in focusing on them, we need to be "good enough to beat the ref"! In this regard, Stephen Covey speaks of the difference between our "circle of concern", the things that affect us, and our "circle of influence", the things that we can change - the latter is always smaller than the former. In these terms, expending energy on the things that lie outside of our circle of influence is pointless.

Miller then digresses again to tell of an incident where someone practised the QBQ principle. In this case it was a flight from Houston Texas. The plane was hot and stuffy, and the airline had overbooked the flight. Before take-off there was an unexplained one-hour delay during the taxiing to the runway. Needless to say, the passengers and crew were all rather frazzled, to put it mildly! That didn't affect one of the passenger attendants though. Shortly after take-off she came down the aisle, wearing a large smile and a Santa Claus cap (it was just before Christmas), and distributing headphones for the in-flight entertainment. As she did so, she took care to make personal comments to the passengers. When she came to Miller he congratulated her on her positive attitude. She responded, with a big smile, "Well, whatever you do, don't drug test me!". Miller comments that it was clear that she was "high - on life". This is often one of the benefits of taking personal responsibility for the situations we find ourselves in - we get to enjoy the journey, no longer feeling like helpless victims tossed about by circumstances. The QBQ that this attendant was asking (whether she knew it or not) was "What can I do right now to make a difference?". In asking this of herself, the attendant made a big difference for a plane-load of cranky passengers.

This is followed by another anecdote, this time illustrating the principle of "ownership" within an organisation, specifically the local phone company. His telephone line was generating a lot of static during conversations, so he put

in a request for a repair. A repairman turned up and worked hard on the problem, but the next day the static was back! A second repairman arrived and again worked hard on it, but again the problem returned. When the third guy arrived, Miller explained the whole story and then waited for the excuses and the blame to flow. However, the workman's response was simply "Mr. Miller, I can't explain it, but I sure can apologize for it!". Miller defines ownership as "A commitment of the head, heart, and hands to fix the problem and never again affix the blame".

Miller then turns to the subject of teamwork. In nature, we don't expect dolphins to soar like eagles, or lions to act like fish - different species have clearly different roles. Likewise the people on a team are likely to have differing strengths, viewpoints, etc. "Let's appreciate people's gifts and strengths just as they are. That's the foundation of teamwork".

He then returns to one of the central guidelines for asking QBQs: "All QBQs Contain an 'I'". He tells of a time when he had just given a presentation on personal accountability to hundreds of employees at a large company. The CEO rose to give a few closing words. On the screen behind him appeared the words: "Personal accountability begins with YOU". As Miller points out, he missed the point - accountability starts with me. It is not to be confused with managers setting goals and targets for their workers, or for accountability groups that meet to help each other work through personal issues. While these are both important and helpful activities, they fall outside of the scope of personal accountability. "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 QBQ guidelines call for questions to contain an "I" - forcing us to put ourselves in the centre of the solution. The behaviour of other people is outside our control, and very often our circumstances are too. What we do control are our own thoughts and actions. Focusing on our circle of influence allows us to be more effective and also usually happier and less frustrated.

Some things to think about:

- 1) Is there some situation that you are facing that requires you to "beat the ref"? Who or what is the referee in this case, and how could you beat them?
- 2) When you find yourself feeling frustrated and angry is the reason something outside of your control, and would asking a QBQ with an "I" help in dealing with the negative emotions?

This week we pick up where left off last week with John G. Miller's book "QBQ! The Question Behind the Question": focusing on "I".

The next section points out that "I can only change me". Intellectually, this may seem obvious, but Miller points out that many people reading his book find themselves thinking things like, "I wish [Person X] could hear this, because they need it"! Many of us believe that we need to change or "fix" the people around us. Miller tells of a director, who said "Really, I'm not trying to change my assistant. I'm not! I just think she should..."! In other words, he thought she needed to change! He tells of another situation where he was called in to run his QBQ training programme for a company. While preparing for this, the company's training manager told him that the real reason that the Vice President wanted to run the QBQ training was "to fix Ed"! The VP had a problem employee, and, rather than face the problem and deal with it directly himself, he was making the entire company go through a training programme! [Perhaps I should reiterate what I said in session 1: I don't think we have a problem with personal accountability in the Department - I'm not trying to "fix", anyone!]. Another manager told Miller directly, "I believe it's my job to change people - I'm a manager"! While managers can advise, lead, mentor, etc., they cannot change other people. It requires an individual to make a choice to change themselves. What all these examples underscore is that while we may claim to agree that "I can only change me", our behaviour is often contrary.

Miller often asks groups that he is training what would need to be changed to improve their organisation. Inevitably, he gets a long list of Ps: "Products, Promotions, Policies, Processes, Procedures, Pricing, and People" (one guy even said "Pepsi" - he disagreed with choice of Coke for the company vending machine!). "Nobody ever says 'Me!'". Our natural inclination is not to see self-change as the solution to the organisation's problems. Asking QBQs that contain an "I" (and begin with "What" or "How") can help us to address this. "The bottom line is that the QBQ works because it's based on the truth 'I can only change me'".

To further underscore this point Miller tells an anecdote of a manager from a large company. Early in her career she had been in a branch office, managing a specific individual. They did not get on, and the working relationship was very difficult. She was very relieved when he was transferred to another branch. Some years later they ended up in the same branch again - she as his manager, again. However, the relationship was completely different - there was good communication and effective cooperation. The manager pondered the change, asking herself, "When did he change?", but then she realised that she was the one who had changed in the interim! When Miller probed exactly what had

changed, her response was "I stopped trying to change him"!

Miller then turns to a discussion of integrity, specifically around corporate vision, mission and values statements. He describes how many large organisations create these: a team of senior leaders go off on a bosberaad for several days, then return to the minions with the vision, mission and values all laid out. In such cases, many of the employees react along the lines of "Well, I'll practice these values when they do!". While this may be valid, it is too easy to pinpoint a lack of integrity in others. QBQ states that we need to focus on ourselves first: "How can I practice the principles I espouse". (The Biblical injunction to remove the log from one's own eye before offering to remove the speck from someone else's eye springs to mind here). "Instead of asking 'When will others walk their talk?' let's walk our own talk first".

As a measure of personal integrity, Miller asks whether what we say about our workplace at work is the same as what we say about it at home. If we're saying positive things at work, but moaning and complaining at home, there's a problem. His advice: "Believe or leave"! If your work is not helping you to achieve your "life goals", then you need to reevaluate your choices.

The next section deals with the issue of working in teams. It may be tempting to adapt the QBQ to ask "What can we do?". The problem with this is "we" is not the correct focus for change. Only individuals change - one at a time. Miller is at pains to point out that work teams are not a bad thing, on the contrary. However, we can lose the focus on personal accountability when we start to "hide behind the team". He describes the QBQ/personal accountability approach as "The power of one".

As a final thought for this week, he quotes the well-known "Serenity Prayer":

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

He rewords this in QBQ terms:

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!

Some things to think about:

- 1) Is there someone else who you think (hopefully, thought, now) should change in order to fix some situation you find yourself in? How could you change your attitude or actions to make a difference?
- 2) Is what you say about your workplace at work the same as what you say about it at home?

We're back with John G. Miller's book "QBQ! The Question Behind the Question".

The next section deals with role models. Miller makes the point that many people are quick to criticise public figures (politicians, celebrities, etc.) for their failures, blaming them for being bad role models for our children. "But in reality, no public figure is a role model for our kids. That's our job - yours and mine". In general, all of us are being observed by others a lot of the time - we are all role models in one way or another, especially those of us who are teachers. Miller points out "Modeling is the most powerful of all teachers", which is a sobering thought.

The next section returns to the central criteria for asking good QBQs, specifically that they should focus on action. Miller opens with a story about a corporate QBQ training session that he conducted for a company that had recently been merged with another, and now had to answer to a new company headquarters across the country. One of the managers had arrived at the training venue "gripping and complaining (his words)" about how the new headquarters was making his local job very difficult. After listening to what Miller had to say about personal accountability, he realised what he needed to do. He immediately booked a flight to HQ for the next day so that he could meet with the central management and discuss the problems he was having. "It's so simple, but the ultimate goal of the QBQ is action!"

This is the third criterion for a good QBQ: it must lead to action. Miller suggests using verbs such as "do", "make", "achieve" and "build" to help focus on action. (Reminder: the other two guidelines are that QBQs (1) start with "what" or "how", and (2) contain an "I"). He also suggests putting in a time frame, leading to QBQs like "What can I do right now?", or "How can I make a difference today?". QBQs without actions are really just statements of good intentions.

"Only through action is anything accomplished".

Leading on from this, he then turns to the subject of managing risk. Many people are highly risk-averse, and taking action may seem risky. However, in today's competitive work place, not taking action may be even more risky: "our lack of initiative today may guarantee our lack of employment tomorrow"! Miller compares a number of aspects of action versus inaction:

- (1) "Action, even when it leads to mistakes, brings learning and growth. Inaction brings stagnation and atrophy".
- (2) "Action leads us towards solutions. Inaction at best does nothing and holds us in the past".
- (3) "Action requires courage. Inaction often indicates fear".
- (4) "Action builds confidence; inaction, doubt".

Miller quotes a friend of his: "It's better to be one who is told to wait than one who waits to be told"!

The next chapter gives another anecdote about someone who really practiced the QBQ principles. This is the story of Judy, a new cashier at a building supplies store (like Mica). Early one morning a young man, in an obvious hurry was in the queue at her till. When he got to the till he handed over his items, which came to a total of \$2.89. He then handed over a \$100 note! Being early in the day, Judy had only \$40 in her till. She asked if he had a smaller note, but he didn't. Judy's dilemma was that to get more change was going to involve sending the \$100 note to the central office, which was going to involve a lengthy wait for the young man and everyone behind him in the queue. Judy reached for her handbag, took \$2.89 from her purse, paid for the goods and handed them to the man together with his \$100. The man was rather taken aback, but thanked her profusely and left.

That wasn't quite the end of the story. Two days later Judy's supervisor came over with a letter in his hand and a cheque for \$50 - a tip from the young man for the great service he had received! Company policy disallowed tips for individuals, so Judy suggested that they put the money into the employees' pizza fund for everyone to benefit.

This still wasn't quite the end of the tale. The following day, the young man returned, with his father. It turned out that his dad owned... a construction company. He was so impressed with the service that his son had received that he had decided to bring all his company's business to Judy's store!

It might have been easy for Judy, a new, young employee, to handle the original transaction differently, but what an opportunity would have been missed. No matter what your position in your organisation you can make a huge impact - positive, like Judy's, or negative.

Some things to think about:

- 1) For whom are you a role model? What kind of example do you think you set?
- 2) What is your attitude to risk? Do you tend towards action or inaction?

The next few sections of John G. Miller's book deal with the topic of leadership.

He starts by asking the question "Are you a leader?". Many people struggle with this question, unsure whether they are a leader, or whether the next person up the corporate totem pole is the leader. (Miller tells a dumb story at this point about asking this question at a seminar only to have a man leap up and shout "Yes, I'm a leader" - his name was Jim Leader!). "Too often, we think leadership is about title, position, the number of people or [amount of money] we manage, or tenure". He uses "tenure" in a general (rather than academic) sense here, to refer to the length of time someone has spent in an organisation - in essence, "serving time" doesn't make someone a leader. "Leadership... 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'". People at all levels in an organisation can be leaders, just like the cashier Judy from the last installment. Anyone with influence is a leader (this ties in closely with John Maxwell's statement: "leadership is influence - nothing more, nothing less" [StaffDev, 14 February 2003, <http://listserv.ru.ac.za/pipermail/cs-staffdev-1/2003-February/000002.html>]).

Miller then refers back to the opening story he told, about the waiter in the busy restaurant who sent his manager to get Miller a Diet Coke. As we noted at the time, there were two remarkable people in the story: the waiter and his manager. Miller now turns to consider the manager's part in the story in more detail. Firstly, he notes all the IQs that she didn't

ask: "Who works for whom here?", "What have you done for me lately?", "Remember when you dropped the ball?", "If I do this for you, what will you do for me?". Rather than asking these (or other) IQs she served the waiter and, through him, the customer. She helped the waiter to excel in his job, and clearly displayed servant leadership. Such leadership is the natural outcome of the QBQ approach. "[I]t requires a humble spirit combined with a servant's heart".

Mill tells about getting into a lift after one of his seminars with one of the participants. She looked thoughtful and then asked him if the lesson of the seminar was that she should return to the office and do her fellow-workers jobs for them. Miller was rather horrified at this, and hastened to correct the impression she had got. "The QBQ is not about covering for people, taking on their duties and responsibilities, or doing it 'all by myself'. That is not service to others, it is a disservice to everyone". Managers who step in to finish off a job for their team, parents who do their children's unfinished chores, etc. do not provide any real value, and certainly do not contribute to the growth and development of the worker/child/etc. True leadership requires a leader to equip and empower those in their care and to assist them to achieve their goals themselves.

In the final section for today, Miller gives a long list of IQs from various areas, together with the opposing QBQ. Here is a small selection:

Customer Service:

Why does the customer expect so much?
Why don't customers follow the instructions?

QBQ: How can I serve them?

Sales:

When are we going to be more competitive?
Why won't the customer call me back?
When will marketing give us better brochures?

QBQ: What can I do to be more effective today?

QBQ: How can I add value for my customers?

Management:

Why doesn't the younger generation want to work?
When am I going to find good people?
Why aren't they motivated?
Who made the mistake?
Why can't people come in on time?

QBQ: How can I be a more effective coach?

QBQ: 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?
Who will care as much as I do?

QBQ: How can I be a better leader?

QBQ: What can I do to show I care?

QBQ: How can I communicate better?

Parent:

When is my child going to listen to me?
Why does she hang out with those kids?
When will he open up?
Why can't you be more like your sister?

QBQ: How can I get to know him better?

QBQ: What can I do to improve my parenting skills?

Spouse:

Why doesn't he/she let go of that old issue?
When will he/she appreciate me more?

QBQ: How can I improve myself today?
QBQ: What can I do to help him/her out?

Volunteer:

Why do I have to do everything myself?

QBQ: What can I do to set better boundaries and just say "no"?

We always have a choice: will we ask IQs or QBQs?

A closing quote:

Humility is the cornerstone of leadership.

Some things to think about:

- 1) How would you answer Miller's question "Are you a leader?"? Why?
- 2) Do you agree that "humility is the cornerstone of leadership"? Why, or why not?

This week brings us to the end of John G. Miller's book "QBQ! The Question Behind the Question". In these final sections he sums up and gives some motivation and a last example.

He begins by discussing the difference between the letter and the spirit of QBQ. The letter should be quite familiar by now (ask questions that begin with "What" or "How", that contain an "I" and focus on action). The spirit is the idea of personal accountability that underlies these guidelines and has permeated the discussion of them. It has three aspects corresponding to the three parts of the letter, which Miller lists as follows:

- No more victim thinking, procrastinating or blaming
- I can only change me
- Take action!

Miller raises the issue of the letter and the spirit of QBQ because it is possible to construct questions that meet the letter of the guidelines, while completing violating the spirit of QBQ. For example, "What can I do to make you change?" and "How can I avoid responsibility in this matter?". Merely adhering to the letter of the QBQ does not necessarily make a question a QBQ!

As he winds up Miller briefly discusses what learning really is, pointing out that, unless we apply what we have learned, we cannot truly state that we have learned anything. In other words, effective learning must result in change, not merely in increased head knowledge. "Learning is really about translating knowing what to do into doing what we know".

He then gives one last example, from his own family's experience. They were driving along a highway one weekend when they saw a man in a wheelchair in a field chasing a huge pile of newspapers that were being blown about in a strong wind (that would catch most people's attention!). While they watched, he leapt from the wheelchair to pin down some papers. One of Miller's children suggested that they stop and help. They did so and were shortly running around collecting the newspapers which almost covered the field. This didn't take too long (Miller and his wife have seven children!). They took them to the man lying in the field, and asked what had happened as he dragged himself back into his wheelchair. He explained that he had got home in his bakkie only to realise that one of a number of bundles of newspapers had fallen off the back. He retraced his route and found the papers being blown around the field. Miller asked if he had intended to try to collect them all himself. His reply: "I couldn't just leave them. It was my mess".

"My mess. My responsibility. What a powerful picture of personal accountability".

In a society that seems to be ever-increasingly victim-oriented, with people far too quick to blame anything or anyone other than themselves for the situations in which they find themselves, this kind of example is desperately needed. Miller ends by encouraging his readers to emulate the Brian the wheelchair-bound newspaper dealer, Jacob the busy waiter and Judy the DIY store clerk. "We need the QBQ [to] bring out the best in each other, ... and make great things

happen".

And a closing quote:

"If more people practiced personal accountability, the world would be a far better place".

Some things to think about:

- 1) Can you think of someone who has demonstrated the QBQ (like any of the examples Miller has given)? How did they illustrate the QBQ principle, and what was the effect on you?
- 2) How can you translate what you have learned from this series into action?