

## Leader's Book Club

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*You are the same today as you'll be in five years except for two things: the people you meet and the books you read*

*-Charlie "Tremendous" Jones*

The article reenergizes a program initiated by COL John O'Brien in which he provided a review of business and leadership books. However, in contrast to the typical military recommended reading lists in which the majority of the books relate to military campaigns or specific battles, our focus is to educate, inspire, and challenge by reviewing books outside of the military sphere. Additionally, knowing the multitude of demands on each of our schedules, many of the books chosen will be intentionally short. Finally, each of these quarterly reviews (as well as the previous summaries by COL O'Brien) will be posted to the USAFP website. A recommended list of books by our current medical senior leadership will also be provided. If you have any recommendations for books to be reviewed or if you'd like to contribute, please let us know; we'd love to hear from you.

### **QBQ! The Question Behind the Question**

QBQ, by John G. Miller, is a short book (115 pages) with a simple, yet profound message. The structure of the book is short chapters with a poignant point or question to reflect upon that all builds and supports the concept of personal accountability. Proper questions, QBQs, are ones that place the emphasis and onus on the individual and not on something external or out of the individual's control. Too often, and I believe we have all fallen into this trap, we ask questions that place the blame on someone else, or at least place responsibility elsewhere. These questions, termed "incorrect questions (IQ)" always ask, "When is someone else going to fix the problem?". QBQs, however, focus on what WE can do and follow a specific format:

- 1) Begins with What or How (not why, when or who)
- 2) Contain I (not them, they, we or you)
- 3) Focus on action

Thus, instead of "When is management going to ..." or "Why are we so short staffed", the proper questions would be "What can I do to improve the situation" or "How can I support the team". QBQs put the focus on our responsibility to serve and contribute positively to the situation. In contrast, just as with gossip, IQs have the tendency to destroy morale and fester like an infection; flipping the script with QBQs and inserting control minimizes wasted energy and destructive individual and organizational behavior.

A common theme throughout the book that is complementary to the principle of personal accountability is avoiding the victim mentality. Obviously, unfortunate things happen on a daily basis, and all of us in medicine have seen this time and time again; however, these circumstances do not justify taking the role of the victim. Actually, the opposite applies; becoming a victim almost certainly worsens the situation emotionally and prevents you from taking actions to improve, or at least to limit,

damage from the event. I recently read in another book that the difference between reacting and responding is our own degree of control. When we react, others are in control; when we respond, we are in control. Victims react...and typically do so poorly.

The author also addresses some key, and all too familiar, "incorrect questions". Specifically, asking "When we're going to get the new, best system or the new training technique?" These questions fail to recognize that most success comes from utilizing and maximizing tools and resources already at hand. The most important of these is us! One phrase that stuck with me from this section was "succeeding *within* the box". Furthermore, focusing on "who" to blame or caused the issue is wasted time. This doesn't mean individuals, sections, departments, and organizations aren't accountable for decisions and actions, but throughout a typical day, way too much time is spent looking for whom to blame or an excuse for non-performance rather than just getting out there and succeeding. Although I'm hesitant to make an over-used sport analogy, this one is too easy to pass up. If the field is in bad shape, it's raining, the ball is under inflated, or the opposing crowd is really loud, at the end of the day, are any of these factors really excuses when the quarterback and running back fumble the handoff or the snapper, placer and kicker mess up the field goal attempt or the other team has more points when time expires and the game is over?

Mr. Miller also dedicates time to organizational behaviors and attitudes. He defines ownership as "A commitment of the head, heart, and hands to *fix* the problem and never again *affix* the blame." Too often, unnecessary bureaucracy, silos, and preservation of ego prevent us from remembering we're all on the same team and will all succeed or fail together. The heart of commitment and successful teams is beginning with our own self. QBQs don't have "they", "them" or "we"; QBQs contain "I". Expecting, even demanding, this attitude of ourselves and of those we lead change the culture and performance of organizations. Honest, meaningful dialogue translates to real communication and addressing underlying needs and gaps. Each of us have unique talents and skills and must maximize those while trusting our teammates to do the same.

Mr. Miller also laments the countless leaders who have either focused their energies on trying to change others without changing themselves or who have acted hypocritically by not following their own advice (I'm sure none of you have ever experienced this...). We all know it's easy to spot things we'd change in others, but the key point to QBQ is personal accountability. By doing this daily, we also model appropriate behavior for those watching us. The final way the book encourages the QBQ concept is by recommending that we as leaders ask "What can I do?" when those working with and for us present with issues. However, this does not imply that we do their jobs or fail to hold them accountable for not fulfilling their responsibilities.

In summary, this book is all about personal accountability and it's translation to personal and professional success. I highly recommend it due to the value of its content as well as its brevity. In closing, I share Mr. Miller's modification of the serenity prayer that captures the essence of the book:

"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."