

QBQ! (The Question Behind the Question) QuickNote #12:

"When are we going to hear something new?"

Tom Sween, CEO of Minnesota-based E.A. Sween Co., would *never* ask that lousy question. With a popular brand name of *Deli Express*, they place freshly made food items in thousands of locations each day. Hardly a glamorous industry, but an important one. And E.A. Sween is a hugely successful company by any standard of measurement. What makes them unique? In 1992 Mr. Sween and his executive team committed to a training process that taught powerful and practical concepts of leadership and self-management. Instead of handing it off to human resources or a staff trainer, they actually said, "*This is our job!*" Demonstrating ownership and responsibility, they invested the time and energy to learn how to facilitate the training materials *themselves*-and then did it. Over all the years of selling training systems, I was most proud to have E.A. Sween on my personal client list. Mostly because they understood it's *always* management's job to develop people and effect cultural change. This is a CEO and group of leaders who believe in and *practice* personal accountability. Over a decade later, not only do Tom and Team "*walk the talk*," but the *talk* that is *walked* is still the talk from the *original content* they brought into the culture in 1992! In simple terms, they've stayed with it and made it work. They understand learning. They know:

The old stuff is the good stuff.

Principles of success are not *timely*, they are *timeless*. Timeless ideas *are not fads*. And engaging in fads can create a terrible organizational cancer: *Cynicism*.

Cynicism defined: *Doubting another's sincerity, motives, and intentions*. It is a costly disease because it robs our organizations of creativity, communication, trust, productivity, and *learning*. And management has created cynicism by buying into the myths of the *Flavor of the Day*, the *Program of the Quarter*, and the *Education Escapade*. Senior teams have escaped for a day of whitewater rafting and called it "team building." The mantra returning to the office was, "*Hey, we got wet together-now we can work together!*" We've held the January "Hype Me Up Higher" sales meetings in warm-weather resorts while bringing in the mountain climbers because, well, they climbed a mountain. They've done their motivational shtick, told us of the dangers they faced and the glory they found, and showed us the PowerPoint presentations of icicles hanging from parkas and chins. We're awed. We bought the book. We got an autograph. And then we returned to the field with *not one kernel of practical content* we can use on the job.

Tremendous quantities of goodwill, energy, time, and money have been squandered through manipulation, short-term thinking, the desire for the quick fix of problems and people, and just plain old ignorance. The organizational world has wasted *billions* of dollars over recent decades. Management dictates what slogan goes on the wall ... *this* year. Department teams want their turn climbing trees and swinging from ropes. Outside "experts" encourage it. Sadly, we have paid them to take us there. Salespeople looking for the silver bullet say, "*I've taken Selling Skills 101, what's next?*" But there really is no higher-level class. How come? Because it's the fundamentals that work best on the job. Yet we have been taught that it is natural, normal, and our right to do the *Blue program* one quarter, the *Red program* the next, and the *Green program* the year after. Changing our core messages, producing new annual vision statements, and latching on to fads have not worked. It's true, we live in a fad-driven culture but do we need to perpetuate it within our organizations? Maybe we should consider simplicity, clarity, consistency, and repetition of *quality* messages over time. Let's *each* ask the accountable question-the *QBQ!* of the Learner:

"How can I apply what I'm hearing?"

Key word: *APPLY*. We *talk* about learning, so let's *learn*. We *talk* about execution, so let's *execute*. We *talk* about accountability, so let's practice *personal* accountability. As we close out this year and focus on the next, let's return to what works: Common sense, effective and timeless principles believed, spoken, and modeled by management and staff over time for all to see. This is the lifeblood of *learning-and can be the death knell of cynicism*. Remember always: It doesn't have to be *new* to be *effective* and it's forever true: *The old stuff is the good stuff*.

John G. Miller
author of the *QBQ!* book.