



5 Whys

Leadership Dimensions

Evaluating information

By repeatedly asking the question "Why" (5 is a good rule of thumb), you can dig below the outward symptoms of a problem to find its root cause. Dealing with the cause, rather than the symptom, will mean your resolution of the problem has longer lasting benefits.

Be aware...

The **5 Whys** approach is *not a 'Who is to blame'* approach.

It is a technique for finding a **systematic explanation** of **WHY** people didn't do something or something didn't happen, as opposed to determining **WHAT** people did.

Be sensitive and thoughtful. So often, in a busy environment where relationships, and time and responsibility pressures lead to decisions and actions that cause problems, the root cause of the problem may be **something 'below the surface'** or **something people don't normally recognise as a cause**.

When to use this tool

- When you have a sensitive or complex problem to resolve
- When you need a solution to a problem that may have wide ramifications
- When a number of people share responsibility for solving a problem and you need to work through to the solution as a group

What to do

1. The first Why

- a. Start with the visible indicator of the problem, that is, the symptom. Ask "why is such and such taking place?"
- b. Put the reason or several reasons that are proposed on the wall.

2, 3, 4, 5 The successive Whys

- a. Take each of the suggested answers as the starting point for a *5 Whys* enquiry, asking "Why" about each one. For example, "Why did this happen, what could the cause be?" Be particularly careful with responses that start with "Because... is/are not doing their job properly". It is vital here to get to the next level of 'why'. Remember you are **seeking a solution not finding someone to blame**.
- b. Post the answers beside each starting point and follow through till you feel you have identified its 'root cause'. You are likely to find your answers converging as separate symptoms lead to the same or similar systemic explanations.

Tips

- The **5 Whys** method requires practice. The more you use and practice it, the more you'll begin to find the real root causes of problems.
- Use **5 Whys** in a **round table situation**, making everyone feel included and equal.
- By writing up the suggested answers, everyone has an open, structured way to analyse the problem because they can see the insights that are being proposed at each step.

List the situations, actions, behaviours or events that contribute to the problem

1. Start with the visible indicator of the problem, that is, the symptom. Ask "why is such and such taking place?" Write the several reasons that are proposed on your wall chart/board.

2. Take one of the suggested reasons as your starting point for a series of "why" questions, asking "Why did this happen, what could the cause be?"

3. If your next answer isn't the root cause, ask again "what could the cause be?"

4. Keep asking "why" until you feel confident you have uncovered the root cause of the starting point you selected.

5. Although this tool is called 5 Whys, you may find that you will need to ask the question fewer or more times than 5, before you find the real issue related to a the symptom you selected.

Note

It may not always be possible to answer the next question immediately. You may need to gather more information or do more thinking in order to answer a question properly.