
Tools

Five Whys

Identifying Problems

Background

Five whys is the practice of asking “Why?” at least five times in a row to determine the root cause of a problem. Application of the strategy involves taking any problem and asking “Why: what caused this problem?” By repeatedly asking the question “Why?”, the layers of problem symptoms are peeled away and the root cause is identified. Although this technique is called five whys, the question “Why?” may need to be asked more than five times. Five whys is one of the simplest tools to use and is easy to complete without statistical analysis.

When to Use

- When it is critical to identify the root cause of a problem
- When the problem is not completely understood
- When problems involve human factors or interactions

How to Use

1. Write the specific problem where it can be seen by all group members.
2. Ask “Why?” the problem occurs. Write the response on chart paper.
3. Each time the question is answered, ask “Why?” again, each time recording the response on chart paper.
4. Continue the process for at least five rounds.

Note: Ensure that all group members are involved and agree with the identified root cause.

How Does It Look

The problem is written so all group members can see and refer to it. After the repetition of “Whys” produces the likely causal factor, write the root cause so all group members can see it.

Next Steps

The determined cause is the target for planned improvement. Select the planning tool most appropriate for defining the improvement path for the identified cause.

