

Using “Five Why’s” to Solve Complex Problems

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A part of any leader’s job is solving problems. As you are probably aware, however, many problems do not have a simple, single cause.

When multiple people volunteer potential solutions to a problem, the quantity and variety of ideas may seem overwhelming. Before energy and funding is applied to implement any resolution, all individuals involved should be convinced that the real foundation of the problem has been identified.

Otherwise, money and effort could be applied to what is later learned is only a symptom of the problem. Eliminating a symptom is not the same as eliminating the underlying cause.

The “Five Why’s” is a tool frequently used in “root cause analysis,” a term used to identify and affirm the primary underlying reason for a problem.

The power of this tool lies in the fact that it is simple, requiring no technical instruction. For every potential cause of a problem that is offered, just ask “Well, why does **that** happen?”

This method is called the “Five Why’s” because the root cause is rarely found after the first or second “Why?” question. The technique doesn’t literally require that the question be asked five times. Sometimes the root cause is evident after three or four inquiries; sometimes the root cause is still not evident after six or seven efforts.

The repeated questioning peels away the layers of symptoms that hide the primary cause of a problem. If there is more than a single cause for the problem, this method helps identify the relationship between the different causes.

Though the process is simple, it is helpful to proceed slowly. **Write down** a description of the problem. Usually, you will find that there is controversy immediately—rarely is it easy to write down a problem statement that everyone agrees accurately defines the situation. Patiently work to obtain a description everyone can support—it helps to have everyone working on the same problem.

Ask, “Why does this problem happen?” Often there will be several different answers—write down each potential explanation. Identify one particular problem statement as a place to start.

For this description, ask again, “Why does **this** situation happen?” Again, there may be more than one cause identified. Write down each of them. Select from among them one particular description to pursue further.

Ask again, “Why does this situation happen?” Continue to ask this question until you reach the point where the group agrees that a root cause has been established.

Now go back to the stage where you had multiple answers to the first “Why?” question. Pursue a root cause of the next stated problem. Continue to do that for every potential cause you identified.

You can see that this may take a lot of time. Though the process may be simple, doing it well may not be easy to execute--especially if there are a lot of opinionated, impatient people involved! When attention is focused on us humans failing to obtain desired results, we can be defensive and evasive.

Still, the technique is superb at eliminating conjecture and driving to causes where potential solutions can be offered and evaluated.

Few leaders know all the right answers. Being able to ask the right questions goes a long way in making progress. Consider using the “Five Why’s” technique next time you face a difficult problem!

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