



## The 5 Whys for Inquiry

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*Developed in the field by educators affiliated with NSRF.*

### **Purpose**

To help the presenter get at the foundational root of his/her question and to uncover multiple perspectives on the question.

### **Presentation** (3 minutes)

The presenter describes the context of his or her inquiry question

One might include...

- Why you chose this question
- Why it is so important to you
- How it relates to your work back home

### **Clarifying Questions** (3 minutes)

The group asks clarifying questions. These are questions, which clarify the context of the presenter's remarks. They should be specific questions, which can be answered with brief statements. For example, "How long has your school been involved in place based learning?" Or, "How many community members are involved with planning this project?"

### **Decision** (3 minutes)

The group discusses the best line of inquiry to get at the heart of the question and decides upon the initial "why question". The presenter is silent.

### **The "Why Questioning":** (10 minutes)

The "why question" decided upon is asked and the presenter responds. Another "why question" is asked in response to the presenter's answer. This continues with a maximum of five "why questions" being asked.

### **Discussion** (5 minutes)

The group then discusses what they have heard the presenter say. Their discussion is not a solving of a problem but an attempt to help the presenter understand the underlying causes for the issue he or she described. The presenter is silent.

### **Response** (3 minutes)

The presenter responds to what has been said. The group is silent.

### **Debrief** (3 minutes)

The group and the presenter debrief the experience.

# 5 Whys Analysis in Action

When applying the 5 Whys technique, you want to get to the problem's essence and then fix it. Actually, the 5 Whys may show you that the source of the problem is quite unexpected. Often, issues that are considered a technical problem actually turn out to be human and process problems. This is why finding and eliminating the root cause is crucial if you want to avoid iteration of failures.

Here is an example of applying the 5 Whys.

**Problem – We didn't send the newsletter for the latest software updates on time.**

1. *Why didn't we send the newsletter on time?* Updates were not implemented until the deadline.
2. *Why were the updates not implemented on time?* Because the developers were still working on the new features.
3. *Why were the developers still working on the new features?* One of the new developers didn't know the procedures.
4. *Why was the new developer unfamiliar with all procedures?* He was not trained properly.
5. *Why was he not trained properly?* Because CTO believes that new employees don't need thorough training and they should learn while working.

You can notice that the root cause of the initial problem turned out to be something completely different from most expectations. Furthermore, it is obvious that it is not technological but a process problem. This is typical because we often focus on the product part of the problem as we neglect the human factor.

*Therefore, the 5 Whys analysis aims to inspect a certain problem in depth until it shows you the real cause.*

Keep in mind that "5" is just a number. Ask "Why" as many times as you need to complete the process and take appropriate actions.

## How to Get Started with 5 Whys

The 5 Whys technique may help you achieve [continuous improvement](#) at any level of your organization. Here are some basic steps you need to follow.

### Form a team

Try to assemble a team of people from different departments. Each representative has to be familiar with the process that is going to be investigated.

By forming a cross-functional team, you are going to receive unique points of view.

This will help you collect enough information to make an informed decision. Be aware that this is not an individual task, and it needs to be executed by the team.

## Define the Problem

Discuss the problem with the team and make a clear problem statement. It will help you define the scope of the issue you are going to investigate.

This is important because investigating a wide scope problem may be a time-consuming exercise with blurred boundaries. Try to be as focused as possible to find an effective solution in the end.

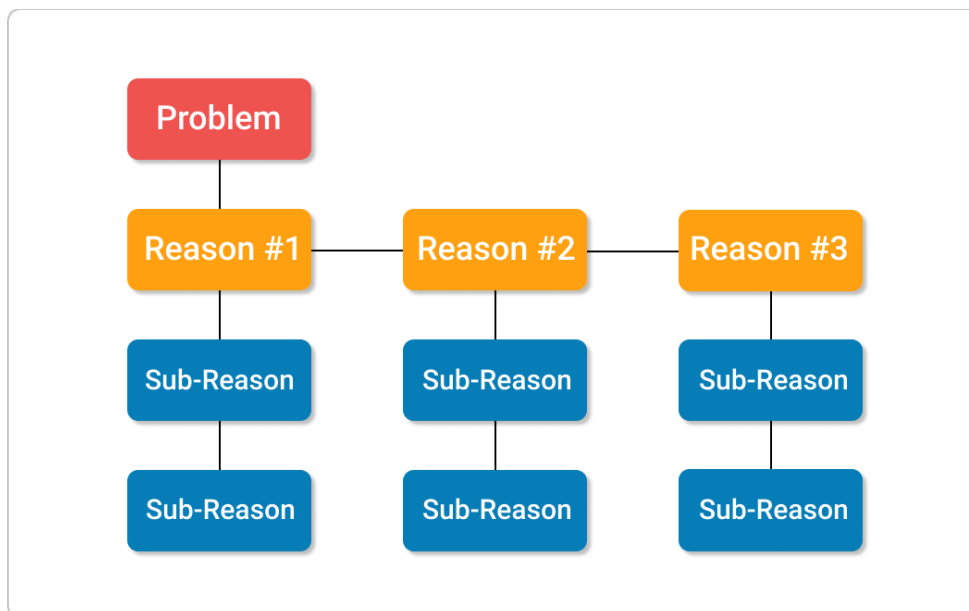
## Ask Why

Empower one person to facilitate the whole process. This team leader will ask the questions and try to keep the team focused. The answers should be based on facts and real data, rather than on emotional opinions.

The facilitator should ask “Why” as many times as needed until the team can identify the root cause of the initial problem.

**Advice 1.** Don’t ask too many Whys. If you keep going, you may end up receiving tons of unreasonable suggestions and complaints, which is not the purpose. Focus on finding the root cause.

**Advice 2.** Sometimes there could be more than one root cause. In these cases, the 5 Whys analysis will look more like a matrix with different branches. This may even help you detect and eliminate organizational issues that have permanent negative effects on the overall performance.



## Take Action

After the team detects the root cause(s), it is time to take corrective actions. All members should be involved in a discussion to find and apply the best solution that will protect your process from recurring problems.

When the decision is made, one of the team members should be responsible for applying the right actions and observing the whole process.

After a certain period of time, the team needs to meet again and check if their actions actually had a positive impact. If not, the process should be repeated.

In the end, the case should be documented and sent across the organization. Sharing this information will give an insightful overview of different kinds of problems a team may face and how those problems can be eliminated.

## In Summary

The 5 Whys technique is a simple and effective tool for solving problems. Its primary goal is to find the exact reason that causes a given problem by asking a sequence of “Why” questions.

- The 5 Whys method helps your team focus on finding the root cause of any problem.
- It encourages each team member to share ideas for continuous improvement, rather than blaming others.
- It gives your team the confidence that it can eliminate any problem and prevent the process from recurring failures.

Extracted from: <https://kanbanize.com/lean-management/improvement/5-whys-analysis-tool>