



Improvement Cymru Academy Toolkit Guide



The 5 Whys

A tool for root cause analysis

What are the 5 Whys?

The 5 Whys is a simple improvement tool which can help identify the source of an issue or the root cause of a problem, without statistical analysis. It is an iterative method that repeatedly asks the question 'why?', (ideally, five times, but it is not limited to this number), making it possible to cut through the layers of a problem to identify a cause. It's very helpful as it's a people focused tool that helps organisations understand the root cause of an issue.

Rationale

Sometimes we jump to conclusions which can be based on wrong assumptions. The key is to avoid these assumptions and to keep drilling down to the real root cause. It provides an opportunity for teams to be heard, for effective and impactful decisions to be made.

Background

The 5 Whys method is part of the Toyota production system. Developed by Sakichi Toyoda, a Japanese inventor and industrialist. The technique has become – and continues to be - an integral part of Lean philosophy (Planview, 2019) and remains part of their manufactory methodologies.

When to use?

It focuses on easier or moderate problems, rather than complex ones, that involve human interactions.

An important aspect of the 5 Whys adopts an inclusive approach within the team. Team members should be familiar with the specifics of the problem and the process you are attempting to resolve.

Remember, to continue to ask questions to come to a team conclusion up to five times. However, you may reach a root cause of the problem by asking fewer than five times.

How to use the 5 Whys approach

1. Write down the specific problem you are aiming to solve. This can help you to clearly understand and formalise the problem and describe it accurately. Gather your team and identify a facilitator.
2. Use brainstorming to ask why the problem occurs. Write the answers down at each stage of the 'Why' question.
3. If these answers do not identify the source of the problem, continue to ask 'Why?' again and write these answers down.
4. Repeat the process until you agree as a team that you have identified the problem's root cause. This may take fewer or more than 5 'whys'.

It is important to identify a facilitator to enable the team to remain focused on the problem. A significant amount of information may be generated, and analysis may be required to identify the root cause.

Example

1. The patient's diagnosis of skin cancer was considerably delayed. - **Why?**
2. The excision biopsy report was not seen by the surgeon. - **Why?**
3. The report was filed in the patient's notes without being seen by the surgeon. - **Why?**
4. A new system meant the report was put in section 4 of the notes and the surgeon did not look for it there. - **Why?**
5. The surgeons had not had communication on this change. - **Why?**

The root cause: The doctor had not been consulted in the change to the process.

Solution: The system has now been changed in consultation with the doctor. A copy of all biopsy reports is now sent directly to the consultant responsible for the patient and no reports are filed unless they have been signed by a doctor.

What next?

Once the root cause of an issue has been identified, it is important to inform all relevant stakeholders or those that are affected by the problem (Improvement NHS,

2019). This could be your colleagues or other departments. This will ensure everyone is focused on working on the problem area, not treating its symptoms.

Helpful tips

Asking ‘**Why?**’ five times can lead us down a single causal pathway. However, it is important to remember problems within complex systems rarely have only one cause. Working with a team can limit this.

You may need to consider other improvement tools to resolve more complex problems such as fishbone diagrams. It is important to have a suite of Improvement tools for your disposal, this will ensure the correct tool is used to address the correct issue.

Just to note it can be useful to write and rewrite an 18-word problem statement to succinctly communicate the problem.

Appendix 1 provides a helpful template that you may wish to use. See page 6

Additional resources

If you would like to learn more about making improvement to your workplace take a look at our website for what we offer you <https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/improvement-cymru/improvement-cymru-academy/> or email us: PHW_ImprovementCymru@wales.nhs.uk to find about the improvement courses we offer.

Further reading

Ihi.org. (2019). *IHI Home Page*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.ihl.org/> [Accessed 1 September 2022].

Improvement.nhs.uk. (2019). *Root cause analysis - using five whys | NHS Improvement*. [Online] Available at: <https://improvement.nhs.uk/resources/root-cause-analysis-using-five-whys/> [Accessed 1 September 2022].

Mind Tools (2021) *5 Whys getting to the root problem quickly* [Online] Available at: https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_5W.htm [Accessed 1 September 2022].

Ohno, T. (2014). *Toyota production system*. London: CRC Press.

Open. (2019). *What is a 5 Whys? Step-by-Step Guide to Running a 5 Whys Exercise*. [Online] Available at: <https://open.buffer.com/5-whys-process/> [Accessed 1 September 2022].

Planview. (2019). *The 5 Whys of Lean | Planview LeanKit*. [online] Available at: <https://www.planview.com/resources/articles/5-whys-of-lean/> [Accessed 1 September 2022].

Spica (2021) The 5 Whys technique – dig deep to find the root cause of any problem. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.spica.com/blog/5-whys> [Accessed 1 September 2022].

Appendix 1: Template '5 Whys'

Event:

What happened? *Define the problem as an event:*

Pattern:

What's been happening? *Define the problem as a 'pattern' by selecting a poor performance factor:*

Structure:

Why has been happening? *What are the tangible and intangible structures determining the results being observed?*

1. Why is this?



2. Why is this?



3. Why is this?



4. Why is this?



5. Why is this?

Action (Solution):

What is the implication for action? *What can you do to change the results?*