



5 Whys

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Five whys and a how

This simple but powerful tool can help strip away the apparent problem to get through to the root problem which is the one we need to solve. For example, a big problem in UK hospitals at the moment is in waiting times and delays, putting pressure on already scarce resources. Here's how the tool could be applied to help.

Apparent problem was that a patient arrived late in the operating theatre causing a delay.

- Why? – Because they had to wait for a trolley to take them from the ward to the theatre
- Why? – Because they had to find a replacement trolley
- Why? – Because the original trolley had a defect – the safety rail had broken
- Why? – Because it had not been regularly checked for wear and tear
- Why? – Because there was no organized system of checking and maintenance

Arriving at this root cause – the real problem is in the lack of systematic maintenance – gives plenty of clues about the 'how', the potential solutions to the problem. Setting up a simple maintenance schedule could ensure that all trolleys are regularly checked and available for use. This would mean that future delays would be avoided, flow would improve and overall system efficiency would be better. Importantly if we had just focused on the apparent problem – a single broken trolley – we would have solved that by repairing the trolley but the underlying problem would happen again.

Using the tool

1. Set out the problem as it is being experienced – for example, long queues at the airport for check in
2. Ask the question 'why?' and generate an explanation – for example because there are not enough staff to deal with passengers
3. Ask 'why?' again to explore this problem further
4. Repeat the process three more times to arrive at a sharp definition of the underlying problem
5. Brainstorm 'how to' solutions to deal with this