

Improved Problem Solving: 5 Why's & 5 How's

We all spend much of our business, and personal time for that matter, resolving conflicts and solving problems. Perhaps the single most influential factor determining our success or failure is whether or not we determine the actual cause - the specific variable that has created the conflict or problem; or the actual solution – the action that will directly solve or improve the problem or conflict.



Using the “5 Why’s” is a practical, simple, easy process to discover the actual cause of a situation. I think of the 5 Why’s as simple and effective root cause analysis. The 5 Why’s reveals possible causes so they can be evaluated, dismissed, prioritized, and acted on when it’s determined there is a single or most significant cause.

What is the 5 Why’s? It is a process where you ask why a conflict or problem exists – what the cause is. And after each of the first 4 answers, you ask why of those answers.

Here is a simple example.

1. Profitability is low. Why?
2. Gross margins are low? Why?
3. Project profitability is low? Why?
4. Projects expenses are high? Why?
5. We expend more than we budget? Why?

We under budget to keep the cost to the client low because we think our standard budgeting and pricing is too high and a barrier to sales.

The first 5 “problems” are “true” or “real” but too broad or general to be actionable. But the 5th “why” revealed a specific, manageable, actionable problem.

The 5 Why’s facilitates “drilling down” to the root cause. And it can reveal multiple relevant answers. Uncertainty should inspire focused analysis and evaluation. Perhaps it will reveal there are multiple root causes that need to be addressed. To good there is that it has enabled you to identify, evaluate, prioritize, and act on them in prioritized order.

I have found suspending judgment or decision-making until executing the 5 Why’s process very helpful. It reduces the chance of relying on wrong or irrelevant conclusions that lead to ineffective and often counterproductive or destructive action. It also demonstrates a thoughtfulness,



thoroughness, and objectivity to other stakeholders involved. And this generates trust, respect, confidence, and comfort. This is especially useful for performance management where you are dealing with individual performance issues and developing corrective action.

If the 5 Why's is an effective process for discovering the root cause of problems and conflicts, the "5 How's" can be thought of as a problem-solving process that enables determination the most effective solution – the action(s) that have root or direct impact. Much like successful problem identification, successful problem-solving requires determining what action(s) action are going to most effectively generate a desired outcome or result.

Let's say we're managing a baseball team and we want to determine how to achieve our goal of winning the championship. Applying the 5 How's might go something like this:

1. Win championship. How?
2. Win all our games. How?
3. Win each game. How?
4. Win each inning. How?
5. Win each at bat. How?

Win the first pitch. The longer answer is "win" the first pitch or each at bat both offensively and defensively. Statistics indicate that at most levels of amateur baseball, the outcome of the first pitch is the most significant factor determining whether the batter makes an out or reaches base safely. So, our "how" became the key metric, to win the first pitch.

I encourage you to adopt these practices. They are simple, fast, and easy (the processes, not the problem or solution necessarily) to execute. They lead to more effective problem solving and more desired outcomes. Problems, conflicts, and solutions always come down to something we do or don't do. Situations. Money, and time are not manageable. What we do and don't do is manageable. And what we do or don't do is the result of our behavior – influenced by what we think, how we feel, our beliefs and attitudes. And that is actionable and manageable, once we get to the root of it.

There is a lot of content on the 5 Why's. There seems to be much less on the 5 How's. For further reading on this topic, this article does a nice job at explaining both, including simple examples:

<https://blog.getswip.com/the-5-whys-and-5-hows-when-clarity-is-just-two-questions-away/>