When confronted with a problem, have you ever stopped and asked "why" five times? If you do not ask the right question, you will not get the right answer. The Five Whys is a simple question-asking technique that explores the cause-and-effect relationships underlying problems.

### Rationale
For every effect there is a cause. But the results chain between the two is fairly long and becomes finer as one moves from inputs to activities, outputs, outcome, and impact. In results-based management, the degree of control one enjoys decreases higher up the chain and the challenge of monitoring and evaluating correspondingly increases. In due course, when a problem appears, the temptation to blame others or external events is strong. Yet, the root cause of problems often lies closer to home.

The Five Whys Technique
When looking to solve a problem, it helps to begin at the end result, reflect on what caused that, and question the answer five times. This elementary and often effective approach to problem solving promotes deep thinking through questioning, and can be adapted quickly and applied to most problems. Most obviously and directly, the Five Whys technique relates to the principle of systematic problem solving: without the intent of the principle, the

---

1. Inputs, activities, and outputs are within the direct control of an intervention's management. An outcome is what an intervention can be expected to achieve and be accountable for. An impact is what an intervention is expected to contribute to.
2. Results-based management is a life-cycle management philosophy and approach that emphasizes results in integrated planning, implementing, monitoring, reporting, learning, and changing. Demonstrating results is important for credibility, accountability, and continuous learning, and to inform decision making and resource allocation.
3. Five is a good rule of thumb. By asking "why" five times, one can usually peel away the layers of symptoms that hide the cause of a problem. But one may also need to ask "why" fewer times, or conversely more.
4. Root cause analysis is the generic name of problem-solving techniques. The basic elements of root causes are materials, equipment, the man-made or natural environment, information, measurement, methods and procedures, people, management, and management systems. Other tools can be used if the Five Whys technique does not intuitively direct attention to one of these. They include barrier analysis, change analysis, causal factor tree analysis, and the Ishikawa (or fishbone) diagram.
technique can only be a shell of the process. Hence, there are three key elements to effective use of the Five Whys technique: (i) accurate and complete statements of problems, (ii) complete honesty in answering the questions, (iii) the determination to get to the bottom of problems and resolve them. The technique was developed by Sakichi Toyoda for the Toyota Industries Corporation.

**Process**

The Five Whys exercise is vastly improved when applied by a team. The five basic steps are:

- Gather a team and develop the problem statement in agreement. After this is done, decide whether or not additional individuals are needed to resolve the problem.
- Ask the first "why" of the team: why is this or that problem taking place? There will probably be three or four sensible answers. Record them all on a flip chart or whiteboard, or use index cards taped to a wall.
- Ask four more successive "whys," repeating the process for every statement on the flip chart, whiteboard, or index cards. Post each answer near its "parent." Follow up on all plausible answers. You will have identified the root cause when asking "why" yields no further useful information. (If necessary, continue to ask questions beyond the arbitrary five layers to get to the root cause.)
- Among the dozen or so answers to the last asked "why" look for systemic causes of the problem. Discuss these and settle on the most likely systemic cause. Follow the team session with a debriefing and show the product to others to confirm that they see logic in the analysis.
- After settling on the most probable root cause of the problem and obtaining confirmation of the logic behind the analysis, develop appropriate corrective actions to remove the root cause from the system. The actions can (as the case demands) be undertaken by others but planning and implementation will benefit from team inputs.

![Five Whys Worksheet](image)
Caveat

The Five Whys technique has been criticized as too basic a tool to analyze root causes to the depth required to ensure that the causes are fixed. The reasons for this criticism include:

- The tendency of investigators to stop at symptoms, and not proceed to lower-level root causes;
- The inability of investigators to cast their minds beyond current information and knowledge;
- Lack of facilitation and support to help investigators ask the right questions;
- The low repeat rate of results: different teams using the Five Whys technique have been known to come up with different causes for the same problem.

Jeff Bezos and Root Cause Analysis

[The author explains how, while he worked for Amazon.com in 2004, Jeff Bezos did something that the author still carries with him to this day. During a visit to the Amazon.com Fulfillment Centers, Jeff Bezos learned of a safety incident during which an associate had damaged his finger. He walked to the whiteboard and began to use the Five Whys technique.]

Why did the associate damage his thumb?
Because his thumb got caught in the conveyor.

Why did his thumb get caught in the conveyor?
Because he was chasing his bag, which was on a running conveyor.

Why did he chase his bag?
Because he had placed his bag on the conveyor, which had then started unexpectedly.

Why was his bag on the conveyor?
Because he was using the conveyor as a table.

And so, the root cause of the associate’s damaged thumb is that he simply needed a table. There wasn’t one around and he had used the conveyor as a table. To eliminate further safety incidences, Amazon.com needs to provide tables at the appropriate stations and update safety training. It must also look into preventative maintenance standard work.

Clearly, the Five Whys technique will suffer if it is applied through deduction only. The process articulated earlier encourages on-the-spot verification of answers to the current "why" question before proceeding to the next, and should help avoid such issues.

Further Reading


For further information

Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).
Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries substantially reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world's poor. Nearly 377 million people in the region live on $1.25 or less a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or its Board of Governors or the governments they represent. ADB encourages printing or copying information exclusively for personal and noncommercial use with proper acknowledgment of ADB. Users are restricted from reselling, redistributing, or creating derivative works for commercial purposes without the express, written consent of ADB.

Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel +63 2 632 4444
Fax +63 2 636 2444
knowledge@adb.org
www.adb.org/knowledgesolutions