# Five Whys

What is a <u>five whys exercise</u>?

A five whys exercise is a question-asking technique to help participants get to the root cause(s) of an issue. The idea is that when you ask "why" five or more times about a problem, your answers will lead you to the root cause of an issue.

When should I use it?

- When a team needs to move beyond assumptions about why a problem is occurring
- When a team is stuck on blaming people rather than the process
- When a team isn't sure why a problem is happening
- When you suspect that the problem is being caused by something far upstream where the problem manifests itself
- You want to identify a specific root cause that is *deep and narrow*. (For problems that may have multiple more obvious causes, a fishbone diagram is a better tool.)

How do I facilitate or create it?

1. **Choose a problem to focus on and write the problem down at the top of a large sheet of flipchart paper**. (Note: if you have many problems and don't know where to start, you can use the Impact-Effort Matrix.)
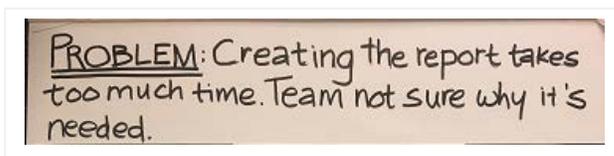

2. **Ask yourself "why is this problem happening?"** Write down the answer to the problem. Draw an arrow between the written problem and the answer to signify that the two are connected. If you have more than one reason, create a branching fishbone diagram and continue the five whys exercise with each branch of the diagram.
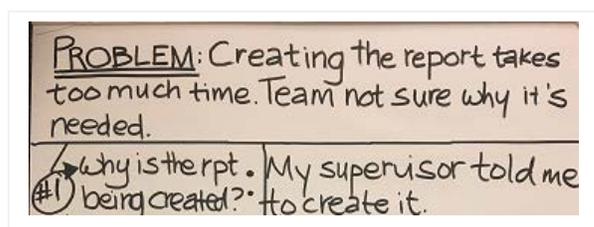
3. **Then, ask yourself "why" about the answer you provided to the first problem**. Continue this process until you have asked "why" five times, if necessary.
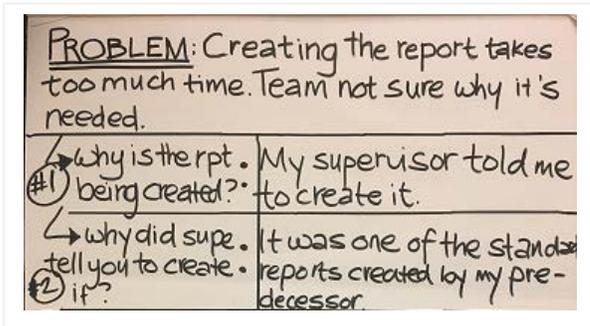
4. **If the final root cause of your diagram is process-based rather than people-based, you may have found your root cause**. If your root cause blames *people* in the process, continue asking why until it leads you to a root cause that is process-based. For example, "Zach failed to perform scheduled maintenance on his truck" is a poor root cause. Continue asking, "Why did he not perform the scheduled maintenance?" You will eventually find process problems: unclear instructions, lack of standard work, supervisory practices that don't prioritize maintenance, etc.

5. **Debrief with team**. Have a team member read through the ideas. If you have a branching diagram, review each branch and decide with team if they think they've found the root cause or causes.

6. **Capture diverse voices.** If there are other staff (or customers) who are involved in the process, but not part of the exercise, you might run the diagram by them to see if they have other ideas.
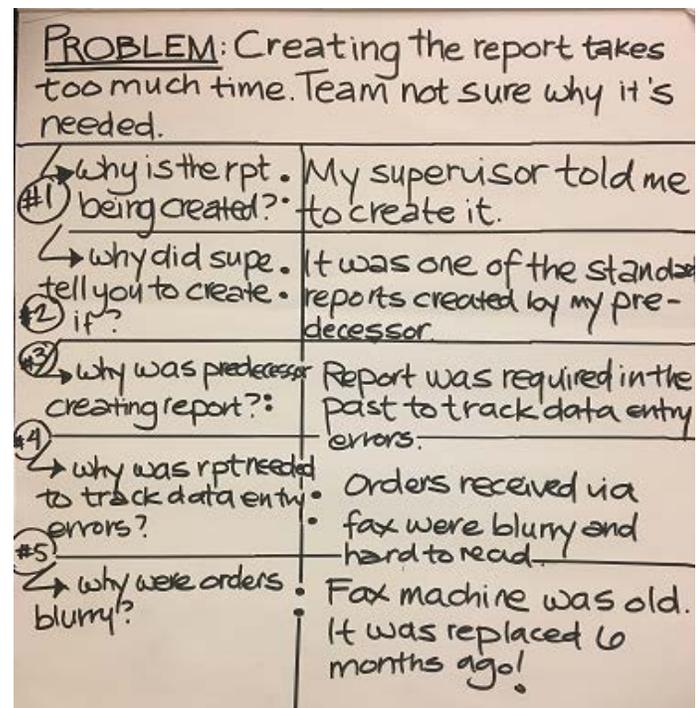
Hints

- If you find that your problem has multiple categories of root causes, then use a fishbone instead.
- While the team may have consensus around a few major root causes (repeated stickies), it's important to also consider root causes identified by only a single team member. Sometimes these are a result of good out-of-the-box thinking.
- Focus the 5 Why's on a line of questions related to a topic that the team has some control over. For example, if you conduct 5 Why's on why staff are always late to a staff meeting, don't go down a line of questioning that is about BART.

5-WHY ANALYSIS – ABC DISTRIBUTION CENTER

PROBLEM STATEMENT: WRONG ITEM SHIPPED TO CUSTOMER

WHY? THE WRONG ITEM WAS PULLED FROM INVENTORY

WHY? THE ITEM WE PULLED FROM INVENTORY WAS MISLABELED

WHY? OUR SUPPLIER MISLABELED THE ITEM PRIOR TO SHIPPING IT TO OUR WAREHOUSE

WHY? THE INDIVIDUAL APPLYING LABELS TO OUR PRODUCT AT THE SUPPLIER PLACED THE WRONG LABEL ON THE PRODUCT

WHY? LABELS FOR DIFFERENT ORDERS ARE PRE-PRINTED, AND IT IS EASY TO APPLY THE WRONG LABEL