



Root Cause & 5-Whys Template¹

The 5-Whys is a simple brainstorming tool that can help teams identify the root cause(s) of a problem. Once a general problem has been recognized (either using the Fishbone Diagram or Process Mapping), ask “why” questions to drill down to the root causes. Asking the 5-Whys allows teams to move beyond obvious answers and reflect on less obvious explanations or causes.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. State the problem you have identified as the starting point for your investigation.
2. Begin by asking “why” questions related to the problem. Like an inquisitive toddler, keep asking why in response to each suggested cause.
3. Ask as many whys as you need in order to get insight at a level that can be addressed (asking five times is typical). You will know you have reached your final “why” because it does not make logical sense to ask why again.

It is said that only by asking “Why?” five times successively, can you delve into a problem deeply enough to understand the ultimate root cause. By the time you get to the 4th or 5th why, you will likely be looking squarely at management practices (more than five whys may be required for complex problems).

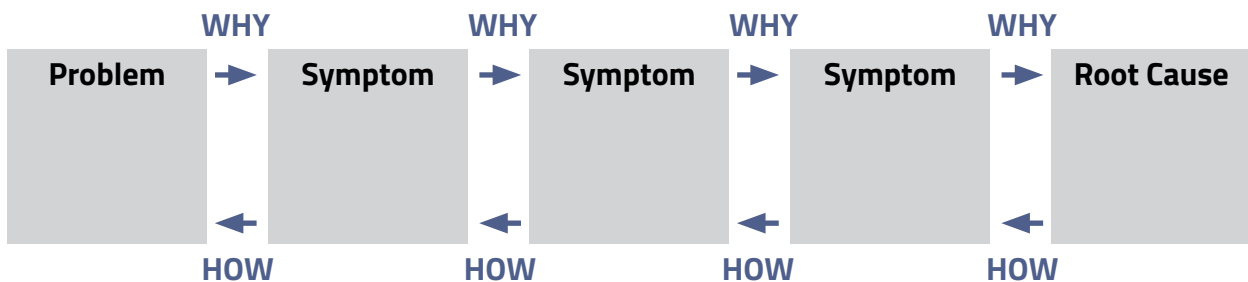
This methodology is closely related to the Cause & Effect (Fishbone) diagram, and can be used to complement the analysis necessary to complete a Cause & Effect diagram.

Example:

Problem: Parents don’t feel that they receive timely and relevant communication from School.

- Why? Parents don’t regularly check out the school website.
- Why? They might not know that the information is there.
- Why? We haven’t told parents that the information is there.
- Why? We don’t regularly send out newsletters or emails to parents.
- Why? It’s not something we normally plan for.

Problem Solution: We need better tools and strategies for communication with parents.



¹ This template was modified by the Wyoming Department of Education, the original is available at https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/5_Whys_Worksheet_680955_7.pdf

Asking Powerful Questions

5 Whys Worksheet

Define the Problem:

Why is it happening?

1.	Why?
2.	Why?
3.	Why?
4.	Why?
5.	Why?

Caution:

- If your last answer is something you cannot control, go back up to the previous answer
- Final answers cannot be because of a person

Reminder:

- List only 1 reason and dig deep. Stay away from listing 5 different reasons.

Identified Root Cause:	
Action/ Plan to Address the Problem:	

Action Plan Double Check:
1. Does your action plan state who is responsible for each action element?
2. Does your action plan involve a plan for communicating to relevant stakeholders?
3. Are the various elements of your action plan connected to a time frame? When will each piece be accomplished? Are deadlines set?
4. How will you assess whether the changes brought about within your plan have made a difference? How will you know if you solved the problem? Be sure to build in reflection in your action plan and make sure to incorporate a method to manage data.

Dimensions Bullseye of Improvement²

Core Realm:

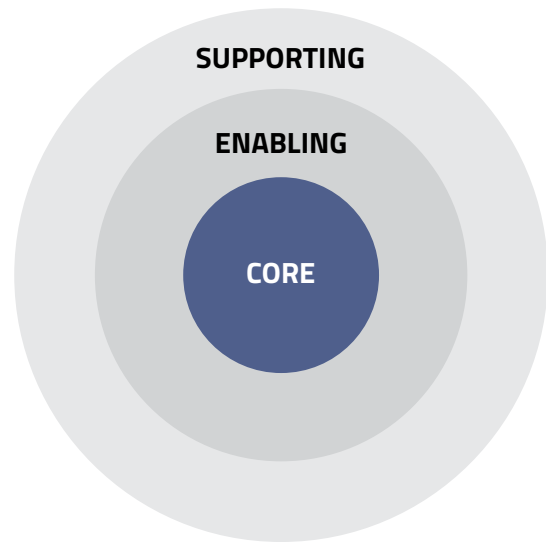
Contains factors that most directly affect students outcomes.

- Instruction
- Curriculum
- Assessments

Enabling Realm:

Contains conditions that must be in place in order to make the core elements successful in affecting students outcomes.

- Materials
- Schedules
- Professional development
- Organizational structures
- School leadership
- Supervision
- Staff accountability for performance



Supporting Realm:

Contains conditions that are helpful toward making the core elements successful.

- Parents
- Governance
- Personnel
- Funding
- Community resources
- Student readiness to learn

Realm	Sphere of Implementation	Amount of School and Teacher Control	Amount of District Control
Core	Classroom	School and teachers have a great deal of control	District has responsibility, but less direct control
Enabling	School	School has some control	District has significant control and leverage
Supporting	District/Community	School has little control	District has some control and Leverage

² Adapted from: Conley, David T. (1997). Roadmap to restructuring: Charting the course of change in American education. Eugene, OR: Clearinghouse on Educational Policy and Management

References and Resources

5-Whys Guide & Template. www.michigan.gov. (n.d.). Retrieved July 13, 2022, from https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/5_Whys_Worksheet_680955_7.pdf

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Cuiccio, C., & Husby-Slater, M. (2018, May). Needs Assessment Guidebook - Supporting the Development of District and School Needs Assessments. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/10/needsassessmentguidebook-508_003.pdf