

5 Whys

What is it?

In a nutshell, **5 Whys** is repeatedly asking the question 'why' to get to the root cause of a problem or issue (it uses five as a rule of thumb).

When to use it?

When you are trying to explore and define a problem and uncover and understand the potential causes. It is a powerful questioning technique which can be used informally in meetings and in conversations with key stakeholders. It can also be used individually when trying to understand why a problem has occurred and is also part of the *Creative Problem Solving (CPS)* process.

Benefits at a glance....

- deceptively simple tool which helps us peel away the layers of a problem or issue to uncover the root cause(s)
- you can use it to work on stubborn or recurrent problems by getting beneath the surface and beyond the symptoms to explore cause-and-effect relationships
- the iterative approach helps to stop us jumping to conclusions and just going for a quick fix

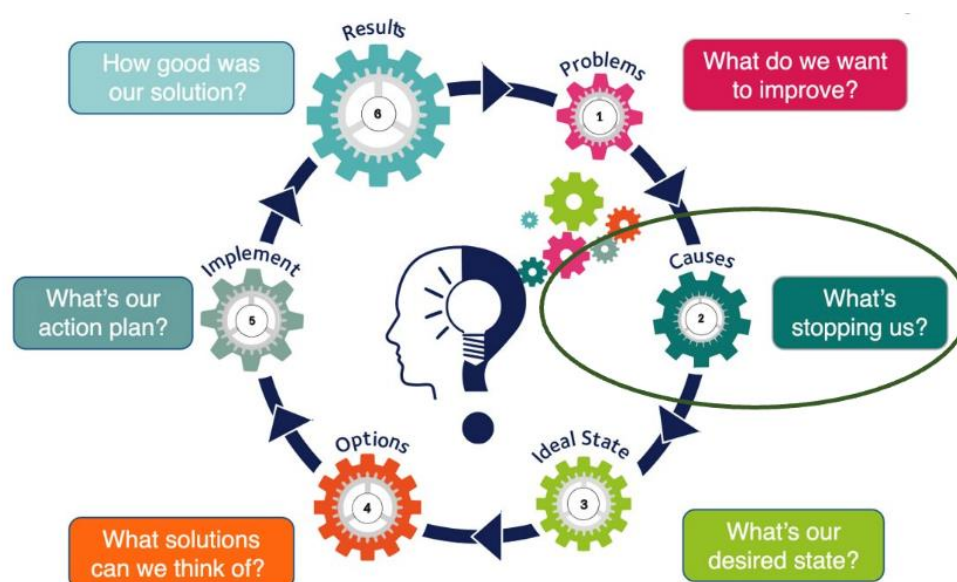


Figure 1: The Creative Problem Solving (CPS) process

The **5 Whys** works best with those who have hands-on experience of the problem or issue. Where possible combine with a *Go See*.

How to use it?

Use the **5 Whys** to drill down to the root causes by asking 'Why?' repeatedly until you can go no further (use five as a rule of thumb!). In effect, each time you ask 'Why?' you are asking 'is this itself caused by anything?'

Watch this short video on YouTube (1min51s) to find out how the US National Parks Service used **5 Whys** to discover the true (and surprising) reason why the Jefferson National Monument was deteriorating <https://youtu.be/1ETtnK7gzlE>



Figure 2: Photographic still image of the Jefferson National Monument from the YouTube video

***TIP:** If a 'Why?' has more than one possibility, you may end up following multiple lanes of inquiry and there may be multiple causes of the problem.*

5 Whys can be used in conjunction with the *Fishbone* (cause and effect) tool in order to fully understand all potential problem causes and to categorise them before prioritising them and tackling the problem itself.

Additional resources

1. Galley M. Sinking of the Titanic case study: How to conduct a 5-Why. Available from <https://blog.thinkreliability.com/how-to-conduct-a-5-why> and <https://youtu.be/38RIXdr4Np0> (Accessed 17 June 20)