

# The Five Whys

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This simple technique of repeatedly asking “why?” is one of the most effective methods for getting to the heart – or root cause – of the matter. By digging deeper – asking “why?” at least five times – we can usually arrive at the cause of our problem, rather than simply dealing with other symptoms of the same underlying cause.

Here’s an example. Our immediate (or apparent) problem: the roof is leaking.

1. **Why** is the roof leaking?  
Answer: Because there is a hole in it.
2. **Why** is there a hole in the roof?  
Answer: Because the custodial crew has not fixed it.
3. **Why** hasn’t the custodial crew fixed the roof?  
Answer: Because the principal has not asked them to fix it.
4. **Why** hasn’t the principal asked them to fix it?  
Answer: Because getting the roof fixed is not a priority for the principal.
5. **Why** isn’t it a priority for the principal?  
Answer: Because the principal is too busy to care about things that do not affect him/her directly.

In this example, we might initially think the solution to our problem is to have the hole in the roof patched. However, after going through the Five Whys exercise, we find that the root of the problem is not the hole in the roof but the principal’s priorities. After realizing this, we would probably also find that there are many other problems (symptoms) of this same underlying cause. Thus, we would be better off addressing the root cause of our many problems (the principal’s priorities) than simply dealing with each problem (symptom) as if it existed in isolation.

Another way to think of the analysis is to relate our problem(s) to an illness. If we have a fever, we can take an aspirin. However, if we dig deeper, we may find we have other symptoms that point to the real cause of our fever – a cause that may take much more than an aspirin to cure!