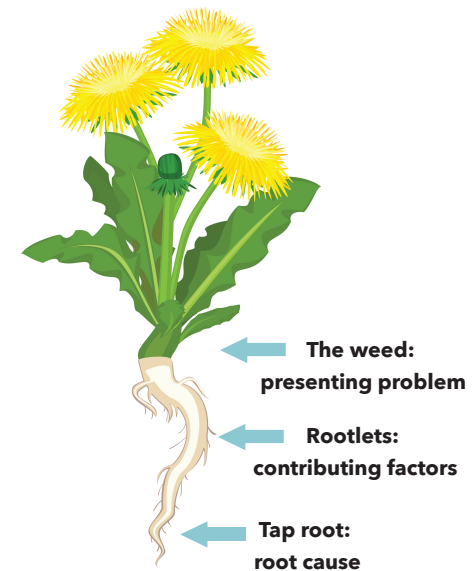


5 Whys Exercise

Before you and your team begin to make changes, it is important to dig deeper and explore the factors that are impacting the outcome you seek to change. In implementation science, this is called problem exploration. Problems may be defined as identified issues in individual or agency practice or they may be opportunities to build and expand on successes. In either case, your team will want to understand the two types of factors that are impacting practice outcomes: contributing factors and root causes (see diagram 1). Contributing factors are elements that affect the presenting problem or outcome but are not the root cause. The root cause is the source of the underlying problem. Ideally, if the root cause is addressed then the problem is less likely to continue or reoccur. Your team may also choose to address key contributing factors in your change efforts.

One well-known and simple technique for exploring contributing factors and root causes is the 5 Whys method (see diagram 1). In this approach, your team will identify a problem or opportunity, then repeatedly ask “why” to drill down to the contributing factors and root cause(s). After each response, the group again asks, “Why?” concerning that response.



Before you begin, gather:

- 1. Knowledgeable team** - individuals with varied experience and viewpoints on the problem (see the Team Formation Guide in the PDSA toolkit for tips). You can do the 5 Whys activity with the team implementing the PDSA model OR with a larger group of stakeholders if you want to gather outside input.
- 2. Data and observations regarding the problem** - data may come from agency reports, staff or stakeholder qualitative surveys, clinical experience, or from taking a few hours to stop and observe the problem occurring in multiple situations while taking notes.
- 3. Prioritized focus for your change** (do not attempt to find a root cause for everything).
- 4. Time** (at least one hour) **and a place to display group ideas** (whiteboard, flip chart).

5 Whys Procedure:

- 1. Define your problem:** your team should formulate a short and specific statement to describe either the problem to address or the opportunity to improve practice.
- 2. Ask the group “why”** that problem occurs or exists. After each response, the facilitator again asks “why” concerning the last response up to 5 times. Teams should make every effort to confirm responses with data when possible. Five is just a guideline. With complex problems, it may take more than 5 questions OR (more likely) there may be more than one “why” pathway. If your team feels they are on a new pathway, they should simply start a new 5 Why’s worksheet for the new pathway (see diagram 1). You can use the results of the multiple 5 Whys Worksheets to make a Why Tree (see diagram 2). Teams should make every effort to confirm responses with data when possible. A Why Tree is a useful tool for depicting multiple root causes and their contributing factors all on one diagram.
- 3. When do we stop asking why?** Keep asking “why” until one of the following occurs:
 - There seems to be no new information.
 - The group has an “aha!” - “I can’t believe we have been doing this” moment.
 - If the ‘why’s’ begin to be repeated. Look for the root cause within the loop of repeated statements by choosing the factor that seems the most impactful based on data, observations, or experience.
 - If the ‘why’s’ are completely outside the agency’s control or influence.

Additional Facilitation Prompts for 5 Whys Exercise

If asking ‘why’ alone is not prompting enough discussion, consider using the following prompts:

- What events lead to the issue? What conditions allow this to occur?
- What other problems occur at the same time as the main problem?
- Will the problem exist if we correct or eliminate this factor?
- Have we considered factors related to:
 - Organizational resources - staff and technology?
 - Infrastructure - policies and processes?
 - Staff knowledge and skills?
 - Agency culture and climate?
 - Stakeholder partnership and engagement?

Tips:

- If possible, use a facilitator outside of your team for the 5 Whys exercise. If an outside facilitator is not available, use this technique. Announce that you will be playing 2 roles in the 5 Whys process: most of the time you will be a facilitator whose job is to write down everyone's ideas and keep the group thinking with the question prompts ('why?'). If you want to add an idea to the brainstorm, before you state your idea, announce to the group that you are adding an idea as a participant (it is not a right or wrong answer or the end to the brainstorm), add it to the list, and then let everyone know you are going back to facilitator mode again.
- Do not cut the brainstorm time short; explore all sides of the issues. Do not jump to brainstorming solutions! Stay on the factors impacting the issue.
- Do not worry if you are unsure if you have correctly identified the root cause. Use this question to narrow the factors of highest interest: of these listed factors, which is the most impactful?
- Some contributing factors and root causes will be within your control and some not. You cannot do a PSDA cycle on a factor outside of your control. If your last answer is something you cannot control, look for a factor you can impact back up a step on the worksheet.

Diagram 1: 5 Whys Exercise

Define the problem:

Why is happening? What is causing this?

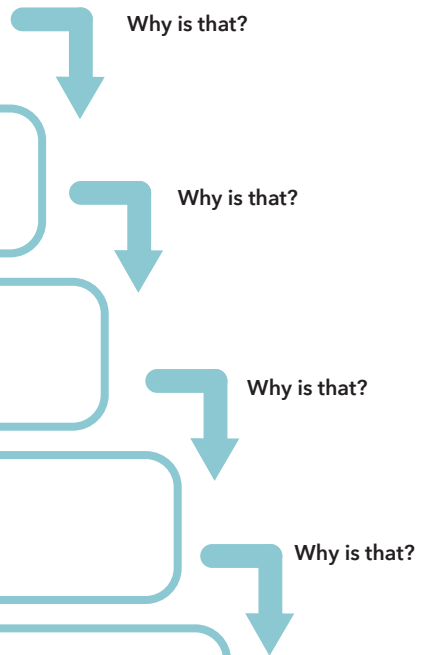
1 (Symptom) :

2 (Symptom) :

3 (Symptom) :

4 (Symptom) :

5 (Root Cause) :



Root Cause Problem Statement (Transfer to your charter):

Diagram 2: Why Tree Framework Example

Define the problem:

Contributing Factor Path 1:

Contributing Factor Path 2:

Contributing Factor Path 3:

