

5 Whys

What is it?

The **5 Whys** is a simple yet powerful technique that involves asking “Why?” multiple times (it uses five as a rule of thumb) to drill down to the root cause of a problem or issue. It is a foundational diagnostic tool that promotes thoughtful investigation and supports a culture of continuous improvement.

Benefits at a glance....

- a deceptively simple tool that uncovers the root cause(s) of issues
- helps address stubborn or recurring problems by going beyond symptoms
- encourages critical thinking and avoids premature conclusions or quick fixes

When to use it?

Use this technique when you need to explore, define, and better understand the underlying causes of a problem. This questioning method is suitable for informal meetings, conversations with stakeholders, or individual reflection. It also forms part of the **Creative Problem Solving (CPS)** process.

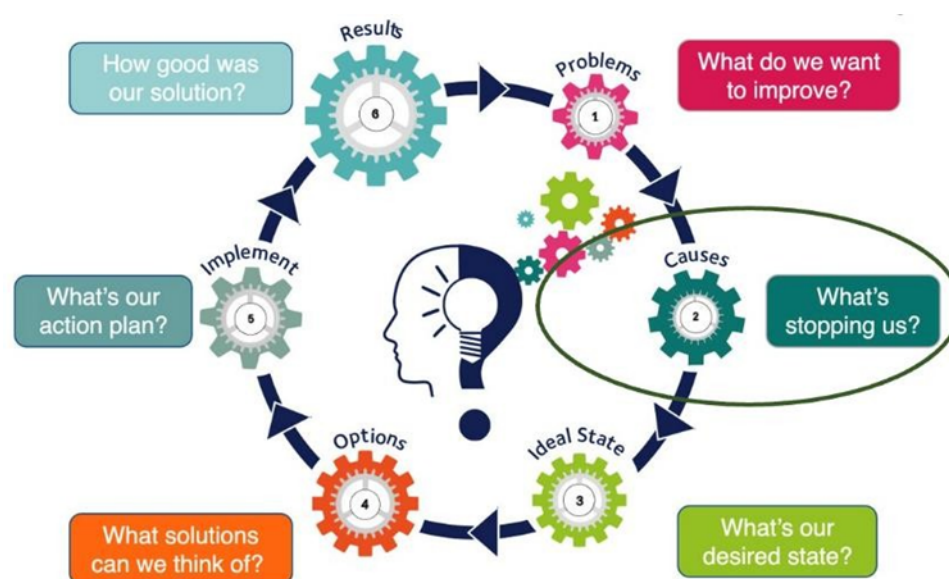


Figure 1: The Creative Problem Solving (CPS) process

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?' for each response you receive 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 [Youtube video](#) to see how the US National Parks Service used the **5 Whys** to uncover a surprising cause of deterioration at the Jefferson National Monument.

***TIP:** If a single 'Why?' leads to multiple possible answers, pursue each as a separate line of inquiry. There may be several contributing causes.*

Combine the **5 Whys** with the **Fishbone** (cause and effect) tool to identify and categorise multiple root causes before prioritising solutions.

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 1 August 25)