5 Whys – Instruction

Why would I use this tool?

The “5 Whys” is a simple brainstorming (problem-solving) tool that can help QI teams to move beyond the “usual” or “surface” answers to identify root causes of a problem. This tool can support teams in examining elements of their systems with an eye toward identifying how elements may be contributing to an issue or problem. It also provides a methodology to get beyond the “name, blame, shame game”.

Quality Improvement Steps

How do I use this tool?

1. State the problem you have identified.
2. Start asking “why” 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 gain insight at a level that the team can address (asking five times is typical). The team may need to stop and collect data to create more understanding around some answers.
4. You will know you have reached your final “why” response when it is something that the team can have an impact on. The final “why” response will often seem obvious to the team when it is reached.
5. Once members of your team have established a root cause that is within their control, you are ready to brainstorm ways to overcome the challenge and move on to small tests of change (PDSA).

How do I analyze this tool?

The 5 Whys tool doesn't require any in-depth analysis—the process of asking "why" around a specific challenge is analysis in itself. However, it may be necessary to go through this process a number of times, producing different answers, to understand the breadth of a challenge. It may also be helpful to apply a Fishbone or another quality improvement tool first, choose one element, and take it to the next level with the 5 Whys.

What do I need to use this tool?

Materials	Timing	Setup
• Flip chart • Markers • 5 Whys laminated poster • 5 Whys Template • The right people in the room	Depending on the number of issues you are tackling, it can take anywhere from 5–20 minutes to carry out the exercise, to a few days (in the case of data analysis)	In order to challenge predictable responses and dig deep into the system, it is important that every group that touches the process is represented during the exercise

What tips and tricks will be useful in facilitating this tool?

- Have the team agree on the problem statement before starting. Making the statement as specific and concise as possible will help the team drill down to the causes of the problem. Example: "Why are falls risk assessments incomplete for patients admitted with dementia" rather than "Risk scores not done".
- Encourage the team to focus on what is observable, using available data to verify. Collect data where necessary to be certain.
- Avoid the "name-blame-shame" approach; stay at the system level.
- If while conducting the 5 Whys analysis, the team comes to an answer that is beyond its control—i.e., not enough funding, not enough resources, a policy barrier—ask the team to "back up" the "Whys" ramp to a question where the response is something within its sphere of influence. It may be necessary to go back to the top again to refocus the team at a more operational level.

5 Whys Worksheet – Tool

Describe the problem:

Focus on 1 contributing factor to the problem and drill down (ask "why is this happening?"). Repeat with additional factors.

Why is this happening?

Why is this happening?

Why is this happening?

Why is this happening?

Why is this happening?

Caution: If your last answer is something you **cannot** control, go back up to previous answer.

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