

# 5 Whys How-to Guide

Use this How-to Guide to complete the 5 Whys exercise.

## Purpose

The purpose of the 5 Whys exercise is to guide team members in discovering root causes of a problem.

## When to Use 5 Whys

5 Whys can be used at any time where there is a need to identify root causes of any specified issue. It can be used in conjunction with other techniques – particularly the Cause and Effect Diagram. The Cause and Effect Diagram identifies all potential causes, and then the 5 Whys technique is used to drill down to root causes.

## Related Documents, Tools, and Templates

The following documents, tools, and templates will be referenced in the How to Use section. Some of the documents identified may already be complete and provide content for the steps below. Others may be useful tools for completing the steps. These tools can be found at [go.uillinois.edu/bpi\\_toolkit](http://go.uillinois.edu/bpi_toolkit).

- Cause and Effect Diagram

## How to Use 5 Whys

Complete the following steps to perform a 5 Whys exercise.

1. Select a cause or strategic problem to focus on. These may be from the Cause and Effect Diagram, problem statement, or other brainstorming exercises.
2. Ask “why does this cause/problem/outcome occur?”
3. When an answer is given, ask “why?” for the reason given.
4. Repeat asking “why?” for each subsequent answer until one of the following scenarios is true:
  - Your group feels that they have identified the root cause.
  - Your group feels that more data or knowledge is needed before continuing.
  - Your group has taken it to the point where they are no longer in control of the reason given. (E.g. “Why? Because it is hot outside.”)
5. Repeat steps 1-4 to evaluate all relevant causes or strategic problems.

## Tips

Example of a 5 Whys exercise for a particular problem:

- Problem – Defect: Cracks found in a brick façade
  - Why? Structural issue with corner of house
    - Why? Termite damage to weight-bearing post
      - Why? Moisture found within walls

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- Why? Leaky outside faucet
- 5 Whys exercises are best performed with a whiteboard or flip chart during the team brainstorming session.
- The number 5 is just a suggestion. You may discover the root cause in 2 or 3 Whys, but other times you may need more than 5.

## References

George, M. L., Rowlands, D., Price, M., & Maxey, J. (2005). *The Lean Six Sigma Pocket Toolbook*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

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