

Pharmacy Process Improvement Series: The Five Whys – *Identifying the Root Cause*



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Root Cause Analysis Tools

Numerous tools available to assist with identification of root cause

- Fishbone (Ishikawa) charts
- Process mapping
- Failure modes effect analysis
- Statistical process control
- **The 5 Whys**

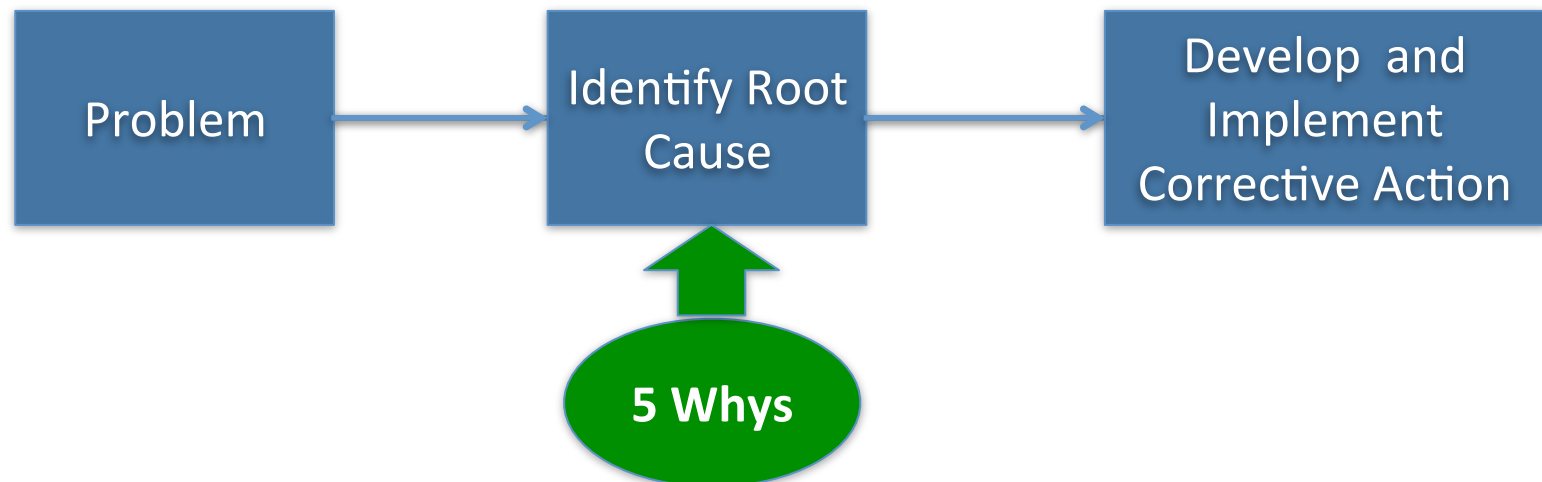


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Process Improvement Tools

- The 5 Whys
 - Simple tool to identify root cause quickly
 - Originally made popular by Toyota Production System
 - Not a problem solving technique



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Although the 5 Whys seems to be one of the simpler root cause analysis tools, it is an easy to use tool that can quickly help identify a root cause to a problem. It was originally made popular by the Toyota Production System, known for its expertise in process improvement.

In general, we often approach a problem as a symptom and end up applying bandaids to the problem rather than identifying and digging down into the actual root cause, so that we can then develop a solution. While the 5 Whys will help identify the Root Cause versus the symptom, it is not a problem solving technique. It is only a beginning step in your quest to solve a problem.

Today, we will discuss how to use this tool, and the benefits and limitations of the tool.



Applying the 5 Whys

- Clearly state the problem
 - Difficult to identify root cause if problem is not clearly stated
- Ask “why” the problem happens and write down the answer
- Continue asking “why” to the previous answer until the problem’s root cause has been identified

May help to visualize process (process mapping) to narrow down most likely sources for problem

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You can start applying the 5 Whys by clearly stating the problem. It is critical to clearly state what the problem is as failure to do so may limit the usefulness of the 5 Whys. Ask why that problem happens and start by writing down the answer.

Continue asking why to the previous answer until the problem’s root cause has been identified. It may also be useful to use process mapping or visualize the process to narrow down the most likely sources for the problem.



The 5 Whys

Allows the user or organization to:

- Quickly identifies those items that are **symptoms** of the problem versus the actual **root cause** of a problem
- Can be very effective, particularly when human factors are involved
- Easy to use and apply

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Why 5?

- Why 5?
 - The number at which most root causes are typically identified
 - Not always necessary or required to reach 5 Whys before a root cause is identified
 - May take more than 5 questions to fully explain root cause



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5 Whys – Pharmacy Example

Problem: The patient was readmitted to the hospital

1. Why was the patient re-admitted

- Because he developed an infection postoperatively

2. Why did he develop an infection?

- Because the antibiotic was not administered within one hour postoperatively

3. Why was the medication not administered within one hour postoperatively?

- Because pharmacy didn't deliver the medication on time

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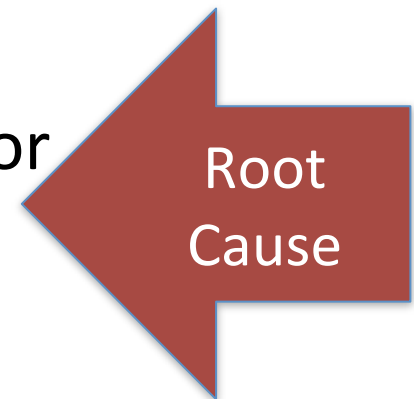
5 Whys – Pharmacy Example

4. Why did the medication not get delivered on time?

- Because STAT medications are not properly identified in pharmacy workflow

5. Why are STAT meds not properly identified in pharmacy?

- Pharmacy currently has no way to monitor STAT meds in real time within the order fulfillment process



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5 Whys Failure

- 5 Whys will not always identify root cause
- If the 5 Whys fail to identify a root cause quickly, more sophisticated problem solving techniques may be necessary
 - Cause and Effect Analysis
 - Data Collection and Statistical Analysis
 - Affinity Diagrams
 - Process Capability Analysis

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Operational Pearls

- Keep asking “why” until satisfied that there is no deeper cause that may be contributing
- Avoid stopping the line of questioning too early
- If “why” leads to multiple answers, pursue each answer separately
- Avoid blaming people. Faulty systems and processes are typically the culprit.

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Thank You

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