

ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

The 5 Whys Methodology

Briya Kodees

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The 5 Whys Methodology

Peeling back layers of symptoms to expose core system breakdowns, prevent recurring failures, and drive lasting process improvement.

Problem Solving

Lean Thinking

Toyota Production
System

THE ICEBERG EFFECT

Symptoms vs. Root Causes

90%

Of apparent problems are merely visible surface symptoms of hidden systemic issues.

Fixing only what is immediately visible guarantees the problem will return.

METHODOLOGY FOUNDATIONS

Origins of the 5 Whys



Toyota Roots

Developed by Sakichi Toyoda for manufacturing quality control and lean systems.



No Blame Culture

Focuses strictly on flawed processes, never targeting individual human error.



Agile Execution

Simple, low-friction framework requiring zero complex statistical tools.

EXECUTION MODEL

The 5 Whys Causal Drill-Down

PROBLEM The vehicle failed to start during client delivery.

WHY 1 The battery was completely discharged.

WHY 2 The alternator was not charging the battery correctly.

WHY 3 The alternator belt snapped during operation.

WHY 4 The belt was well beyond its recommended service lifespan.

ROOT CAUSE Vehicle maintenance schedules were not automated in the ERP.

BEST PRACTICES

Rules for Accurate Diagnosis

Base Every Step on Facts

Rely only on verified observation, never on assumptions or speculation.

Follow Direct Causal Logic

Ensure each level directly causes the level immediately preceding it.

Never Stop at "Human Error"

Ask why the system allowed or induced the mistake to occur.

Test with "Therefore"

Read backwards using "therefore" to verify logical alignment.

VALIDATION METHOD

The Reverse "Therefore" Test

Root Cause

Maintenance schedules were not automated in the ERP...

↓ **THEFORE...**

Cause 4

The alternator belt was not replaced during scheduled service...

↓ **THEFORE...**

Cause 3

The belt snapped, leading to charging failure...

↓ **THEFORE...**

Symptom

The vehicle failed to start.

CASE STUDY: SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

System Outage Root Cause Analysis

Incident Trigger

Problem: Database connection pool exhausted during peak hours.

Surface symptom affected 15,000 active sessions.

Intermittent Steps

Whys 1–3: Unindexed search queries caused CPU spikes, locking database connections.

Queries pushed without staging review.

Process Root Cause

Whys 4–5: Automated query performance gate was missing in CI/CD pipeline.

Fixed by enforcing linting rules.

ADVANCED APPLICATION

Multi-Branch 5 Whys Analysis

BRANCH A: TECHNICAL

System Failure

Traces hardware, software bugs, and physical equipment breakdowns.

+

BRANCH B: PROCESS

Procedure Gap

Traces missing SOPs, training gaps, and communication breakdowns.

ACTION PLANNING

Corrective vs. Preventative Action

Whys Stage	Identified Cause	Countermeasure Type	Action Taken
Why 1 (Surface)	Dead battery	Corrective (Patch)	Jumpstart battery
Why 3 (Middle)	Broken alternator belt	Corrective (Repair)	Replace belt
Why 5 (Root)	No automated service trigger	Preventative (Systemic)	Implement ERP maintenance workflow

RISK MITIGATION

4 Common 5 Whys Traps

Confirmation Bias

Steering questions toward a predetermined answer rather than following facts.

Stopping Too Early

Settling at "Why 2" or "Why 3" where fixes are still temporary patches.

Blaming Individuals

Concluding "operator forgot" instead of fixing the missing safeguard.

Isolation Traps

Running analysis without involving frontline workers who execute the task.

FACILITATION GUIDE

Retrospective Workshop Checklist

01 Assemble a cross-functional team including frontline operators.

02 Agree on a single, clear, measurable problem statement.

03 Ask the first "Why?" and record answers backed by evidence.

04 Repeat 4 more times until a process failure is uncovered.

05 Assign owners and deadlines to systemic countermeasures.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Ask Why Until You Reach the System.

Transform everyday operational failures into long-term system enhancements with structured 5 Whys analysis.

[Start 5 Whys Retrospective](#)