

Analyze Potential Causes – Asking Why?

Analyzing potential causes is an important part of the problem solving process. To uncover the true root causes of an issue, questions need to be asked and information needs to be gathered and sifted.

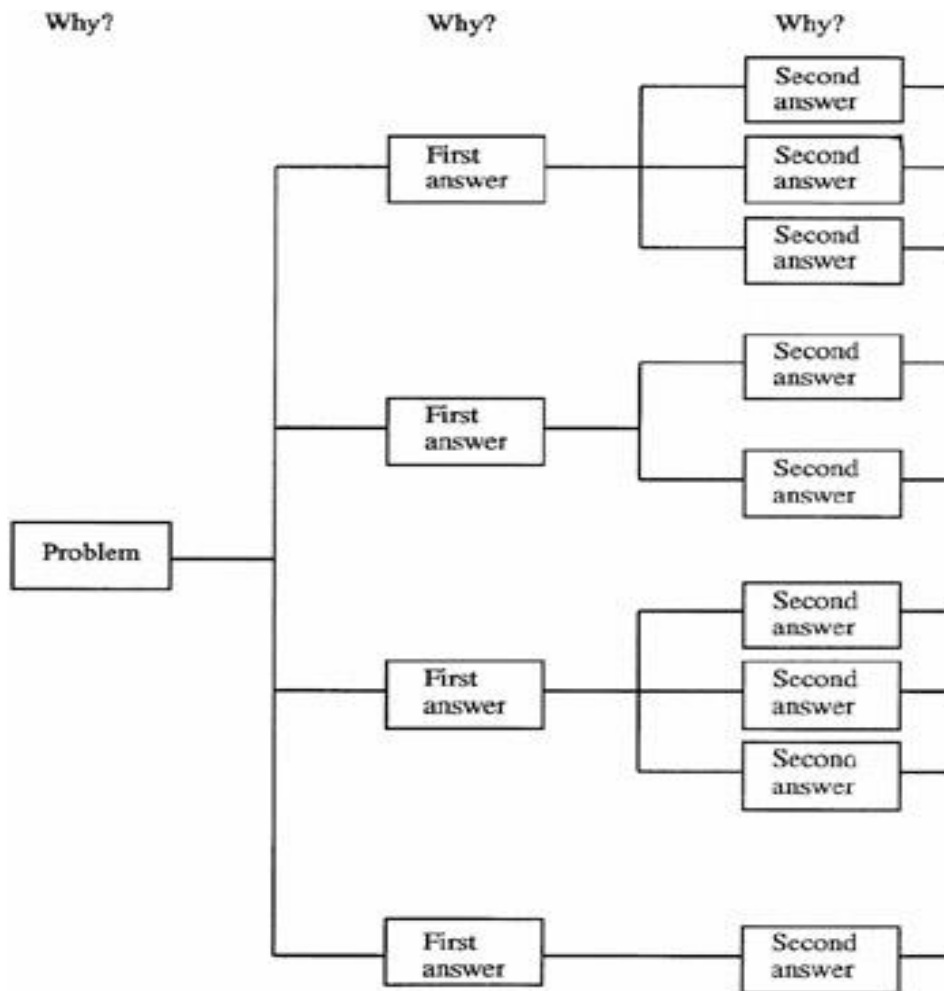
A common mistake during a root cause analysis is to assume you know what is causing a problem without taking the time and effort to dig deeper. This can lead to addressing symptoms instead of the causes, resulting in the problem resurfacing later. One tool to help problem-solving teams analyze potential causes is the “Why?” tool.

The Why? tool is a systematic way to determine the root causes of a problem. The goal of the tool is to identify all the possible causes of a particular problem so you can isolate the most important causes.

The process involves stating a problem and then repeatedly asking the question "Why?" until it cannot be answered. At that stage it is likely that the group has uncovered the root causes of the problem, and can then begin to analyze these in terms of importance and impact.

Method

1. Write the problem statement clarifying the true problem on the left hand side of the flipchart.
2. The team asks the question "Why?", and records all of the answers in a column to the right of the problem statement (see diagram on next page).
3. Take each of the answers from the first round, and pose the question "Why?" again, recording the answers to the right of the corresponding item in the second column.
4. Repeat this process asking "Why?" again and again until no further answers can be given (usually five time is sufficient). Use additional pages of flipchart paper to record the answers as needed.
5. When the process is exhausted, allow time to consider the information, and let the problem-solving team read through the complete Why? diagram. Then discuss the relative importance of the causes identified to guide the direction of further analysis and investigation.



The goal of this activity is to uncover the true causes of the problem, not merely the symptoms. Generally the first few columns will be symptoms of the true causes that emerge as the team continues to ask “Why?”

The challenge here is to keep an open mind while answering the “Why?” questions and recognize that it is time to stop when the answers are no longer actionable. More often than not, teams tend to stop too soon in the process and risk focusing on symptoms, not true root causes.

Why? Worksheet

Why?

Why?

Why?

Why?

Why?

