

This analytical tool is intended to get to the root cause of a problem by asking 'why' or 'what caused this' several times. Each question seeks a deeper understanding until the asker discovers the root issue. It was first popularised by the Toyota Production System to try and separate symptoms from causes in order to ensure any corrective action is treating the right problem. Taiichi Ohno said, 'by repeating why five times, the nature of the problem as well as its solution becomes clear.'

Key benefits of 5 whys

This simple tool does not require any complex analysis; everyone can understand the idea and therefore it can be used throughout an organisation at any level to assist in immediately investigating a problem.

Because anyone can use it, and the tool encourages people to track issues to their source, it encourages teamwork and cross-functional thinking.

It is cheap and can be used in conjunction with many other problem-solving techniques.

Implementation

Prerequisite

Assemble a team of people who have a breadth of knowledge about the area, or seek out extra knowledge in order to trace the relationships between various problems.

Asking the 5 whys

- Describe the problem as well as you can – use a whiteboard to write up a description the team agrees with.
- Ask the team why the problem occurs. Draw a line from problem to the suggested cause A.
- Ask the team why cause A occurs. Draw a line from cause A to new cause B.
- Continue until it feels impossible to discover a further root. In practice you may need to ask 'why' more than 5 times, or fewer. It is also possible that a problem might have more than one root cause.
- Ensure the team agrees that resolving the root cause would stop the problem at the top from occurring.

Potential pitfalls

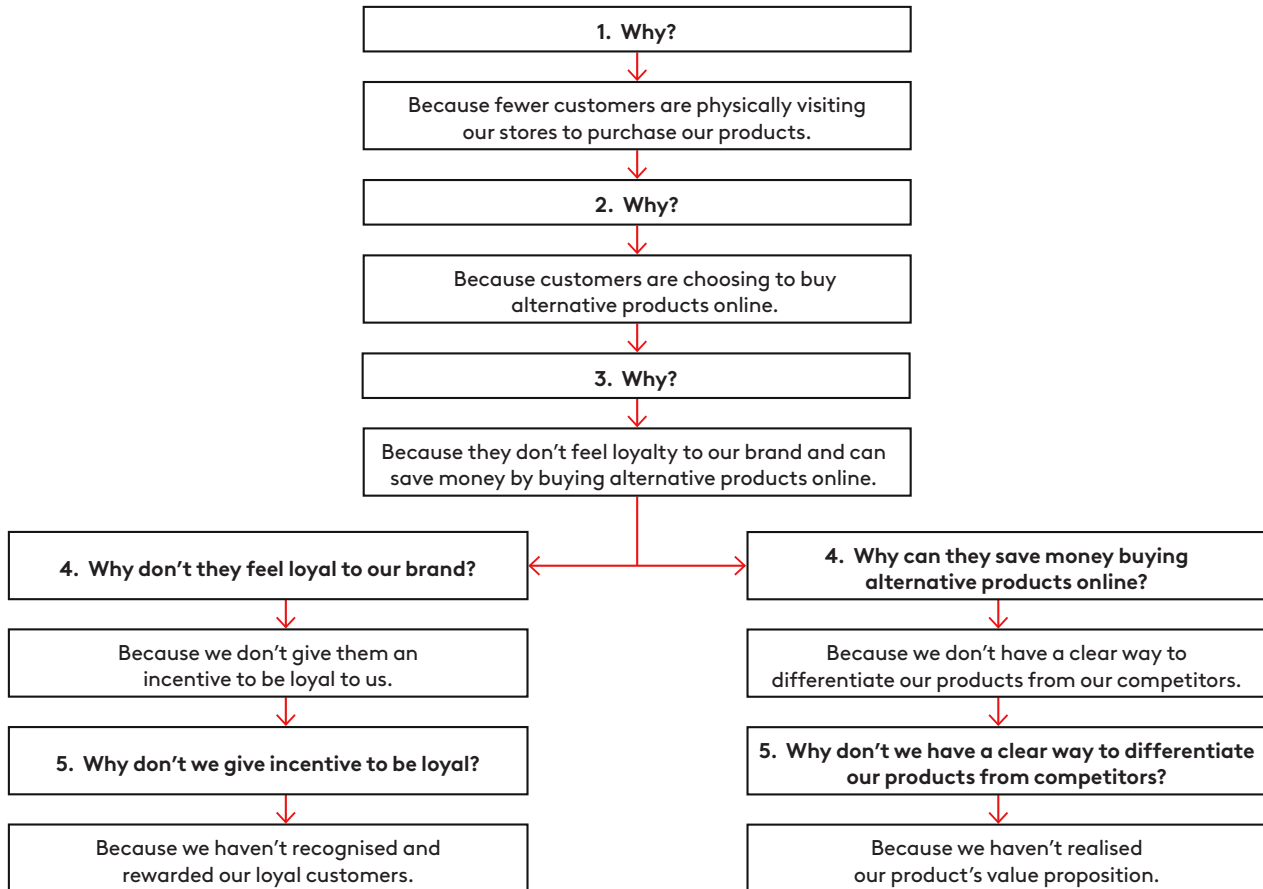
- A single mistake in any of the causes linked to the problem will give misleading results, meaning that the team might implement a solution which fails to fix either the symptom or the cause.
- The team's knowledge might not be sufficiently broad to track causes outside of their knowledge area.
- People can stop asking why too early, isolating a single cause when there may be several that must be tackled to overcome the problem.

You can improve the technique by asking yourself some further questions as a check at each step:

- What have we observed or measured that leads us to connect this problem to this cause?
- Are there any other causes that could give rise to the same problem?
- Must anything else happen in order for this cause to create the problem? This is often a sign that you need to keep asking why.

Example of 5 whys leading to differing root causes

PROBLEM: Our retail clothing stores are selling less inventory resulting in a sharp revenue decline.



We started with a problem statement: Our retail clothing stores sell less inventory, resulting in a sharp decline in revenue. Using the 5 whys, we now have two root causes to explore: 1) we haven't recognised and rewarded our loyal customers, and 2) we haven't realised our product's value proposition.

If you want to learn more, consider reading:
Toyota Production System: Beyond Large-Scale Production by Taiichi Ohno