



The Five Whys

Origin

The Five Whys is a process tool created by Sakichi Toyada, the founder of Toyota Industries, to get to the root cause of errors and issues at work. The flow of the process is simple: begin with a statement about the problem at hand and ask: Why? Then ask the question again four more times, each time interrogating what has been previously discovered. This may lead to a root cause that, if addressed, could most effectively solve the problem. However, sometimes the root cause of a problem can't be solved by the people currently involved. In that case, you look for "counter-measures" to mitigate the problem until larger solutions can be found. Sometimes, you don't need to ask five times. You may arrive at a root cause sooner.

The Five Whys in Higher Education

Here are two examples of using the Five Whys in higher ed. You'll see that sometimes the root cause can't be addressed by an instructor or even a college. In that case, it's time to look for counter-measures. Here, we'll look at two lines of inquiry about why students do not purchase textbooks.

1. Problem: Students aren't buying the textbooks for a class, which they must use in order to pass the class.

Why? The textbooks are expensive and the students must wait for aid.

Why? The publisher controls the cost of the textbook and wishes to make a profit.

Why? Our economy runs on money.

Now, an instructor at MTC can't single-handedly address the money-based economy of our nation nor can they change the publisher's goal to make a profit. However, the instructor can deploy counter-measures within this system.

Solution: Find or create free OERs that will offer the student analogous content as the textbook.

But this is a problem with several causes. What if we have another answer?

0. Problem: Students aren't buying the textbooks for a class, which they must use in order to pass the class.

Why? Students do not value the textbook.

Why? They believe they do not need it to pass the class.

This is quite a different issue from financial strain. Perhaps the textbook falls within a student's budget but they do not believe that it has value. Changing the monetary value of the textbook will not ameliorate this problem. Instead, we must find a way to help the student value the textbook enough to purchase and use it. Here are two ways to consider adding value to the textbook:

Solution 1: Require the purchase of the textbook for a grade. If they do not purchase it, they will receive a zero that affects their final grade.

Solution 2: Illustrate the value of the textbook in the creation of the student's grade. This would mean, through an exercise such as a presentation, showing how the student will integrate the text into the flow of the class. Thus, the student can perceive the value of the textbook in the learning and grading process and can accept that without the text, success is unlikely.

What Do You Want to Investigate?

What questions do you have about root causes in your classes? See if asking the Fives Whys might reveal some things you hadn't considered. Let us know if you find anything surprising and what you decide about how to mitigate those causes that you can't resolve on your own.