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1 Purpose

The purpose is that suppliers understand how to use the problem solving method 5 whys.

2 Scope

The routine has an impact on all suppliers.

3 When to use 5 Whys

5 Whys is used for troubleshooting, quality improvement and problem solving. It is most effective when used to resolve simple or moderately difficult problems.

Be careful when tackling complex or critical problems. 5 Whys can lead you to pursue a single track, or a small number of tracks, of enquiry when there could be multiple causes.

The technique can often direct the root(s) of a problem quickly. So, whenever a system or process isn't working properly start with 5 whys, before using a more in-depth approach and certainly before attempting to develop a solution.

4 Steps

The model follows a seven-step process:

Step 1 - Assemble a Team

Gather together people who are familiar with the detail of the problem and with the process that you're trying to fix. Include someone to act as a facilitator, who can keep the team focused on identifying effective counter-measures.

Step 2 - Define the Problem

If you can, observe the problem in action. Discuss it with your team and write a brief, clear problem statement that you all agree on. For example, "Team A isn't meeting its response time targets" or "Software release B resulted in too many rollback failures."

Then, write your statement on a whiteboard, leaving enough space around it to write your answers to the repeated question, "Why?"

Step 3 - Ask the First "Why?"

Ask the team why the problem is occurring. (For example, "Why isn't the detail correct?")

Asking "why?" sounds simple, but answering it requires thought and intelligent application. Search for answers that are grounded in fact: they must be accounts of things that have actually happened – not guesses at what might have happened.

This prevents 5 Whys from becoming just a process of deductive reasoning, which can generate a large number of possible causes and, sometimes, create more confusion as you chase down hypothetical problems.

The team members may come up with one obvious reason why, or several plausible ones. Record their answers under (or to the right of) the problem statement as short phrases, rather than single words or lengthy statements. For example, saying "volume of calls is too high" is better than a vague "overloaded."

Step 4 - Ask "Why?" Four More Times

Working sequentially along one of the answers you generated in Step 3, ask four further "whys" in succession. Frame the question each time in response to the answer you've just recorded, and again record your responses.

Example:

Deviation: Product not according to specification after processed in machine.

Why 1: Why is not product according to specification processed in machine?

Answer 1: Milling not ok on one side of the product.

Why 2: Why is the milling not ok on one side of the product?

Answer 2: The milling tool does not reach the castings.

Why 3: Why does not the tool reach the castings?

Answer 3: The Casting is not centered in the machine.

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Why 4? Why is the casting not centered in the machine?

Answer 4: The material edge is too big on the castings.

Why 5: Why is the material edge too big on the cast?

Answer: Purchased castings not according to specification

Step 5 - Know When to Stop

You'll have revealed the nature of the root cause when asking "why" produces no more useful responses and you can go no further. An appropriate counter-measure or process change should then become evident.

However if you're not sure whether you've uncovered the real root cause, consider using a more in-depth problem-solving technique like Cause and Effect Analysis

Step 6 - Address the Root Cause(s)

When at least one true root cause is identified, discuss and agree what counter-measures will prevent the problem from recurring.

Step 7 - Monitor Your Measures

Keep a close watch on how effectively the counter-measures eliminate or minimize the initial problem. You may need to amend them, or replace them with something different. If this happens, it would be sensible to repeat the 5 Whys process to ensure that you've identified the correct root cause