

# Learning Enrichment Activity

## 5 Whys Problem Solving

Oakland University  
Pawley Lean Institute  
6633 18 Mile Road  
Sterling Heights, MI 48314

### What is 5 Whys Problem Solving?

The 5 Whys Problem Solving technique is a simple process to follow to solve any problem by repeatedly asking the question “Why” (five times is a good rule of thumb), to peel away the layers of symptoms that can lead to the root cause of a problem. This strategy relates to the principle of systematic problem solving.

### Proper uses of the technique:

1. To help identify the root cause of a problem
  - A root cause is the most basic reason, which if eliminated, would prevent reoccurrence.
2. Provides a framework for a team to work through a more complex problem
3. To solve problems as they occur

### Improper uses of the technique:

1. To emphasize the person or blame: turning the 5 Whys into the 5 Whos
2. Making it a tedious, desk intensive project

### Activity Procedure:

1. Write down the specific problem.
  - Writing the issue helps you formalize the problem and describe it completely.
  - It helps a team focus on the same problem.
  - Always describe the current condition.
  - Use data where possible.
    - Example: Overall customer complaints are up 50%.
2. Ask *WHY* the problem happens and write the answer down below the problem.
3. If the answer provided doesn't identify the root cause of the problem that you wrote in step 1, ask *WHY* again and write that answer down.
4. Loop back to step 3 until the team is in agreement that the problem's root cause is identified.

### Case Example:

Problem Statement: Your company was unable to get the customer's product request to them on time.

1. *Why* were you unable to produce the product on time?
  - Because the equipment failed.
2. *Why* did the equipment fail?
  - Because the circuit board burned out.
3. *Why* did the circuit board burn out?
  - Because it overheated.
4. *Why* did it overheat?
  - Because the air filter wasn't changed.
5. *Why* wasn't the filter changed?
  - Because there was no afternoon preventative maintenance shift scheduled to change it.