

LEARNING HANDBOOK

Guidance and tools to support systematic learning before, during and after project activity in health and care

Five whys

'Five whys' is a simple tool used to understand an adverse outcome. It can uncover the root cause of a problem that has occurred during a project or programme. It not only uncovers glitches in the delivery, but also issues with organisational or team processes.

Initially used with Toyota, it is also a key tool within the [Six Sigma](#) process.

Tool	Time	Resources	Physicality	Interactivity
Five whys	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★

When?

'Five whys' can be used during or after a project. It can be used both to understand why a project may not be on track, or why a project has not delivered the intended outcomes.

Whilst, in some cases, further in-depth analysis may be required to fully understand the cause of an adverse outcome, the 'five whys' tool can be used in the first instance to narrow down the focus.

Who?

Those who are directly involved on the 'front-line' or 'shop-floor' should take part in the 'five whys' process.

The session is often facilitated by a senior manager or leader who needs to understand the root cause of an adverse outcome in order to prevent it reoccurring in future. It is important that whoever facilitates remains neutral, objective and impartial.

The process should be carried out in a safe space and members of staff should be encouraged to be completely open and honest.

How?

The overall time required for the session is between 45 minutes to an hour.

'Five whys' is very simple – you start with an initial statement, or description, of the problem/complaint. From this, you keep asking why, until you have a statement that can be acted upon – and in turn, a lesson that can be learned.

See overleaf for an example:

Statement: The project was not delivered on time

WHY? There were unforeseeable delays experienced during the project

WHY? The platform to host the resource was not procured on time

WHY? There were no responses to the first invitation to tender

WHY? The organisations that were invited to tender were not fit for purpose

WHY? The tender went through an inappropriate procurement framework

Actionable statement: Lines of communication between the procurement and commissioning team were not sufficient

You may arrive at your 'actionable' statement before the five questions, or it may take a few more. If you are unable to arrive at an actionable statement, you may not have the correct people involved in the process.

All answers should be factual and witnessed by the member of the team providing the answers – members of the group can discuss their different experiences and come to a conclusive answer to each 'why' from these.

Further reading:

- MindTools – [Five whys](#)
- Institute for Innovation and Improvement – [Root analysis using five whys](#)

