

Effective Communication and Problem Solving: The 5 Why's!

As a kid, I remember reading in a trivia book of fun facts that four-year-olds ask 400 questions per day. I remember thinking that was a huge and crazy number! I thought about how hard it must be to be a parent and come up with effective, patient answers to all of those questions. As an adult, I appreciate now how few of us probably got all those questions answered, and so we stopped asking. Also, for some reason, adults who ask a lot of questions are sometimes interpreted as being incompetent, "too nosy", or insubordinate to power figures.

However, I think the four-year-olds were on to something! One of the most effective ways to get at the heart of a problem is to ask "why" five times. This technique is actually used sometimes in formal Quality Improvement initiatives!

For example, an executive in an organization might say something like, "our housekeeping department has really high turnover, which is making it hard to keep up with the amount of work and do a good enough job keeping our buildings attractive and sanitary!". The 5 Why's might go like this:

- Q1: Why do you have high turnover in housekeeping?
- A: Because most of our housekeeping employees are Spanish speakers.
- Q2: How come (why) most of the employees are Spanish speakers?
- A: Because it's a low paying job and no one else wants those jobs.
- Q3: Why doesn't anyone else want those jobs?
- A: Because it's really hard work.
- Q4: What makes the work so hard (this is a form of "why?")?
- A: The employees sometimes can't take a break, and they don't always get trained right.

Ah ha! So in only *four* "why's" we've gotten to what might be a truer source of the high turnover, which is something the department and organization can actually do something about, instead of dismissing the problem as a perceived cultural trait of the employee group they can't change. The 5 Why's help get at the root of the problem, and past fixing mere symptoms of the problem. Now we can look at the root cause (ask 5 more why's!) for why employees aren't taking breaks or getting trained, and make changes.

Some things to notice:

1. There are many ways to ask "why". In Question 2, I used "how come" and in Question 4 I used "what". It can be much more effective to ask "why" using other words, since the question "why" can feel like an interrogation and put people on the defensive (think about the times you were asked "why?!" as a kid!).

2. Sometimes there are different "why" questions that can be asked. For instance, in Question 3, a more provocative question might be "Why do you think only Spanish speakers would take a low paying job?" or "Why is it a low paying job?"

3. The answers can give insight into false assumptions, or opportunities to gather facts. I have been in many meetings where well-meaning leaders interpret data (even numbers) or dismiss problems based on their own beliefs or assumptions without being curious and digging deeper. The answers to Questions 1 and 2 show assumptions that might be incorrect. The answer to Question 3 as well, which might prompt a question like "Where did you get that information?" or "Have you gotten feedback from employees about why there is turnover (or why it's hard work)?"

You try it! This works in relationships between individuals as well, especially in working across differences. Think about something you find unpleasant or frustrating. Think about a stereotype. Maybe:

- They are always late!
- They don't have money to spend on our products!
- That idea will never work!
- They will never respond to our survey!

Try out The 5 Why's and let me know how you do!

If you'd like some help with The 5 Why's or need assistance working through some issues in your organization or your personal worklife, contact me today at susana@susantarinderle.com for a free 30-minute strategy session!

!