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Quality Improvement (QI) in Evaluation: Ask Why Again and Again and Again

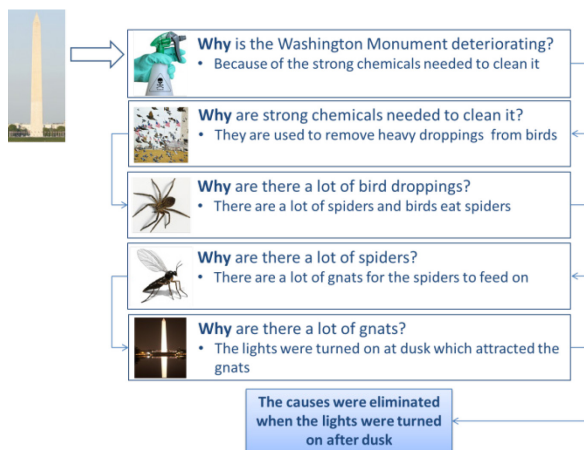
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Ruth Aboagye, Sai Cherala, Pam Senesac, and Joan Johnston on Quality Improvement (QI) in Evaluation: Ask Why Again and Again and Again

Hello again from the [MBA, doctor and two nurses](#) at [UMass Medical School's Center for Health Policy and Research](#) - Office of Health Care Innovation and Quality to talk about "5 Whys" as an evaluation tool. We have all encountered problems that refuse to go away. We think we've "fixed" it and it comes back or we find we've only fixed part of it. Stubborn and recurring problems are often symptoms of deeper problems. Evaluate the symptoms to diagnose the root cause in order to solve the problem effectively and permanently. Sakichi Toyoda's 5 Whys technique – a simple but powerful tool – can help peel away the symptomatic layers and lead to the root cause.

This technique simply asks "why" until you reach the underlying source of the problem. Then, a robust counter-measure often becomes apparent. You'll know that you reached the source problem when you no longer have answers to the "why" question.

See how the "5 Whys" was used to save the Washington Monument. Turned out the countermeasure was as simple as turning the lights on after dusk.



"5 Whys" Key Points:

- A simple, practical tool that does not require statistical analysis or hypothesis testing, and can often be completed without data. It's flexible and combines well with other methods and techniques.
- It uses "counter-measures" rather than "fix and be done" solutions. Counter-measures seek to prevent the problem from recurring.
- 5 Whys is the rule of thumb. You may need fewer or more 'whys' than five to get to the root cause.

Hot tips:

- Follow Toyota's "[Go and See](#)" philosophy. Go where the problem is happening to gain an in-depth understanding of the problem.
- Write down the source problem. This helps formalize and describe the problem completely; helps the team focus on the problem.
- Every time you ask "why," look for answers that are factual – not events that might have happened. This prevents the 5 Whys becoming just a process of deductive reasoning.
- Write down the questions and answers in full sentences so that everyone is on the same page.
- Be careful not to rely only on 5 Whys for critical or more complex problems; complement with other tools such as [Cause and Effect \(Fishbone\) diagrams](#).

Lessons learned:

- Include subject matter experts in the root cause analysis dialogue
- Avoid attributing blame; the goal is to get to the systemic cause
- Beware of intentional or unintentional influence during the 5 Whys exercise
- 5 Whys is best suited for simple to moderately-difficult problems

Rad Resource:

- [Ask 'why' five times about every matter](#)

- [5 Whys Tool for Root Cause Analysis](#)
- [How Asking 5 Questions Allowed Me to Eat Dinner With My Kids](#)
- [5 Whys by Eric Ries, Entrepreneur-in-Residence at Harvard Business School](#)