

Using The Five Whys by Del Suggs

"The Five Whys" is a method of distilling the true cause/effect of an issue. Simply put, it involves asking the question "why?," and then asking "why?" of the answer. The pretense is that if asked five times, that simple question will take you to the heart of the matter.

When I first heard of the Five Whys, I was told it was an ancient Chinese technique. Later I learned it was neither ancient nor Chinese-- it had been developed by Sakichi Toyoda at his automobile company to aid problem solving. Whatever the source, it's a useful tool.

A quick example: My car won't start.

Why? Because the battery is dead.

Why? Because the alternator isn't working.

Why? Because the belt broke.

Why? Because it was worn out.

Why? Because I didn't follow the auto maintenance schedule.

So the root cause of my car failing to start is my own neglect of the required maintenance.

The concept is to peel back the layers of an issue, and get

down to the true problem or concern. But it also works in helping to determine a purpose. I like to use it to analyze a situation, condition, proposal, or issue.

It's especially useful in developing a purpose or mission statement. While assisting an SGA to create a mission statement, I began by asking them why the SGA existed. "To be the voice of the students" they replied. Why? "So the administration will know the students' opinion on important school issues." Why? "So the school can better meet the students' needs." Why? "So more students can get an education." Why? "So they can become successful productive citizens."

So the SGA's real purpose is to help students become successful graduates. That's a totally different idea and more powerful purpose that just being the "voice of the students."

While it may seem a little hokey, and the number five is pretty arbitrary (could be three, could be six), it does seem to work. Maybe looking at the path we've come will make the path ahead seem more clear.

The next time you're faced with a decision, issue, or question try the Five Whys.

You might just get down to the "heart of the matter."

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www.DelSuggs.com
Del@DelSuggs.com**