The Five-Why Process

The Five Whys have been used as a root cause analysis tool for many years. The approach uses a systemic questionnaire technique to search for the root causes of a problem. The depth of layers of questions and answers is not set in stone. Five layers is generally sufficient to identify the root cause of a specific problem, but the key is to continue asking and answering the new layer of questions that arise from previous answers until a question is very difficult to answer (this is where the root cause is found). The Five-Why exercise is vastly improved when accomplished by a Team.   Here's an example applied to a financial problem:

Problem Statement: **We are being turned down for risk capital**

1. Q: Why are we being turned down?
   A: Because no investor wants to back our business

2. Q: Why don't investors want to back our business?
   A: Because they do not see the true potential of our business

3. Q: Why don't investors see the true potential of our business?
   A: Because they are not getting the proper information and facts

4. Q: Why are they not getting the proper information and facts?
   A: Because our investment proposal is ineffective and incomplete

5. Q: Why is our investment proposal ineffective and incomplete?
   A: Because we have not sought advise from someone with experience and knowledge who may be able to help us create an effective investment proposal.

Feel free to continue asking questions until you can no longer come up with an answer. Your final answer will be close to the true root cause of the problem. There are two key elements in effective use of the Five-Why process.

1. Accurate and Complete Problem Statements
2. Complete honesty in answering the questions

Once the root cause is identified you can go to work on resolving the cause of the problem.   As you trace the "Whys" back to their root cause, you will find yourself confronting issues that affect not only the original symptom, but also the entire organization. One of the benefits of Five-Why analysis is that it trains people to recognize the difference between an event-oriented explanation and a systemic explanation. Systemic explanations are the ones that, as you trace them back, lead to the reasons why the problem exists. By contrast, an event is something that simply happens

and may or may not have systemic issues associated with it. It may turn out that 12 different symptoms can be traced back to 2 or 3 system problems. It's the system problems that we need to attack…
The actual Five-Why Process:

There are basically five steps to conducting a Five-Why exercise:

Step 1. Assemble a team and develop the problem statement. Once this is done, decide whether or not additional people will be needed to address the problem.

Step 2. Ask the first "WHY" of the team. Why is such and such taking place? You will probably end up with three or four plausible answers. Place them all on a flip chart, whiteboard or use index cards taped to a wall. Leave plenty of room around them.

Step 3. Ask four more successive "WHYs" repeating the process for every statement on the flip chart, whiteboard or index cards. Post each answer near its "parent." Follow up on all the answers that seem likely. You will have identified the root cause when "WHY" doesn't yield anymore useful information. Continue to ask questions beyond the arbitrary five layers if necessary to get to the root cause.

Step 4. Among the dozen or so answers to the last asked "Why" look for systemic causes or sources of the problem. Circulate the systemic causes or sources among the team and discuss them. Try to identify the one or two most likely systemic sources of the problem. Follow the team session with a debriefing and show the work product to others and ask if they see the logic in the analysis.

Step 5. After settling upon the most likely root cause of the problem and obtaining confirmation of the logic behind the analysis, you can go to work on development of an appropriate corrective action or mistake proofing to remove the root cause from the system. This action may be undertaken by others but can benefit from team input.
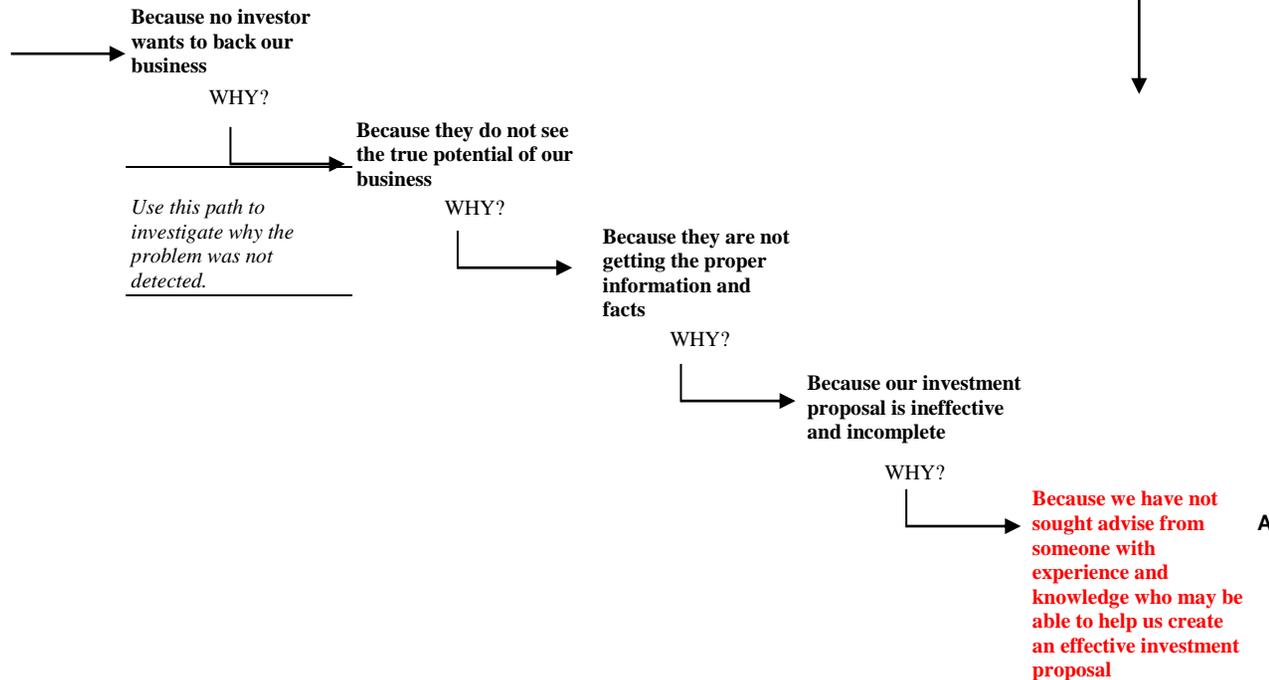
Five Why Example

Date: 12/15/2004

Corrective Action
with Responsibility

Define Problem

EOB5-SA 2-5   *Use this path for*
the specific
nonconformance
being investigated

We are being turned down for risk capital

Systemic Root Causes

A: Chief Financial Officer

Develop a plan to identify and obtain consultant help to revise our investment proposal. Consultant must have a proven track record in assisting companies in obtaining risk capital. With consultant help revise the company investment proposal not later than 15 Feb 2005

Because no investor wants to back our business

WHY?

Use this path to investigate why the problem was not detected.

Because they do not see the true potential of our business

WHY?

Because they are not getting the proper information and facts

WHY?

Because our investment proposal is ineffective and incomplete

WHY?

B:
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Because we have not sought advise from someone with experience and knowledge who may be able to help us create an effective investment proposal   **A**