Quality and Safety Series

The 5 Whys
OBJECTIVES

• Describe the elements of the 5 Whys tool.

• Identify reasons for using the 5 Whys tool.

• Review the process for using the 5 Whys tool.
What Is the 5 Whys Tool?

• Developed as part of Lean.
• Used in performance improvement.
  – Part of “define” phase for DMAIC\(^1\)
  – Part of “plan” phase for PDSA\(^2\)
• Uses iterative interrogative technique.
• Explores cause-and-effect relationships.
• Used in root cause analysis.
• Used in a group.
  – Persons directly involved in the event
• Constructed so each answer forms the foundation of the next question.

1. DMAIC = define, measure, analyze, improve, control
2. PDSA = plan, do, study, act
Getting Started

1. Form a team.
   - Work with each person who has direct knowledge of the event or process.

2. Define the problem.
   - Create a clear problem statement.
   - Define the scope.

3. Ask the question.
   - Answers should be based in fact, not emotion.
   - If possible, back up answers with data, policies, procedures, etc.
Important!

• Not a punitive process
• Part of “just culture”

• Not a blame game
• Set process boundaries

TIP: Instead of asking “why?” ask “How could this have happened?”
The 5 Whys

Begin by identifying a specific problem.

1. Then ask, “Why did this happen?”
2. Then ask, “Why did this happen?”
3. Then ask, “Why did this happen?”
4. Then ask, “Why did this happen?”
5. Then ask, “Why did this happen?”
### Antibiotic for Patients With Sepsis: Example of 5 Whys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patient Safety</td>
<td>Antibiotics delayed for patients with sepsis in ED</td>
<td>Pharmacy delay</td>
<td>Depends on length of ED queue</td>
<td>ED orders are all considered STAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Safety</td>
<td>Antibiotics delayed for patients with sepsis in ED</td>
<td>Pharmacy delay</td>
<td>Depends on length of ED queue</td>
<td>Tube system gets backed up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Safety</td>
<td>Antibiotics delayed for patients with sepsis in ED</td>
<td>Nursing staff workflow</td>
<td>Multiple phone calls to Pharmacy asking for antibiotics</td>
<td>Pharmacy looks in EMR for specific patient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Safety</td>
<td>Antibiotics delayed for patients with sepsis in ED</td>
<td>Nursing staff workflow</td>
<td>Check tube system multiple times to see if antibiotics have arrived</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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More Than 1 Reason?

Problem Statement

Reason #1a
Reason #1b
Reason #1c
Reason #1d
Reason #1e

Reason #2a
Reason #2b
Reason #2c
Reason #2d
Reason #2e
The 5 Whys Template

The 5 Whys

The 5 Whys tool aids in the identification of the root cause of a problem. Begin by identifying a specific problem and ask why this is occurring. Continue to ask “Why?” to identify causes until the underlying cause is determined. Each “Why?” should build from the previous answer. There is nothing magical about the number five; sometimes a root cause may be reached after asking “Why?” just a few times, other times deeper questioning is needed.

Steps
1. Define a problem; be specific.
2. Ask why this problem occurs and list the reasons in Box 1.
3. Select one of the reasons from Box 1 and ask, “Why does this occur?” List the reasons in Box 2.
4. Continue this process of questioning until you have uncovered the root cause of the identified problem.
   If there are no identifiable answers or solutions, address a different reason.

The problem: __________________________________________

Why does this occur?

1. __________________________________________ Why is that?
   Why is that?

2. __________________________________________ Why is that?
   Why is that?

3. __________________________________________ Why is that?

4. __________________________________________ Why is that?

5. __________________________________________ Why is that?

Template available at: www.hsag.com/hqic-quality-series
Next Steps

• Team reaches consensus.
• Root cause identified.
• Identify additional support for root cause.
• Support with data.
• Continue with performance improvement cycle.
Key Take-Aways

• 5 Whys is a tool used in the *define* or *plan* phase of performance improvement models.

• The 5 Whys tool is used to drill down on the root cause of an event.

• Use a team approach when completing the tool.

• The 5 Whys process must be non-punitive.

• Problems or issues may have more than one underlying reason.
Thank you!

Questions: hospitalquality@hsag.com