

Introduction

Root cause analysis (RCA) is a process used to investigate and categorize the root cause of community needs. The root cause is the highest-level cause of a problem, or the factor that should be permanently eliminated to see improvement.² RCA gives teams the opportunity to look more deeply at identified challenges and investigate precursors that could be addressed to prevent the need from resurfacing. As with a weed, the challenge must be ‘rooted out’ to prevent it from reappearing in the future. In particular, RCA helps identify systems level factors related to identified needs.

The Five Whys is a commonly used RCA tool that can be used by organizations as a systematic and formalized approach to considering the root causes of community need. Instructions for the Five Whys are provided in addition to a template for recording data.

Getting Started

- 1) Before beginning a Root Cause Analysis, it is important convene a team of diverse stakeholders that includes content experts, practitioners, community members, and potential service beneficiaries.
- 2) All team members should participate in a brainstorming session prior to completing the Five Whys. Teams should come to shared agreement on the specific community need they wish to address through the RCA. Teams should attend to the following equity considerations during their discussion:
 - How might implicit bias be impacting our thinking or perception of the need?
 - How might deficit thinking be impacting our response to the need?

Five Whys – Instructions

The Five Whys begins with the problem statement your team identified during brainstorming. For this example, the identified need is “Children in our community are not ready for kindergarten.” The team will then ask why this need or cause is present, and record responses. Continue to ask why, recording responses as you go. By asking why at least five times, your team should get at the root cause for the identified need.

Problem Statement:	Children in our community are not ready for kindergarten.
	<i>Why?</i>
	Not all children in the community are going to high-quality preschool.
	<i>Why?</i>
	There are not enough high-quality preschools in our community.
	<i>Why?</i>
	Preschool staff need additional training and education to provide high-quality preschool education.
	<i>Why?</i>
	Professional development opportunities are not available for preschool staff.
	<i>Why?</i>
Root Cause:	The community college does not offer training and professional development opportunities for staff.

In this example, asking why five times reveals that only limited training and professional development opportunities are available for preschool staff, which results in poor kindergarten readiness for children in the community. The team’s next steps might be to engage the local community college in providing more training for preschool staff or consider other community partners who may be able to provide training resources.

In some cases, the team may generate more than one answer when asking, “why?” The team can either prioritize one response to follow or consider following through the Five Whys with

multiple responses. For the latter, use a separate worksheet for each new response as needed.

Five Whys – Template

Team Name:

Date:

**Problem
Statement**

Why? (1)

Why? (2)

Why? (3)

Why? (4)

Why? (5)

Root Cause



References

¹ These resources were adapted from the work of IPRO, the Medicare Quality Improvement Organization for New York State, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). https://atlanticquality.org/download/508_7_1-12-14_RCA_Toolkit_final.pdf

² American Society for Quality. (2018). <http://asq.org/learn-about-quality/root-cause-analysis/overview/overview.html>.