

TOOLS

The 5 Whys: A Critical Thinking Tool

Sometimes getting to the root of a problem is as easy as asking “Why?” Here’s a useful tool to remind people not to make assumptions and to dig a little deeper.



CRITICAL THINKING

“The 5 Whys” is an exercise to help people think more critically about their work and to challenge assumptions.

The exercise:

- Challenges people to question others and to be questioned by others;
- Promotes critical thinking in campaign work;
- Pushes people to get past the first easy answer and search for the root cause of a problem;
- Begs the question about the right solution or fix for the problem; and
- Is fun and easy to implement.

PRACTICE USING ‘THE 5 WHYS’

Identify a specific problem in your campaign or organizing work

(for example, people aren’t showing up to the committee meeting):

- Write down the specific problem;
- Ask why the problem happens and give your best informed answer;
- Be honest and keep it simple;
- Continue by questioning each one of your answers;
- Continue at least five times; and
- Reach your goal: get to an answer that gives a clue to the solution.

The Danger of Asking ‘Why?’

- We get defensive
- We learn the truth
- We don’t want others to challenge us
- We don’t want to pester others
- We might realize something has to change
- We have to take responsibility for the solution

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE

Problem Statement:

You are on your way home from work and your car stops in the middle of the road.

Q: Why did your car stop?

A: Because it ran out of gas.

Q: Why did it run out of gas?

A: Because I didn't buy any gas.

Q: Why didn't you buy any gas?

A: Because I don't have any money.

Q: Why don't you have any money?

A: Because I don't get paid enough.

Q: Why don't you get paid enough?

A: Because we don't have a union.

Teamwork

You can use this exercise to engage the team in debriefs and campaign planning:

- Write down the issue to help formalize the problem;
- The team should come to an agreement of the problem's root cause; and
- Use this analysis to shape a plan.