

5 Whys: Root Cause Analysis

As you complete this exercise, recall the natural inquisitiveness of a kindergartner. When children seek to learn more about the world around them, they often plague adults with endless “why?” questions. Each answer is met with more curiosity to unpack the world’s mysteries even further. Risk professionals can emulate this childlike learning technique by asking “why” five times. This process can peel away each distracting layer, revealing the root cause (or causes) of a challenge or a risk at the 5th “why” answer.

Describe a current challenge or risk (a disruptive event or action has materialized):

Example: a five-member program team resigned without giving notice.

Why is this happening/did that happen?

Example: the team decided to start a new, separate organization.

Why is that?

Example: the team grew disenchanted with the support they were receiving.

Why is that?

Example: the program the team supported was downgraded and is no longer a top priority for the current fiscal year.

Why is that?

Example: the demands of a new funder led us to consolidate our priorities; something had to give.

Why is that?

Example: the decision to consolidate priorities was made without involving impacted members of the team.





Additional Exploration

The 5th Why statement uncovered potential root causes to your challenge or event. What actions could you implement to prevent future similar events from happening?

Optional: To learn more answer the following three questions, considering factors that might have influenced the trajectory of your challenge/risk event after the 5th **WHY** statement.

Was this event influenced by actions/decisions in your control?

Were there outside influences affecting how the risk materialized?

What steps will prevent similar risk events from materializing in the future?