

5 Whys Canvas

Too often problems persist. It is because we get captured by their symptoms and fail to identify their root causes. When we unpack the causes of a problem (or unmet opportunity), the reasons for persistence become apparent along with more effective solution options.

The 5 Whys method was initially developed to identify and eliminate faults in manufacturing plants. It is, however, a very simple and remarkably powerful tool that is applicable in a wide range of situations.

In simple terms, the 5 Whys method encourages you to think like a child and ask “Why?”. By delving into the reasons why a problem exists, you can tackle the real causes and avoid investing in half-baked or misguided solutions.

5 Whys is also valuable for exploring complex problems as inter-connected, systemic causes are likely to emerge. Further insights to 5 Whys and its place in complex problem solving are available in *Smashing the State of Dumb-stuck*.

Suggestions about how to use this canvas are provided below. Explore and test your own ways to make it more powerful, sharing your experiences and examples with others.

5 Whys Canvas

▼ The problem of concern The unwanted situation or unrealised opportunity	1	
▼ Why is that occurring?	2	
▼ Why is that occurring?	3	
▼ Why is that occurring?	4	
● Why is that occurring?		

Canvas enabling insights from the book *Smashing the State of Dumb-stuck* (2021) from MoshPit Publishing
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Steps to using the 5 Whys Canvas

1. Characterise the challenge or problem you are endeavouring to solve. Present it as a question, e.g. “Why is this problem occurring?”
2. Name three or four of the most direct and obvious reasons why this problem exists.
3. For each of these primary causes, ask again “Why is that occurring?”
4. Repeat step 3 and other two or three times to develop at least five layers of insights to the nature of your problem and its causes.
5. Test your confidence in the insights gained by asking “If we addressed the root causes, how sure are we it would resolve our problem?”
6. Discuss and agree your preferred interventions to prevent your problem from recurring. Interventions can be targeted to resolve causes at any level of the 5 Whys, noting that resolution of the deepest (root) causes will prove most effective and enduring.

You can use this table to capture your 5 Whys analysis. Alternatively, you can develop and record your layers of insight using a mind map or fishbone diagram. A mindmap drawn with different coloured pens can be particularly useful when exploring highly complex problems.

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EXAMPLE

<p>▼ The problem of concern The unwanted situation or unrealised opportunity</p>	<p>Why is dedication and persistence lacking in the way we combat climate change?</p>		
<p>▼ Why is that occurring? There has been active obfuscation and denial of climate change as a serious issue due to benefits of inaction</p>	<p>People don't understand the nature and significance of climate change and connections to things they care about</p>	<p>People prioritise short-term pain avoidance and self-gratification over longer-term gain</p>	<p>Public institutions and governance settings don't maintain consistent focus and coherent action</p>
<p>▼ Why is that occurring? Greed by leaders of corporations The evidence is not obvious or directly experienced (cause-effect disconnect) People in power have not fought misinformation</p>	<p>It's not a topic of 'tribal' interest There is no direct experience, threat, or trigger to engage The issue is complex and exceeds the 'cognitive power' of many people</p>	<p>Innate biological preference in our DNA Cultural cues reinforce short-term gratification Immediate pressures/demands for survival dominate attention</p>	<p>Lack of support from people in power to uphold longer-term interests Governments don't talk about longer-term plans, priorities and visions Little coherence of policies across governments and jurisdictions</p>
<p>▼ Why is that occurring? Celebration, power and hero status go to the wealthy / cult of the individual Promotion of 'alternative facts' Producers are not held accountable for externalities / disbenefits of their activities Misinformation serves political purposes Addressing climate change is seen to be a lot of effort for little reward Lack of tools and resources to do the job</p>	<p>Wealth and celebrity status is celebrated over intellect and contribution It's classed as an issue for 'elites' Extreme events are labelled as 'just part of normal climate variability' There is no single enemy to fight (the enemy is us) There is an expectation that governments will bail people out if required It is a complex systems-level issue Less application and attention span to build knowledge</p>	<p>Need to satisfy human needs while you could, before you were killed or died It triggers reward centres of the brain Our cognitive flaws and biases impede accurate risk calibration Capitalist model incentivises consumption Economic growth is considered essential Being thrifty is 'old fashioned' and boring High costs of living vs wage growth Growing inequality, wealth concentration Prevailing habits of a consumer society</p>	<p>Increasing power 'at the margin' in politics Ministers are judged on 24/7 news cycle not medium-term outcomes Hyper-partisan politics exploits any point of policy difference Media rewards bad news, sensationalism Visions are cut down as 'pipe dreams' Short-term governments don't benefit from longer-term plans and investments Federated model silos power and agendas Policies target short-term needs of constituents and Ministers Lack of critical and sophisticated thinking</p>
<p>● Why is that occurring? Diminution of values of citizenship with cultivated preference for consumerism Impacts take time to emerge and may not have an obvious cause-effect relationship Politics has become focused on narrow interests rather than that of the majority</p>	<p>People avoid the intellectual challenge Avoidance of personal responsibility Economy-wide issues are the result of our economic and energy model</p>	<p>Human brains on operate efficiently when using simple cause-effect rules We have no accepted economic model that doesn't rely on constant growth Politics favours the wealthy</p>	<p>News cycle and social media breeds need for instant information and judgement Growth in expectation for instant solutions and personal rewards People are motivated by personal survival and success over collaboration and shared benefits</p>