WORKSHEET + WORKED EXAMPLE

Map Possible Causes With a Fishbone

An editable fishbone diagram and one evidence-led investigation to take next.

30-45 minutes | Fishbone · Ishikawa cause-and-effect diagram

Use it in three moves

1. Agree a specific effect and invite people from different parts of the work. Add possibilities across the branches; empty branches are questions, not a failure.

2. Use short lines for possible causes. The diagram organizes hypotheses; it does not establish a root cause or prove that every branch contributes.

3. Choose a branch to investigate with evidence. Use Five Whys to explore a promising chain more deeply, and return to revise the map.

Write the effect at the head of the fish

Describe what happened, where, when, and how often. Avoid building a preferred cause into the problem statement.

Process and handoffs

One possible cause per line. Ask about sequence, approvals, missing checks, and how work crosses boundaries.

Information and communication

One possible cause per line. Consider missing, late, contradictory, or hard-to-find information.

Tools and materials

One possible cause per line. Consider equipment, software, access, and inputs without assuming a technical fix.

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YOUR WORKING NOTES / CONTINUED

Capacity and support

One possible cause per line. Look at workload, coverage, skills, authority, and support. Avoid writing a person's name as the cause.

Environment and dependencies

One possible cause per line. Include external timing, physical conditions, competing priorities, and upstream dependencies.

Measures and incentives

One possible cause per line. Ask what counts as success, what is invisible, and what a metric might encourage.

Choose a branch to investigate

Pick a specific possibility. Record evidence for and against it, another explanation, the next check, the people involved, and a date.

A question for me

Whose view of the work is missing from this map?

See one way through

FICTIONAL WORKED EXAMPLE / NOT THE ANSWER TO YOUR SITUATION

Write the effect at the head of the fish

Four of twelve Tuesday orders missed the agreed courier collection.

Process and handoffs

Address checks happen after packing begins
Sales and packing use different request forms

Information and communication

Collection cutoff is absent from the order form
Address corrections arrive in a separate message

Tools and materials

Label printer pauses intermittently
Some labels require manual re-entry

Capacity and support

Only one person can approve address changes
Late-shift backup has not practiced the correction process

Environment and dependencies

Courier collection time sometimes changes
Urgent orders interrupt the planned batch

Measures and incentives

Orders are counted as ready before details are complete
The dashboard hides time waiting for corrections

Choose a branch to investigate

Possibility: address details arrive incomplete. Three late orders had afternoon corrections; we have not checked the on-time orders. Lee and Morgan will trace ten orders, including on-time ones, before Thursday. Check courier timing as an alternative.

The thinking behind it

People often compensate for conditions the diagram makes visible. Include their accounts, the interfaces between teams, and the incentives you help create before making the explanation about an individual.

Kaoru Ishikawa developed the cause-and-effect diagram, commonly called a fishbone. It groups possible causes around an observed effect. ASQ describes categories as adaptable to the work. This original version uses six prompts suited to everyday team and service work; its branches are hypotheses to investigate.

ASQ · Fishbone diagrams

Read You Have a Culture Problem by Nic Payne

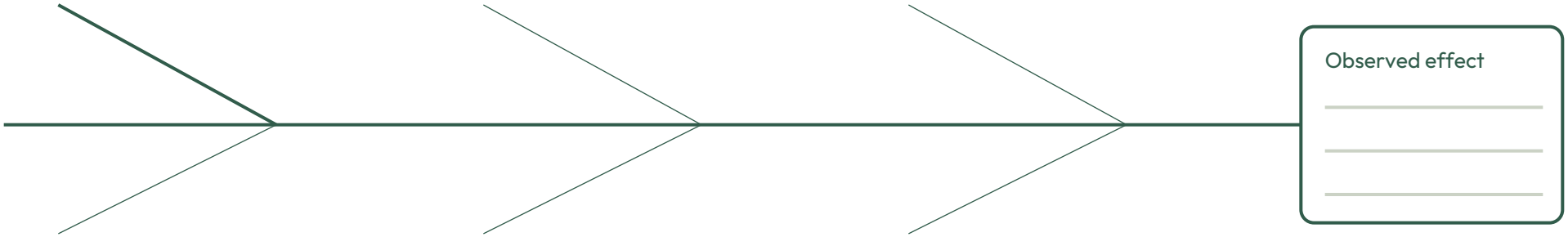
Map possible causes

Write the observed effect at the head. Add possibilities to the branches, then choose what to investigate.

Process / handoffs

Information

Tools / materials



Capacity / support

Environment

Measures / incentives

Next check / evidence for and against / people involved / date