WORKSHEET + WORKED EXAMPLE

Why Did This Happen?

A trail of possible causes, with the evidence still attached.

20 minutes | Five Whys

Use it in three moves

1. Start with a specific event. Describe what happened without deciding who is to blame.

2. Ask what conditions might explain it. For each possibility, record evidence and an alternative explanation. Follow more than one branch when the facts call for it.

3. Stop when you have a useful condition to investigate or change. It may take three questions or eight. An untested explanation stays a possibility.

The event, not the verdict

What happened, where, and when?

The next thing to find out

Choose a question you can investigate, with someone who knows the work.

Who will investigate with whom?

When will you compare what you found?

One item at a time

Copy this page for additional items. Use one row, option, task, or possibility per copy. The web tool handles calculations and comparisons where included.

Possible condition

What does this help explain?

Name the event or an earlier condition.

What supports it?

What else might explain it?

Evidence status

Choose: Not checked / Some evidence / Checked with people doing the work

A question for me

What has the team been having to work around that I have treated as normal?

See one way through

FICTIONAL WORKED EXAMPLE / NOT THE ANSWER TO YOUR SITUATION

The event, not the verdict

Four of Tuesday's twelve orders left after the agreed collection time.

The next thing to find out

Check when complete order information reached packing on the last five late orders.

Who will investigate with whom?

Lee from packing and Morgan from sales

When will you compare what you found?

Thursday's 15-minute dispatch review

Example item 1

Possible condition: Packing received incomplete address details.

What does this help explain?: Late dispatch

What supports it?: Three late orders had address corrections that afternoon.

What else might explain it?: Courier collection may also have changed.

Evidence status: Some evidence

Example item 2

Possible condition: Sales and packing use different order forms.

What does this help explain?: Incomplete address details

What supports it?: We have seen both forms, but have not followed an order through them.

What else might explain it?: The issue may be a missing check rather than the form.

Evidence status: Not checked

The thinking behind it

In Nic's essay on servant leadership, care needs support that survives the individual. Look for a condition people are compensating for, and include your own part in maintaining it.

The Five Whys practice is associated with Taiichi Ohno and the Toyota Production System. Its purpose is to investigate the conditions behind a problem. Five is a prompt, not a required count; complex situations can have several contributing causes.

Lean Enterprise Institute on Five Whys

Read The Magic of Mr. Greenleaf - A Servant Leader's Guide to the Impossible by Nic Payne