Quick Tips for Team Leaders[1]

Five Whys [2]

Jeff Oltmann

This is a very simple but powerful questioning process that helps a team peel away layers of symptoms to get closer the real root cause of a situation. Understanding these root causes is key to making long term improvements to a situation rather than treating symptoms. The technique was originally developed by Sakichi Toyoda who stated that "by repeating why five times, the nature of the problem as well as its solution becomes clear."

When to Use

- When you want to bring clarity and refinement to a problem statement.
- When you need to elicit information on real motivations, needs, or existing ways of doing things. For example, you may need to understand how a business process is really performed instead of how it is supposed to be done, and why.
- When you want to push a group to delve deeper to figure out what the real problem is, not just its obvious symptoms.

Procedure

1. To use informally, usually in a 1:1 or small group interview:
   a. Ask a question about why something happened or is done a certain way.
   b. When you get an answer, ask why that is the way it is, or why not an alternative approach.
   c. Keep asking why or why not, being careful to phrase the question in a variety of ways so that you don’t come across as obnoxious or confrontational.
   d. Repeat until you get to the root cause, which may take more or less than five repetitions.
2. To use more formally, such as in a problem-solving session or kaizen event:
   a. Gather a group of people who have good insight into the problem or situation that you want to understand.

[1] This series of “Quick Tips” articles is by Jeff Oltmann, experienced program and technology executive and principle of Synergy Associates in Oregon, USA. The Quick Tips offer simple approaches and models for problem analysis, gathering ideas and input from team members, facilitation and taking action. The tips offered in this series were identified or developed over two decades of helping program, project and team leaders get things done in faster, more agile ways. Learn more about Jeff Oltmann in his author profile at the end of this article.

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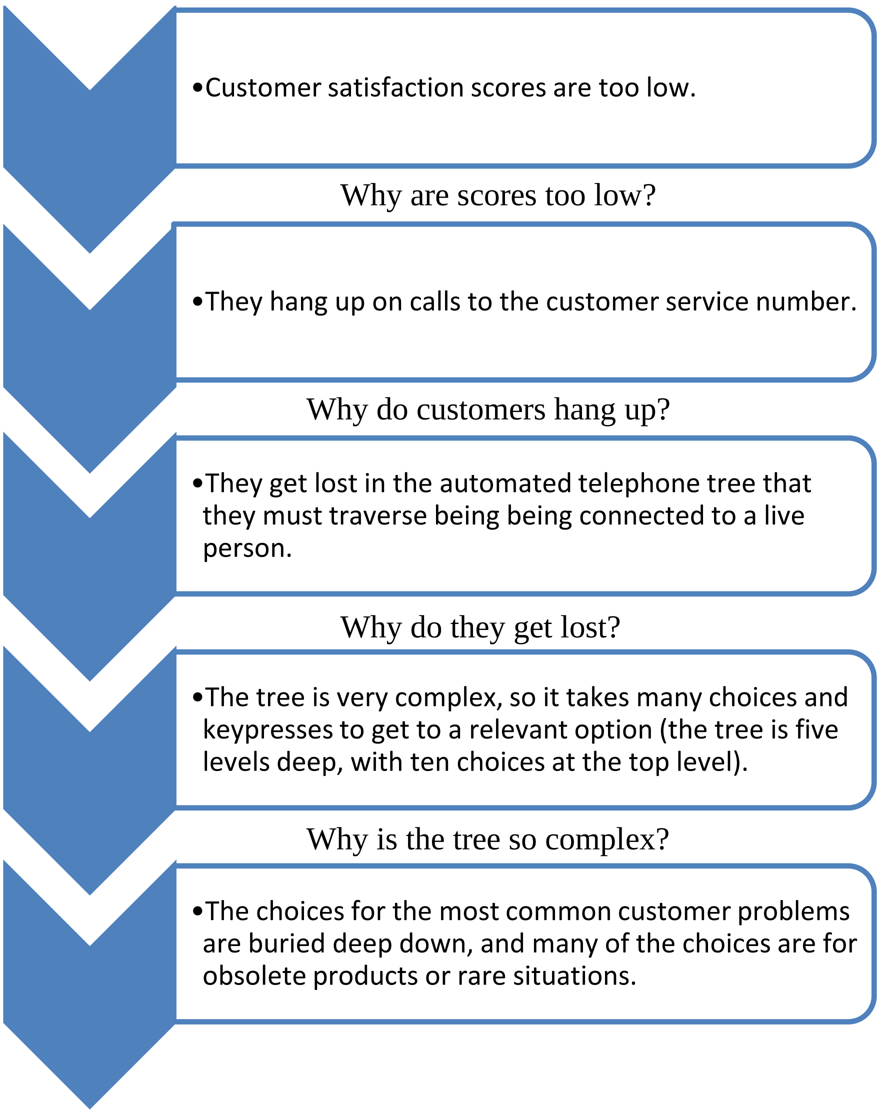
b. At the top of a whiteboard or large piece of paper, write a summary of the problem.
c. Ask why five times, as described above. Write the answer to each successive why below the previous one, connecting it with a vertical line. If there is more than one answer to a why question, write all of them on the same line, resulting in a branching tree.

Example



See more about the Five Whys technique at ASQ's quality tools resource center: https://asq.org/quality-resources/five-whys

About the Author

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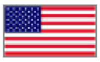

Jeff Oltmann is a seasoned leader with over 30 years of experience advising clients, managing successful technology programs, and developing new products. His specialties include strategy deployment, operational and project excellence, and project portfolio management. As principal consultant at Synergy Professional Services, Jeff advises leaders and teams in diverse sectors including healthcare, research, bioscience, and technology product development.

Jeff is the founder of the Portfolio and Project Leaders Forum. He is also on the graduate faculty of the Division of Management at Oregon Health and Science University and was previously on executive staff at IBM. He teaches portfolio, program, and project management and is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP®).

Jeff welcomes your questions and ideas. You can contact him at jeff@spspro.com or read previous articles at www.spspro.com/article-library.