Fix the Problem, not its Symptoms

Have you ever “solved” a problem only to have it happen again? Last summer I fixed a leaky hose spigot. After 10 minutes, it briefly erupted like Old Faithful in my backyard. If you’ve had a similar experience, you are probably treating a symptom instead of solving the problem itself. The best way to solve any problem is to identify and address the root cause of the problem, not just treat the symptoms.

With an environment as complex as the State of Minnesota, it is important to fully understand the issue when a problem occurs. The surface issue is often not the root cause of the problem.

One technique you can use to perform a basic root cause analysis of almost any problem is called the Five Whys Root Cause Analysis. The beauty of the Five Whys lies within its simplicity, effectiveness, and ease of use.

The first step in solving any problem is to identify, document, and understand the problem. Writing the issue down in a brief, succinct problem statement helps formalize the problem and describe it completely. It also allows a team to make sure they all have the same understanding of what the problem they are trying to resolve is.

Second, ask “Why?” for the first time. Answering why requires thought and intelligent application. This answer should be based on accounts of what actually happened, not guesses at what might have happened. You may come up with one or several answers to your first why question. For each answer to the first why ask why again and document your answers. Continue asking why until you get to the root cause of the problem. It typically takes around five whys to get to the root cause, but it may take more or less whys to get to the root cause depending on the complexity.

Once you have identified the root cause, determine what counter-measures will prevent the problem from recurring and implement the best solution. Enhancing internal controls might be just the solution!

After you have addressed the root cause, monitor the effectiveness of your counter-measures and adjust them accordingly.

Here is an example of Five Whys Root Cause Analysis:

**Problem:** You got a speeding ticket.

**First “Why?”:** You were running late for work and drove faster than the speed limit.

**Second “Why?”:** You got up late.

**Third “Why?”:** You were too tired to get up when the alarm went off and hit snooze the button.

**Fourth “Why?”:** You went to bed late.

**Fifth “Why?”:** You stayed up and watched your favorite TV show.

**Solution:** Fix the root cause of the problem by setting and maintaining a bedtime every night.

**Monitor:** Did setting a bedtime help you get up in time and not have to rush to work?

**Questions?**

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