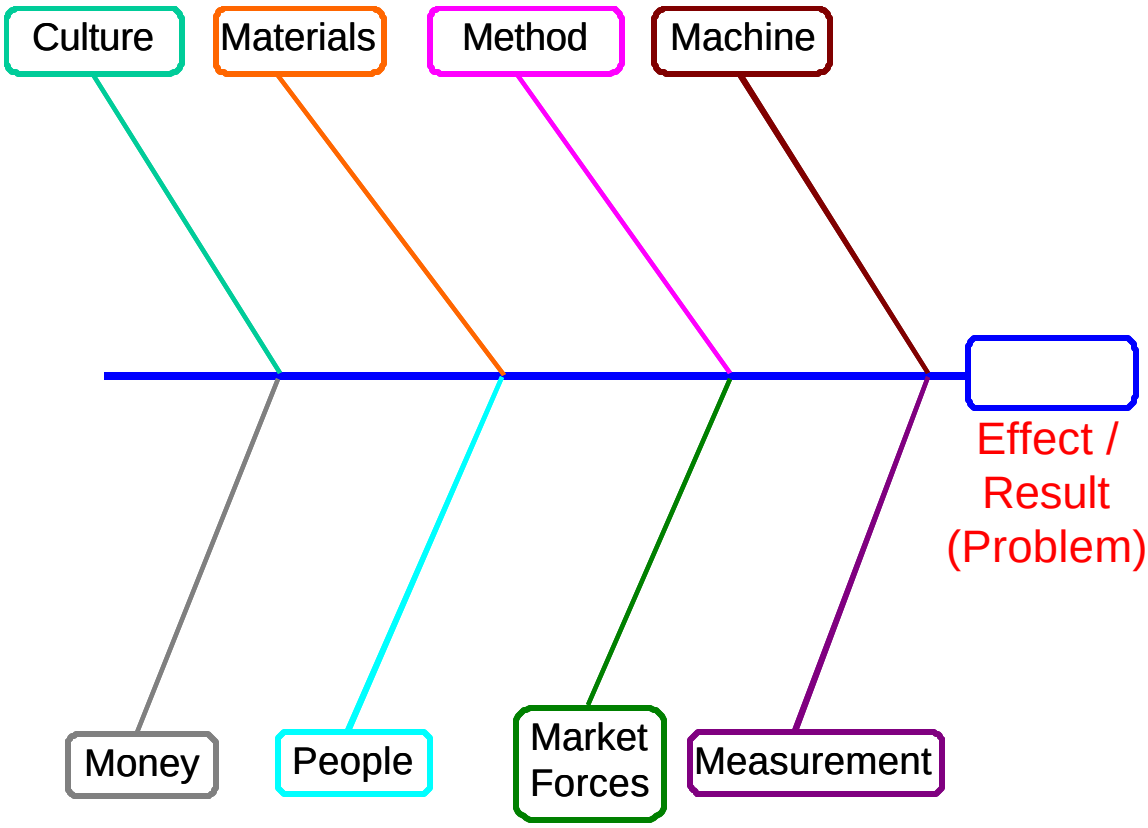
ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS:

(based on THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO GREAT CUSTOMER SERVICE
by Ron Karr and Don Blohowiak)

Using the Cause & Effect Diagram



Digging to the Root

How can you avoid the blame game and get to the root cause of problems to really fix what's wrong?

A simple method for problem identification appears below. But first, a couple of important points:

- Problems are rarely caused by one single factor. In this complex world, everything is part of an inter-related, interdependent system. A problem is a puzzle with more than one piece.
- Identifying and solving problems works best when many people from many different parts of the company have input into the problem identification process.

To identify many possible causes of problems, create a Cause and Effect Diagram (illustrated above) following this simple 10-step process:

1. Identify the problem you want to solve.
2. Put the problem description at the head of the fish.
3. Gather your colleagues and have a free-flowing idea generating session about possible causes.
4. Identify as many possible causes as possible. Encourage creativity; don't debate the merits of any suggestion you're simply listing possibilities.
5. Group together related ideas and write them down under the major headings along the big branches. Create little branches from the main trunks with sub-ideas branching yet again off the branches you created.
6. After filling up the diagram, step back, and review what you've come up with.
7. Ask the group for their ideas on what from all the possibilities you see before you, are likely causes.
8. Explore likely causes further. Take a branch of the fish bone, for example, machinery, and create another fish bone diagram for it. The major branches of a fish bone for a suspected machinery problem might be labeled Maintenance, Parts, Methods, and so on.
9. Gather and analyze quantifiable data related to the leading suspected root causes. Verify (or invalidate) your gut instincts.
10. Draw conclusions and take action after knowing what the root causes are.

Note
Cause and effect diagrams can tell you which way the wind is blowing, but they cannot tell you the speed of the wind or the air temperature. In other words, you need data to complete the picture. Even if a whole room full of well-informed people review a cause- and- effect diagram and agree that X is the culprit, they might all be wrong. A consensus gut feel is still only a gut feel. Complete the picture with hard data.

Questions for Causes

Here's a simple process to help clarify your thinking about problem causation. Ask the following questions:

Where are we now in our current performance?
Where do we want to be?
What do we think is keeping us behind?
What do we know so definitively we can prove it?
What do we need to find out?
Where can we get the additional information?
What will we do with the information once we have it?
What do we need to do to fix the problem?
Who's responsible for implementing changes?
What's the timetable?
How will we monitor progress?

Wrestling with these questions helps you to create an agenda for analysis, change, and improvement.

The 5+/20+ Method

Identifying the possible cause of a problem may help you see the surface of the problem more clearly. But to really solve the problem will require you to get beneath the surface.

Combining a couple of classic problem- solving methods, Don Blohowiak has created a process called the five-plus-20twenty-plus method. It's a two-stage process. (See the reproducible form at the end of this article to put this method to work.)

1. Take any problem and ask why it occurred. Take the answer to that question and ask why, and keep repeating this critically important question for at least five levels of detail.
2. When you've gone at least five levels down, and truly believe that you can go no further, begin listing possible solutions to this root cause. List at least 20 possible solutions.

Here is an example Problem:

You can't handle all the customer calls coming into the company. Why?
Your company is receiving more calls than expected from customers. Why?
Customers are asking questions about your new X-UST model. Why?
Customers don't understand many of its features. Why?
The features seem to confuse customers. Why?
The ones on the new model work differently than most in the industry. Why?
We thought we knew what customers wanted.

Bingo!

Actually, this line of analysis could go on for a few more levels. Once you get to the root causes and there probably are a few here, list at least twenty possible solutions.

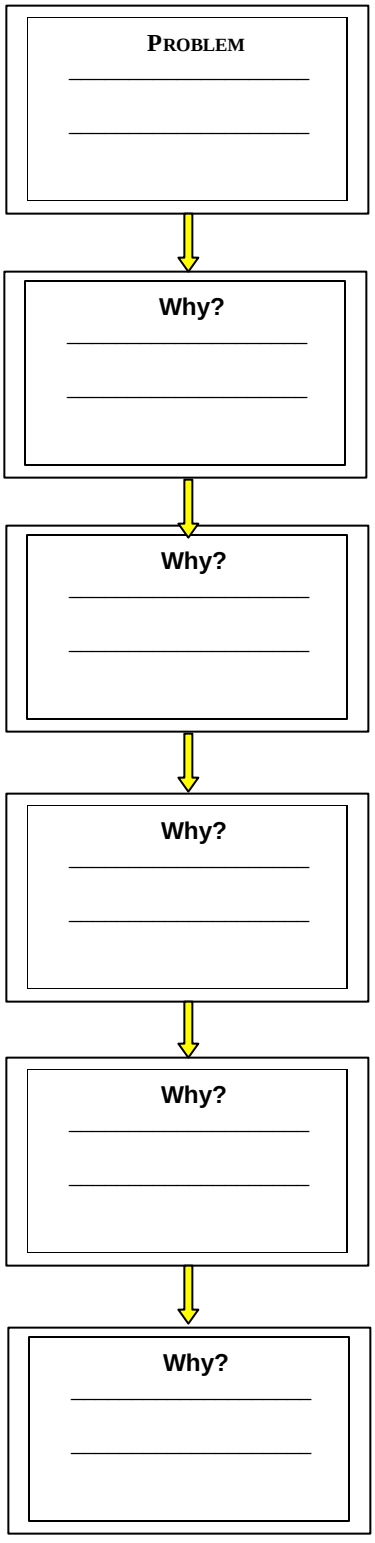
Notice how much different this list of twenty solutions to the root cause is from what it might have been had you just stopped at the first or second level of "why." And notice how much more intriguing your solutions are once you get past the most obvious two or three.

If you don't solve for the root cause of the problem, you're not solving the problem.

Note

Don't look for the *right* answer to what ails your firm. There is no right answer. There are many, many possible solutions to any challenge your organization faces. And some of the best may be the least obvious. Solving real world business problems isn't not like completing a grade school fill-in-the-blank exercise.

5 Why / 20+ Problem Solver



Possible Solutions

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____
16. _____
17. _____
18. _____
19. _____
20. _____

Progress Through Process

How you do what you do is as important as what you do. In other words, turning the nut on a bolt with your teeth probably isn't as good a method as using a fitted wrench. Both turn the nut. So both do the job. One does it much more efficiently (not to mention painlessly!).

Analyzing Work

Could you speed up the service you provide your customers? Could you trim costs by working more efficiently? What if you eliminated unnecessary repetition, delays, approvals, and the bureaucratic steps you have to take to check an order, confirm pricing, review an invoice, answer a technical question, or whatever you do to assist customers?

We have yet to meet anyone working in any company of any size that could honestly say they could not possibly improve their work processes.

Note
When examining your work processes, think macro, not micro. Most work processes include many steps to completing a task or achieving an objective. Rarely do all those steps fall within one work group or department, or report to the same top manager. So think across the organization, and beyond your organization. Picture the whole, not just the part(s) you know best.

Here's how you can begin to analyze your work-flow to seek ways of improving it.
Identify the actual steps in a specific process. Focus on individual work steps[md]not departments, not jobs, not people.

Be very specific. It's not, "give service on the telephone." It's:

1. Answer the call
2. Greet customer
3. Determine the nature of the inquiry
4. Query the database for applicable information
5. Provide appropriate answers
6. Ask the customer if there is anything else they need
7. Respond appropriately: query the database again, or, if necessary, transfer the call, or, ask customer if she can hold while information is sought, if yes, proceed to obtain information from the sub-system or internal information source; if no, schedule a follow-up call with the customer
8. Thank the customer for calling
9. Wait for the customer to disconnect
10. Disconnect the call
11. Input the service call and results into the database
12. Complete any pending information gathering, etc.

Draw a map of the process, showing each, individual step. There' is a standard set of symbols for illustrating work-flow (which you can find in many graphics software packages) but don't worry so much about following the "proper" protocol for the map. Devote your energy to identifying the exact steps in the process. If you understand your map and can explain it to other people, it's probably fine for your purposes.

Verify the steps in the process. “Attach” yourself to the work. Walk through it every step of the way, as though you were the question being addressed or the paper or work being handled. Be sure you didn’t overlook any steps along the way. If you did, add them to your map.

Ask the following questions:

Why do we do it this way?

What if we didn’t do this step at all? Who would notice? What would happen? What’s the risk involved?

How could we achieve the same objective (assuming its worth doing), by doing it a different way? How many different ways can we think of to do it?

Discuss with your colleagues across the organization, ways to streamline your processes. Create plans for alternative methods. Select a new method. Test the new method on a small scale before changing the whole operation. Identify and work-out the kinks before turning your company and your customers on their heads.

Evaluating processes has evolved to a fine science, with very sophisticated software and consultants available to undertake “business process reengineering,” known as BPR. Your own company may have people knowledgeable about BPR available to help you redesign your work. You can usually find them in either the finance or information technology departments. Or, if you work for a small company with limited resources, consider doing the analysis yourself or retaining a consultant to help you.

When you begin examining business processes with a macro view, some colleagues may feel threatened. After all, you' are looking over their “turf.” Likewise, in the process of improving processes, you may find ways too eliminating unnecessary work and the jobs that do them. While process improvement is vitally important to the quality of the service you provide to your customers and the fiscal health of your company, some of your colleagues may resist the effort. You' are more likely to succeed when your effort has the enthusiastic support of top management.

You can’t get better merely doing what you do now, even if you know that it already works. You have to experiment. Try some things. All progress in the history of the world has been the result of trying something new.