

## Digging Deep Into Needs with The Five Whys

By Mike Schultz

**Editor's Note:** Author Mike Schultz introduces us here to “The Five Whys” – a vehicle that takes us to the heart of creating and maintaining strong, lasting client relationships by using a simple yet deeply effective method of inquiry.

If you want to be a trusted partner, helping your customers solve their most difficult problems and create lasting success, you have to solve the right problems. Many sellers don't. This is because they tackle and solve symptoms of a deeper problem, not the deep problems themselves. Getting to the root cause of problems is an essential component of a world-class needs discovery, as knowing the root causes will define your solution and the success it will have.

### Enter the Five Whys

The Five Whys is a root-cause analysis technique, pioneered by Taichi Ohno of the lean manufacturing movement, that helps business leaders to get past putting Band-Aids on the symptoms of a problem, and instead address the underlying causes, thus permanently solving the problem.

The Five Whys help you work with prospects to uncover the root causes of what is driving their needs, and craft the most compelling, powerful, and lasting solutions. Essentially, the Five Whys is to problem solving and critical thinking what removing weeds at the root is to gardening. Fix a symptom in business but not the underlying cause, and, much like a pulled weed with the root left in the ground; the symptom is bound to sprout up again. Fix the underlying cause of a problem at the root, and you will see lasting improvement.

Here's how it works. When presented with a problem, ask questions that start with why? Why did that happen? Why will this solve the problem? Why are things the way they are?

For example, let's say a prospect says to you, “We need more training for our IT staff because we're receiving too many complaints about bad service.” Here's how it might go.

**You:** “Why are you are receiving too many complaints about your service?” (Why 1)

**Prospect:** “Because response times are slow.”

**You:** “Why are response times slow?” (Why 2)

**Prospect:** “Because our staff always seems backed up, no matter what we do.”

**You:** “Why is the staff always backed up?” (Why 3)

**Prospect:** “Because requests come in that are deemed urgent that really aren't, and the ones that are urgent don't get immediate response. So we're always reacting like crazy every minute of the day.”

**You:** “Why can't you differentiate between the really urgent problems and the not-so-urgent problems?” (Why 4)

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**Prospect:** “Because we don’t have definitions of what constitutes urgent, and we don’t have a sufficient job ticket management system to help us keep it straight if we did.”

**You:** “Why don’t you have a job ticket management system that can help you keep it all sorted out?” (Why 5)

**Prospect:** “Because we looked at this two years ago and we didn’t need it, but now we’re twice the size and have so much more volume. No one’s brought it up again with Jane, our COO, who makes the decisions about these kinds of things.”

**You:** “Why hasn’t anyone brought it up with Jane?” (Why 6)

**Prospect:** Silence.

**You:** “Is training for the IT staff what you need, or should you re-engage Jane about how a job ticket management system will improve response times and reduce complaints?”

**Prospect:** “Time to talk to Jane.”

**You:** “Then you need to get approval, and install the job ticket management system?”

**Prospect:** “Right again.”

**You:** “Let’s talk about what you need in a job ticket management system, then. We see three options. One is right, depending on a few factors. Let’s have a look.”

## When using the Five Whys

Do not stop at the first need you uncover and think you can fix it. Rainmakers who are capable of getting to the bottom of things create stronger relationships and stronger foundations of trust are seen as problem solvers and change agents. In turn, this keeps the competition closed out and enables them to sell to clients year after year.

When using the Five Whys in your sales conversations, keep the following in mind:

- **Get agreement on the desired outcome.** Lack of agreement on the desired outcome happens often. Make sure you come to unambiguous agreement on the New Reality you are trying to create. Only then can you solve the right problems to get there.
- **Involve the right team.** Make sure you have the right buyers and sellers in the room to actually get to the root cause. If the discussion starts off with, “We need a new (insert need here),” you need to have the technical experts – yours and theirs – available who know what may be driving this perceived need.
- **Employ good logic.** Don’t make specious cause/effect conclusions. Like a geometry proof gone awry, make one mistake in the middle and you can find yourself on the wrong path for the duration.
- **Allow leeway to people as they try to answer, “Why?”** You will often find a number of possible root causes. You might not know definitely the answer to why at first. Take care not to shoot early ideas down.
- **Realize you might need a bigger process to uncover the root.** Sometimes you can’t just “come” to the answer, and you need to perform an in-depth analysis so you can understand what’s really going on.

If you employ the Five Whys you’ll know that as you uncover needs and craft solutions, you’ll be addressing the root causes, solving problems effectively and for the long term.

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## “First Why Question” Starter Ideas

If you're keen to give the Five Whys a try and looking for a place to start, here's an example of a set of why questions you can ask about your team's sales success:

- Why didn't we reach our revenue goals?
- Why is our sales staffing set at its current level?
- Why haven't we been able to implement (insert tactic or initiative here), even though we keep saying it's a priority?
- Why hasn't (insert tactic or initiative here) worked as well for us as we might have liked?
- Why haven't we tried anything new or innovative in our sales process?
- Why aren't our messages resonating as strongly as they might?
- Why are we (or aren't we) launching sales efforts into new, geographies, industry specialties, etc.?
- Why don't people other than the sales team bring in new customers and revenue as much as they might?
- Do we have a culture of sales success? Why is it like what it's like?
- Why haven't we been able to penetrate our target accounts like we believe we can and should?
- Are your competitors outmaneuvering us? Why?
- Why don't we sell at higher prices?
- Why have we had more sales success in some groups and less in others?
- Why isn't our repeat business rate higher?
- Why did we lose a customer (or set of customers) that we lost?
- Why did we lose a big new business opportunity?

### About the Author

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