Method

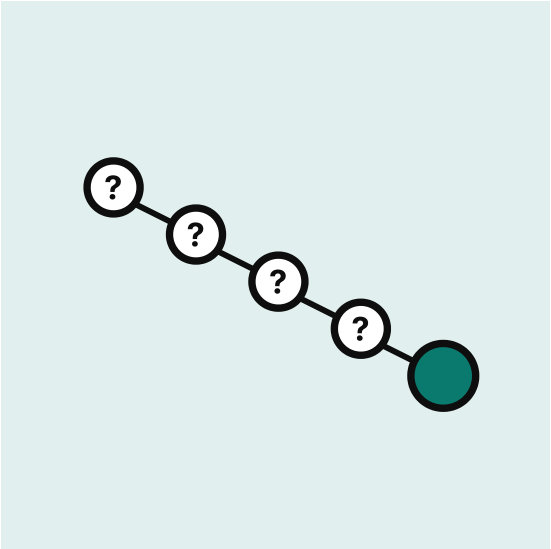
Five whys

A technique for finding the root cause of a problem by asking “why?” several times in a row, each time about the previous answer.

In Spanish
Los cinco porqués

Origin
Ohno, Toyota (1988)

Output
A chain of causes that reaches the root cause of the problem



What it’s for

It keeps you from stopping at the symptom and helps you fix the underlying cause.

Key elements

Concrete facts
Start from a problem described with facts, not opinions.

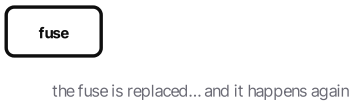
On the previous answer
Each “why?” is asked about the last answer.

Causes, not culprits
The chain looks for what failed in the process, not whom to blame.

An example

Taiichi Ohno’s classic example: a machine has stopped.

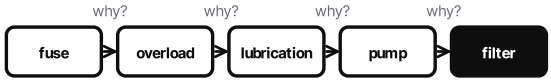
Stopping at the first why



the fuse is replaced... and it happens again

A fuse has blown: it gets replaced. **It will happen again.**

Five whys



Fuse, overload, poor lubrication, worn pump... until you find the pump had no filter and metal shavings were getting in. **The cause gets fixed.**

Each “why?” goes down one level, until you reach something that, once corrected, keeps the problem from happening again.

How it’s done

1 

Describe the problem with concrete facts.

2 

Ask “why?” about each answer.

3 

Stop when you reach a cause that can be corrected.

Applications in design

When to use it

In synthesis, to move from a problem you see to the cause behind it.

Avoid

Following a single chain of causes when the problem has several.

Don’t fall for it

Five is a guideline: sometimes three whys are enough and sometimes you need more.

Connections

Builds on

- Insight
- Design synthesis

Related to

Premortem

Authors and works

1988	**Taiichi Ohno**	Spread it as part of the Toyota Production System.

Sources

Original sources

- Ohno, T. (1988). Toyota production system: Beyond large-scale production. Productivity Press.

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