



Seeing tomorrow's ideas...Today

foursight
consulting

Vol. 5, No. 6, June 2008

Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Our natural tendency is to quickly act on a problem without identifying the "real" problem. Read this month's newsletter to learn a powerful and simple technique for identifying problems.

Creativity Technique: The Five Whys

The questioner who "dares to be naive" enough to ask "why" over and over gets the best results.

- Buckminster Fuller

Many writers, including Albert Einstein, stressed that creative people generally are excellent "problem finders." Problem finders have the ability to identify the "real" problem, an important element of *problem definition* process which generally includes the ability to: (1) identify the "real" problem, (2) isolate important (and unimportant) aspects of a problem, (3) clarify and simplify a problem, (4) identify sub-problems, broadly, (5) propose alternative problem definitions, and (6) define a problem more broadly. Note that getting to items 5 and 6 open the door to a wider variety of problem solutions.

The value of identifying the "real" problem means making certain that your actions will be directed toward solving the "real" problem or taking advantage of the "real" opportunity, rather than merely addressing symptoms of the problem or an apparent (but not necessarily real) opportunity. Problem identification requires careful analysis.

There are several techniques for identifying the "real" problem however one powerful yet simple technique is the Five Whys Technique.

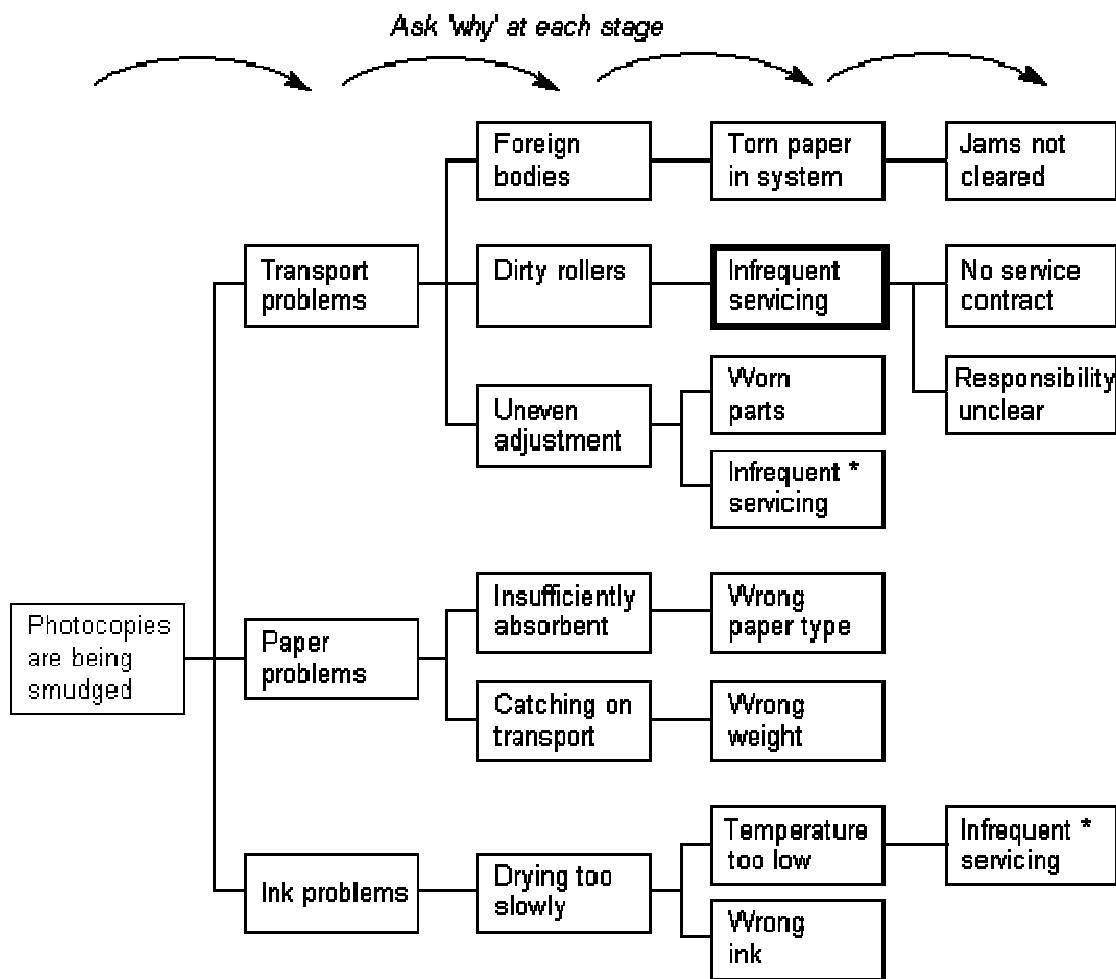
The Five Whys Technique

If you've been involved in the Six Sigma process, you've heard of the Five Whys Technique for solving problems. This technique was made popular by car-maker Toyota in the 1970s, yet it has widespread application. The Five Whys Technique is based on the premise that it usually takes five questions to find the truth or the "root cause" of a problem.

Here are the steps:

1. Write the problem on a Post-it Note and place it to the left of a large work area on the wall. A big sheet of brown paper or several flip-chart pages taped together can help. Note: if you are on your own you can simply use a pen and paper.
2. Ask 'What are the main sub-areas that may lead to this problem?' Write each of these on a Post-it Note and stick them up, well spaced out (to allow lower-level trees to develop) to the right of the problem Post-it Note.
3. Repeat this sequence of breaking down the problem once more, this time simply asking 'Why does this happen?'
4. After this third level, a fourth detailed level would overcrowd the work area, so start to focus by only developing likely-looking causes or solution areas. In each of these, keep asking "Why" until you have a root cause or a complete solution.
5. When you have completed the analysis, discuss (or reflect on) and identify the key cause to address. When examining the diagram, the same sub-cause may turn up several times in various places. This may well mean that if these are addressed, then you will kill several birds with one stone, getting multiple benefits from one action.

The Following provides an example of the Five Whys Technique:



= Key cause * = Duplicate cause

Making the tree visible allows you to:

- Re-examine parts of the analysis so that you can change, remove or add to it at any time.
- Consciously not follow some paths, digging only into the most likely areas.
- Allow a group of people to be on the same page with regards to the situation and work more harmoniously on it.

Once you have determined the root cause(s) of the problem, take the appropriate steps to resolve the issue. If it is a problem that requires imagination and creativity to solve it, consider using the *Creative Problem Solving Process* (for more information on this process refer to *Creative Problem Solving and Idea Generating Techniques(PDF)* in the ideas section of our website at <http://www.foursightconsulting.com/ideas/>).

What's the Bottom line

The Five Whys technique is an easy and powerful tool for identifying the "real" problem. Because it is so elementary in nature, it can be adapted quickly and applied to most any problem, situation or opportunity.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

For more ideas on creativity, innovation, to join or be removed from the newsletter distribution list, visit www.foursightconsulting.com.