Get to the Root of a Problem

To solve a problem, you have to understand why it's happening.

Use this process to understand the root causes of any problem.

Determine Surface-Level Causes: Most problems have several surface-level causes. Talk to people who interact with the problem (or observe the problem happening) to create a list of surface level causes.

Categorize Surface-Level Causes:
• *Human cause*: when a person does something wrong
• *Physical cause:* when a tangible, material item fails
• *Organizational cause*: when a system, process, or policy is faulty

Use the Five Whys to Get to find Root Causes: Keep asking "why" until you get to a root cause you can do something about.

For example:

I didn't buy cat food. Why?
Because it wasn't on my shopping list. Why?
Because I made my shopping list on Sunday, before we ran out of cat food.

As you can see, it won't always take five whys.

Prioritize Your Root Causes: Throw out any root causes you can't do anything about. Then prioritize fixing the root causes you can do something about.