The 5 Whys

Let's return to the idea of asking "Why?" several times to identify sub- and sub-sub causes in a cause-and-effect diagram. This approach, known as "The 5 Whys," is fundamental to root cause analysis. The idea is to repeatedly ask "Why?" for each potential root cause to get to the true underlying cause.

For example, suppose that a team is studying the problem of low machine throughput. One potential cause is machine downtime. You ask, why is there machine downtime? Because a critical component breaks down.

Why? Because the component is not properly lubricated. Why? The component is not being properly maintained. Why? The component is not in the preventative maintenance schedule. You might not need to ask "Why?" five times, but by repeatedly asking the question, you have identified a potential cause that is easy to address. You'd repeat this process for these other potential causes of the problem.

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