Root Cause Analysis

Stop fixing symptoms and start solving problems. Root cause analysis digs beneath surface issues to find system failures. Most organizations solve the same problems repeatedly because they only patch symptoms.

2 hours
Strategy
Intermediate

H HOW TO RUN

1. Define the Problem. State the problem specifically. For example, "15% of orders ship with wrong items in the past month." Quantify it. When did it start? Who experiences it? What's the impact? Align everyone on the problem — 15 min
2. Ask Why Five Times. Start with the problem. Ask, "Why does this happen?" Write the answer. Ask "Why?" again. Go at least five levels deep. Example: Wrong items ship → Why? → Pickers can't read labels → Why? → Labels print faded → Why? → Printer low on toner → Why? → No maintenance schedule → Why? → No one assigned responsibility. The fifth why often reveals the root — 45 min
3. Identify Contributing Factors. Draw a fishbone diagram with the problem as the head. Add categories: people, process, technology, environment. List contributing factors for each. This reveals if it's a single root cause or multiple factors. It's often a system failure — 20 min
4. Verify with Evidence. For each root cause, ask: is there evidence? If we fix this, will the problem stop? Test your theory against the data. Sometimes the obvious cause isn't causal — 20 min
5. Design Solutions. Address root causes, not symptoms. If the root cause is "no maintenance schedule," the solution is systematic maintenance, not just changing toner. Solutions should make recurrence structurally impossible — 20 min

KEY TIP

Stopping at Symptoms: Teams stop asking "why?" too early. "Bad communication" is a symptom.

O OBJECTIVES

- Address fundamental causes instead of treating symptoms
- Use questioning to peel back layers of problems
- Identify systemic issues versus one-off failures
- Create solutions that prevent recurrence

M MATERIALS

- ☐ Problem statement
- ☐ Whiteboard or large paper
- ☐ Sticky notes
- ☐ Data about the problem
- ☐ Markers

P PARTICIPANTS

4 to 7 people

F FACILITATOR NOTES

REMEMBER

- Why is communication bad? Push until you get to something actionable.
- Blame vs. Cause: Root cause analysis can turn into blame. Redirect: we're finding system failures.
- Most problems stem from poorly designed processes. Single vs. Multiple Causes: Rarely is there one root cause.
- Usually multiple factors converge. Solutions might need to address several factors.
- Testing the Root Cause: Good test: "If we eliminate this, will the problem stop?"
- If the answer is "maybe," you haven't found the root.