The “5 Whys”

What are the 5 Whys and what do they do?

It can be tempting at the start of a quality improvement project to quickly start to make changes to “fix” the problem. However, the likelihood is that this will result in dealing with the symptoms of problem without actually addressing the problem itself. The 5 Whys is an approach which can be used to prevent this from happening.

The 5 Whys entails repeatedly asking the question “Why?” when exploring the reason for the problem. This encourages teams to keep peeling away the layers of the issue, to avoid assumptions, and to drill down to the real root cause of the problem. The recommendation is to ask “Why?” five times however, it may take fewer or more steps.

Who should do this?

It’s best to adopt a team approach when completing the 5 Whys; the team should include your key stakeholders and any patient representatives.

This means that everyboady has an opportunity to provide their insights into the problem, and this supports development of a team consensus about the cause of the problem.

How to do this?

Write down the problem and describe it accurately. Ask why the problem happens. Write down the answer. If the answer doesn’t identify the source of the problem, ask “Why?” again.

Keep going with identifying the answer to the question “Why?” and asking the question “Why?” again until the root cause of the problem is identified. Here’s an example:

1. There was a delay in theatre due to the late arrival of a patient. Why?
2. Because there was a long wait for a trolley. Why?
3. Because a replacement trolley had to be found. Why?
4. Because the original trolley’s safety rail was worn and broken. Why?
5. Because it had not been regularly checked. Why?
6. Because there is no equipment maintenance schedule. This is the root cause of the problem.

The 5 Whys can be used independently or as part of a Cause and Effect Diagram (Fishbone).

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