

# The 5 Whys Process We Use to Understand the Root of Any Problem

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Sometimes things don't go according to plan. Tools break, wires get crossed, the best-laid plans fall apart.

And on those occasions, it helps to know exactly what happened—so it doesn't happen again.

Moments like these are when we at [Buffer](#) turn to a simple but remarkably effective process: **The 5 Whys**.

**It's just as it sounds: A discussion of the unexpected event or challenge that follows one train of thought to its logical conclusion by asking "Why?" five times to get to the root of what happened.**

But it's also a lot deeper than that, too. Let's take a look at the origin and history of this unique process, and I'll tell you a bit about how it works for us on [our remote team](#) at Buffer—and how it could work for you, too.

## The origin of the 5 Whys

The 5 Whys technique was developed and fine-tuned within the Toyota Motor Corporation as a critical component of its problem-solving training.



Taiichi Ohno, the architect of the Toyota Production System in the 1950s, describes the method in his book [Toyota Production System: Beyond Large-Scale Production](#) as “the basis of Toyota’s scientific approach . . . by repeating why five times, the nature of the problem as well as its solution becomes clear.”

Ohno encouraged his team to dig into each problem that arose until they found the root cause. “Observe the production floor without preconceptions,” he would advise. “Ask ‘why’ five times about every matter.”

Here’s an [example Toyota offers](#) of a potential 5 Whys that might be used at one of their plants.


1. **"Why did the robot stop?"**  
The circuit has overloaded, causing a fuse to blow.
2. **"Why is the circuit overloaded?"**  
There was insufficient lubrication on the bearings, so they locked up.
3. **"Why was there insufficient lubrication on the bearings?"**  
The oil pump on the robot is not circulating sufficient oil.
4. **"Why is the pump not circulating sufficient oil?"**  
The pump intake is clogged with metal shavings.
5. **"Why is the intake clogged with metal shavings?"**  
Because there is no filter on the pump.

Today, the method is used far beyond Toyota, and it’s particularly popular in the world of lean development. A lot of what we know at Buffer in implementing the 5 Whys has come from [The Lean Startup](#)’s Eric Ries, who does an amazing job describing the 5 Why’s in [these two](#) posts.

## How the 5 Whys process works

At our startup, we perform a “5 Whys” after something unexpected has occurred—and that means we perform them a lot! We keep a “5 Whys” folder in our team’s





Dropbox Paper account, and the folder has 20+ notes files and counting (not to mention the 5 Whys docs that might not be categorized into the folder). 'Fires' of various sizes are inevitable—and probably the only constant in the life of a startup.

We've held these discussions in every facet of Buffer, from engineering to happiness to marketing and more, and the same process holds true no matter whether the problem is technical or more human-based. Here's how Eric Ries explains:

**“Five Whys involves holding meetings immediately following the resolution of problems the company is facing. These problems can be anything: development mistakes, site outages, marketing program failures, or even internal missed schedules. Any time something unexpected happens, we could do some root cause analysis.”**

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**It's important to note that the purpose of the 5 whys isn't to place blame**, but rather to uncover the root cause of why something unexpected occurred. Additionally, it helps a team create small, incremental steps so that the same issue doesn't happen again (to anyone).

