



**Do you really
need to carry
out root cause
analysis for
everything?**

Let's say something goes wrong in your lab, like that QC fails on your least favourite test. Nobody likes mistakes, but you go ahead and fix it because it's the right thing to do. Problem solved!

And then a week later, the same thing happens again. And then again. Correcting the problem is now just part of the job, and it is your least favourite test after all. It's a bit annoying but really, there's nothing you can do. Or is there?

Using completely anecdotal evidence, we've compiled the top 10 reasons why someone wouldn't use Root Cause Analysis:

- * They like investigating the same incidents. It helps keep their skills sharp.
- * They find crisis management invigorating
- * They like placing blame
- * They enjoy talking to unhappy clients about quality issues
- * They like the buzz of a management investigation into their incident
- * They like being on the opposite spectrum of those 'best practice' businesses
- * They'd rather do things the hard way
- * They like visits from unhappy regulators after accidents. Meeting new people is fun!
- * They prefer to waste time implementing ineffective corrective actions
- * They like that feeling of hopelessness when they can't find a good answer.

That's not what happens here!

We're sure that none of these apply to your business. But we also understand that sometimes, root cause analysis can be pushed to one side when you're busy. And although it's not difficult, it can be time consuming.

That's why sometimes the symptoms are treated rather than the disease itself.

There are several techniques you can use to determine root cause. One of the most popular is the '5 whys' method. This involves asking at least five questions to drill down into an issue.

The reason this seems to be the most popular to implement is because it doesn't need any specialised resources or knowledge. Just a willingness to clearly define the issue and ask those questions.

Pick your team

Agonising over an issue on your own and trying to find solutions simply isn't effective. That's why you must assemble a team that has direct involvement with the process.

There must also be a moderator or facilitator who will steer the team to an outcome. This role is extremely important in the root cause analysis process. This person should have sufficient experience and be able to maintain quiet control over the discussion.

It need not be a member of staff. In fact, an external person could add enormous value to the process, especially if it's to sort out one of the bigger or more frequent problems.

As well as removing the burden from one particular staff member, they will be seen as completely neutral, having no agenda other than securing the best outcome.

What questions should you ask?

Before we start asking too many "why" questions, we first need to understand what has happened. In this stage of the root cause analysis process, we need to clearly focus on the issue at hand. It's helpful to begin by describing the event or issue, including any harm or negative outcomes that occurred. Then determine what the correct outcome should have been. From here you should be able to create a problem statement that the team agrees on.

There are many questions that could be asked at this stage. Some of these include:

- * Was there any deviation from the normal procedure? Explain the deviation.
- * Was the procedure described clearly through written guidelines or in staff training?
- * Were staffing levels adequate at the time of the incident?
- * Was there a defect, malfunction or misuse of equipment that contributed to the event?
- * Was the procedure carried out by regular staff familiar with the activity?
- * Were there any environmental factors that may have contributed to the incident?

You could also consider providing a list of questions to the team beforehand. This may help them clarify their thinking about the incident.

It may sound like a lot to do for what is a small problem, but if it is a persistent annoyance, it will be worth this investment.

Sorting through the feedback

Now we can start with the “whys”!

The key to success with this is to sort through the team’s responses and concentrate on those that are backed by facts. Removing the emotion from these responses may be a challenge for those directly involved.

Again, this is where the moderator’s role is critical. Their skills and abilities will be needed to keep the team on track. In addition, they should note other issues that crop up that may need to be raised separately or require further investigation outside the process of dealing with the problem at hand.

Time for action!

Once the discussion has been completed and the team agrees on the root cause, it’s corrective action

time. Decide on the best action(s) that will protect your process from the problem recurring.

Be sure everything has been documented and the people who need to do things are told what they need to do and by when.

You can turn the exercise into a bigger learning event for people across the organisation and provide a summary of the problem, causes and actions to all (relevant) staff. This will help staff understand how what can seem like little annoyances can be symptoms of a bigger problem and perhaps improve their troubleshooting skills.

It’s a good idea for the team to reconvene to examine the results of their actions and discuss the effectiveness (or otherwise) of the solutions. It also can give them a sense of closure.

The final word

No matter how careful or diligent people are, it’s possible that somewhere along the line, something will go wrong. Root cause analysis is the best way to ensure that these issues are the exception rather than the rule.

We run an excellent training course on root cause analysis where we explore the 5 whys and other techniques, and places are still available for the next session on 15 June.

If this date doesn’t suit you, we’re also taking Expressions of Interest for training later in the year and inhouse courses. Email info@masmanagementsystems.com.au and let us know your preferred dates.

On a more practical level, if you need support with running a Root Cause Analysis in your organisation, Maree would be pleased to help. She has extensive experience as a facilitator and can guide your team to the best outcomes.

To arrange a confidential discussion, phone Maree on 0411 540 709 or info@masmanagementsystems.com.au

Remember, you don’t have to do this alone!