



Stop Putting Band-Aids on It

*The Executive's Guide to
Finding The Real Root Cause*

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1. THE REAL PROBLEM

You know something's wrong. You just can't find it.

Your team is busy. Your managers are working hard. And the same problems keep coming back, every week, every quarter, like clockwork.

Customers are calling with complaints. Costs keep climbing. Morale is low. You've held the meetings, hired the consultants, updated the processes, and still, the problems return. So you patch them. You add a new policy. You send a memo. You put another band-aid on it and move on.

Here's what nobody has told you: **the problem you're fixing is not the problem.**

It's a symptom. And as long as you keep treating symptoms, the real problem, the root cause, keeps doing damage underneath the surface.

"Customers calling us daily with complaints isn't a problem. That's a symptom. The problem is somewhere else entirely, and until you find it, you're just putting band-aids on a wound that needs surgery."

John J. Murphy

After 38 years working inside organizations from Fortune 100s to the US military, training over 1,000 people at ADP alone, and running hundreds of rapid improvement events across 50+ countries, I've seen the same pattern everywhere:

Leadership teams treating symptoms while the root cause quietly destroys their business.

This guide will show you exactly how to stop. You'll learn the same tool I've taught to executives at ADP, Wiley, GSK, Raytheon, and dozens more, a fifth-grade simple, executive-level powerful technique called The Five Whys.



2. THE ANALOGY

The headache isn't a head problem.

Let me give you an analogy I use with every executive team I work with. It's so simple it sounds almost insulting, and then it changes how they see everything.

Imagine you have a recurring headache. It keeps coming back, week after week. The obvious solution is aspirin.

And the aspirin works, for a while. But the headache keeps returning because you're treating the symptom, not the cause. Even worse, you are now creating another problem.

A side effect. You are putting your liver and stomach at risk.

Here's what's actually happening when you ask why five levels deep:

WHY 1, The symptom

Question: *Why do I have a recurring headache?*

Answer: You're not getting enough oxygen to your brain.

WHY 2, Going deeper

Question: *Why aren't you getting enough oxygen?*

Answer: Poor circulation in your neck and inflammation.

WHY 3, Deeper still

Question: *Why do you have inflammation in your neck?*

Answer: You're favoring one side of your body, you might not even know it.

WHY 4, Closer now

Question: *Why are you favoring one side?*

Answer: Your hips are out of alignment.

WHY 5, The root cause

Question: *Why are your hips out of alignment?*

Answer: Because of an old injury you stopped thinking about years ago.

The point: No amount of aspirin will fix a hip problem. The same is true in your business. The complaint your customers are making is the headache. Your real problem is somewhere else entirely, and until you get there, you're just managing symptoms.



3. THE TOOL

The Five Whys: A fifth-grade tool with executive-level power.

The Five Whys was developed by Toyota, one of the most operationally excellent organizations in history. It's deceptively simple: when a problem appears, you ask "why" five levels deep, not across, but down.

Not "why did this department fail?" and "why did that department fail?" in parallel. You pick one thread and you follow it down until you hit the real cause, the one that, if you fix it, stops the problem from recurring.

"Any problem on the planet, if you drill down five levels, you get to ignorance as the root cause. We don't know any better. If we knew better, we'd do better. That's not an insult, it's a starting point."

John J. Murphy

At the fifth level, you almost always find the same thing: ignorance. Not laziness, not malice, just a gap in knowledge, a missing policy, a system that was never designed properly. That discovery is not a failure. It's where real change begins.

This is why I always start with executive education and alignment before running any improvement events.

Leaders know their functions, but they often don't see the whole business. The Five Whys gives them a way to see it together, from the same data, at the same time.

The result? Alignment happens without argument. You can't dispute facts. You can only bring better facts, and in 38 years, almost nobody ever has.

“It doesn’t make a lot of sense to solve problems inside a box when it is the box that is the problem.”

John J. Murphy



4. IN PRACTICE

Five Whys on a real business problem.

The scenario (a composite of real engagements):

A mid-size manufacturer. Customers calling daily about inaccurate orders. They are not receiving what they ordered. The team's response has been to add more customer service staff and apologize faster. The calls keep coming.

WHY 1, The complaint

Question: *Why are customers receiving inaccurate orders?*

Answer: Shipping and order intake aren't communicating, there's no standardized handoff between the two departments.

WHY 2, The process gap

Question: *Why is there no standardized handoff?*

Answer: The company is organized in departmental silos. Each team is measured on its own efficiency, not the customer's experience across the full value stream.

WHY 3, The structure

Question: *Why are teams only measured within their own silo?*

Answer: Leadership has never looked at the value stream end to end. Improvement events have been run inside individual departments, not across the stream.

WHY 4, The leadership gap

Question: *Why has leadership never mapped the full value stream?*

Answer: They were never trained to. Lean thinking and Operational Excellence were never part of their development. They're managing by function, not by flow.

WHY 5, The root cause

Question: *Why wasn't Lean thinking part of their development?*

Answer: Ignorance, they didn't know what they didn't know. The solution is executive education, alignment, and then systemic improvement across the value stream.

The fix that actually worked:

More customer service staff was never the answer.

The answer was executive alignment on Lean principles, followed by a cross-functional Kaizen event that redesigned the value stream in five days. The calls stopped, freeing up capacity for more value-added work. Customers were delighted.



5. WHY IT KEEPS HAPPENING

Why does root cause stay hidden so long?

In my 38 years of working with organizations from startups to Fortune 100s, I've found four reasons why the same problems recur, and why leadership teams almost never reach the real root cause on their own.

1. You're measuring the wrong things

When every department is measured on its own efficiency, nobody is accountable for what happens across the full value stream. The silos look efficient. The system is broken. One department processes twice as fast, and the output sits in a warehouse for three months waiting for the next operation. That's not efficiency. That's waste wearing the costume of performance.

2. You're managing by function, not by flow

Think of an orchestra. A hundred musicians, each brilliant in their own right, but nobody is playing the same song at the same time. Value is created across the stream, not within any single department. Until leaders can see the whole stream, from material in the door to the customer receiving value, they're conducting individual instruments instead of a symphony.

3. You're confusing symptoms with problems

Customers calling, morale dropping, costs climbing, these are symptoms, not problems. Treating symptoms as problems keeps leadership permanently reactive. Every fix creates temporary relief, then the symptom returns. The headache never goes away because nobody has looked at the hips.

4. Most 'improvement' happens in the wrong place

Organizations run efficiency projects inside silos, trying to speed up individual operations while the value stream connecting them stays broken. I've worked with companies that spent years optimizing departments that shouldn't exist at all. The problem wasn't how fast they worked. It was that what they were doing was waste.

"Most of the time in a business process, nothing is happening. The product is sitting. The email is waiting. The invoice is in an inbox. We call that white space, and it's where most of your cost and delay is hiding."

John J. Murphy



6. THE FRAMEWORK

From diagnosis to lasting change: DMAIC.

The Five Whys is one of several diagnostic tools that fit into a change methodology called DMAIC: Define, Measure, Analyze, Innovate, Control. This methodology pulls people together and aligns them as a team to fix the system and make sure it stays fixed.

D, Define

Map the current state end to end. Every touchpoint, every handoff, every person with their hands in the process. No assumptions, just what's actually happening, from material in the door to the customer receiving value.

M, Measure

Populate the map with indisputable facts and data. Lead time. Defect rate. Cost. Distance traveled. Touch points. This is where the picture gets uncomfortable, but discomfort based on facts creates alignment. This is where I've had senior executives say "that cannot be right" and then go get the data themselves, only to come back shaking their heads.

A, Analyze

This is where the Five Whys live. Run root cause analysis on the most critical undesirable effects (UDEs) revealed by the data. Write the problem statement: the root cause and the UDEs it creates. Now you know exactly what you're fixing, and why.

I, Innovate

Don't improve what should be eliminated. The original model used "Improve." I use "Innovate" now because improvement assumes the process is worth keeping. Sometimes the right answer is to delete or redesign entirely. By Friday of a Kaizen week, the new process is already in place, not planned, not proposed, done.

C, Control

Lock it in with policy, standard work, visual controls, and mistake-proofing (poka-yoke). The change has to sustain without John Murphy in the room. If it requires ongoing heroics to maintain, it's not in stable and control. It's managed. There's a difference.

Real results from the field:

- Lead time cut in half
- Process steps reduced from 100 to 40
- Touch points reduced by 50%
- \$300 million in raw material inventory eliminated
- New process in place by Friday, not by next quarter
- Net Promoter Scores improved within weeks



7. TRY IT NOW

Run the Five Whys on a problem in your business, right now.

Pick one recurring problem in your organization.

Something that's come up before. Something your team has already "fixed" at least once. That's your starting symptom. Now ask why, five levels deep.

The Five Whys Template

WHY 1, The symptom:

What everyone sees and reacts to. What are the visible undesirable effects?

WHY 2, The process issue:

What's breaking in the actual work? Where does the process fail?

WHY 3, The structural cause:

What design, system, measurement or structure is behind the breakdown?

WHY 4, The leadership or accountability gap:

Who isn't seeing this? What's missing at the leadership level?

WHY 5, The root cause:

The knowledge gap, policy gap, or missing system that allowed everything above it to happen.

Remember: the first answer that comes up is almost never the root cause. It's just the first layer. Keep asking. The discomfort of going deeper is exactly where the value lives.

John J. Murphy

John J. Murphy is the founder and CEO of Venture Management Consultants, Inc. (1988). He is an award-winning author of 20 books, a keynote speaker recognized by MSN as a Top 10 Leading Speaker in 2025, and a management consultant selected by Selling Power as a Leading Consultant in 2025. He is also an esteemed faculty member of FUEL, Inc. and a certified professional expert (CPE) by the Cathcart Institute.



John has delivered services to some of the world's leading organizations including ADP, BMW, Chase, the CIA, Eli Lilly, GE, GM, GSK, Hilton, Merck, Perrigo, Prudential, Raytheon, and the US Navy.

As an educator, John has trained thousands of people from over 50 countries, including Fortune 500 executives, military leaders, and Lean Six Sigma black belts. He has shared the stage with General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Zig Ziglar, Denis Waitley, Jim Rohn, and Anthony Robbins.

A graduate of the University of Notre Dame (BBA Finance) and a former Notre Dame quarterback, John brings the same discipline, precision, and team-first philosophy from the football field into every organization he works with.

What Others Say

"You remain one of the most inspiring people I have ever worked with. I use the lessons you taught me every day." **Phil Meer, CEO, SciSure (former ADP)**

"Let John Murphy be your guide through the minefields that accompany any change effort." **Dr. Ken Blanchard, co-author, The One Minute Manager**

"In my 36+ years of work experience, John is one of those rare finds that possess a combination of skills, character, and courage needed to help people improve their organizational performance." **Mike Simmons, Continuous Improvement Consultant**



YOUR NEXT STEP

Ready to find the real problem?

If this resonated, if you read through those Five Whys and found yourself thinking about a problem in your own organization that keeps coming back, let's talk.

Even if we don't work together, I'm happy to walk you through the Five Whys on your specific situation. No agenda. No pitch. Just a conversation, 15 minutes, no commitment.

Book a Free 15-Minute Call

Also available:

- **John's AI Twin**, Practice the Five Whys with John's AI coaching platform, available 24/7 on **FUEL**
- **20 Books**, Explore John's full library of books on Change Mastery, Leadership, Operational Excellence, and Inner Peace at **johnjmurphy.org/books**
- **Fearless Podcast**, Weekly conversations on leadership, change, and inner peace. Search "Fearless with John" on YouTube or your preferred podcast platform