

MONDAY MESSAGE

Invest, Influence, Impact



Why Do We Get These Results – **Identifying Root Causes**

Could there be anything more unattractive and aggravating than bird droppings in a nice public place, or for that matter, on the deck attached to my house? There is an old story told about a time in the late 1980's about how bird droppings were ruining the monuments in Washington, D.C. at a rapid pace. The story is based upon true historical events and is supported by research conducted by a man named Don Messermith, a professor from the University of Maryland. Dr. Messermith used a process called the “5 Whys” to determine that the root cause of the problem was not the excessive cleaning with harsh chemicals, but instead the abundant presence of insects at night around the monuments. So, instead of trying to create new processes for cleaning or develop new and improved cleaning detergents, the solution was changing the

lighting around the monuments. The lighting change drove away the insects and this drove away the excessive spiders who ate the insects. Birds left because there were fewer insects and spiders to eat resulting in fewer bird messes to clean.

Albert Einstein once said, “If I only had an hour to solve a problem, I would spend 55 minutes studying the problem and 5 minutes developing solutions.” We can learn a great and powerful lesson here in the pursuit of solving problems within the halls and classrooms of our schools. Spending time getting to the root cause is never time wasted, and ironically, can end up preventing us from actually wasting time and a lot of money. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has coined a term called “solutionitis” to explain when schools and districts do not actually take the time to find the root cause of problems, but instead drive initiative after initiative to improve an outcome. If we expect to solve problems and improve at scale we must invest in getting to the root of the problem. Here are a few tools educators can use to help do just that.

[5 Whys](#) – This model is based upon asking the question “why” 5 times to find the root cause of a problem. It generally takes five iterations of asking this question to arrive at the real cause, but there is no harm for the facilitator to ask the question fewer times or more times if necessary.

[Ishikawa Fishbone Diagram](#) – The fishbone diagram is a cause and effect graphical representation of potential sources to a specific problem. The graphic looks like a fish skeleton with the specific problem at the head and causes of the problem making up the spine of the fish. Originally, each bone of the spine was supposed to address one of 6 M's (man, method, machine, measurement, materials, and mother nature), however, teams are encouraged to consider other categories of problem causes.

[Empathy Interviews](#) – This is possibly the most underutilized of all root cause tools. In fact, you have a hard time finding it as a supported methodology. We could debate whether it is a process itself or a way to support some other root cause process. Regardless, it is mentioned here because educational leaders can gain so much knowledge by simply asking the people closest to the problem what they see and how they feel about an issue.

As educators, we are in the business of learning, and one very important aspect about learning is we actually learn with and through others. Therefore, in our pursuit of solving problems and attempting to get to the root causes of those issues it's not only important to have a good process for getting there, but to compel the people around us

to join in the pursuit. Maybe one root cause of our educational problems today is the lack of commitment to the right problem solving process that utilizes the collective knowledge, skills and abilities of the people.