VIS-IT™ Technique for
Problem Solving

THE FIVE-WHYS

The objective for using the Five-Whys technique is to get as close as possible to the "root" causes of a problem. This is accomplished by continually seeking to find "higher level" causes of a problem.

As with any problem solving activity, it is useful to distinguish between a cause of a problem and a symptom of a problem. A symptom is a visible indicator, or outward sign, of a problem. Symptoms accompany a problem, but are not the "operational" cause of a problem. For example, a company may see symptoms that their market share is declining. These *symptoms* might include the following:

- They lag behind the sales growth rate of their major competitor.
- Its products are featured less often than previously in the trade press.
- Good people are leaving to seek better opportunities with other companies.

Thus, based on the symptoms that can be observed, the company has deduced that it is facing a significant problem: declining market share.

Based on other idea processing techniques, like Thinking with Hexagons, the leadership may have come up with these *first-level, direct causes* for the decline in market share:

- A decrease in the percentage of sales from new products.
- A delay in filling several openings in the sales department.
- A reduction in the marketing and advertising budget.
- A growing number of dissatisfied customers, complaining about service.
- A consistent erosion of the R&D budget, leading to the loss of several good engineers.
- Prices that are increasing faster than the industry average.

However, the Five-Whys technique suggests that it is not enough to identify only first-level causes. Experience has shown that it is important to get the group's thinking to go to higher-level causes, and eventually find the "root" causes.

The VIS-IT Five Whys Technique uses the stimulating geometry of hexagons to help groups find higher level and root causes. Here is how it works.

Step 1: Conduct a *Thinking with Hexagons* session to address a Focus Question similar to the following: "We believe we are faced with a significant problem: the decline of our market share. What are the causes, issues, symptoms, or other factors we must successfully address to solve this problem?"

Step 2: After response ideas have been generated and captured on hexagons, arrange the hexagons into several clusters of ideas that seem to belong together.

Step 3: In each cluster, remove the symptom ideas and set them aside, leaving only the cause ideas behind.

Step 4: Examine the clusters containing cause ideas, and then agree on a cluster label that will serve as one of the first-level causes for the problem. Write those first-level cause labels on blue hexagons.

Step 5: Write the Problem Statement on white hexagon, and position it in the center of a whiteboard or large posting space. Position as many as six of the first-level causes around the Problem Statement white hexagon. See the example below.
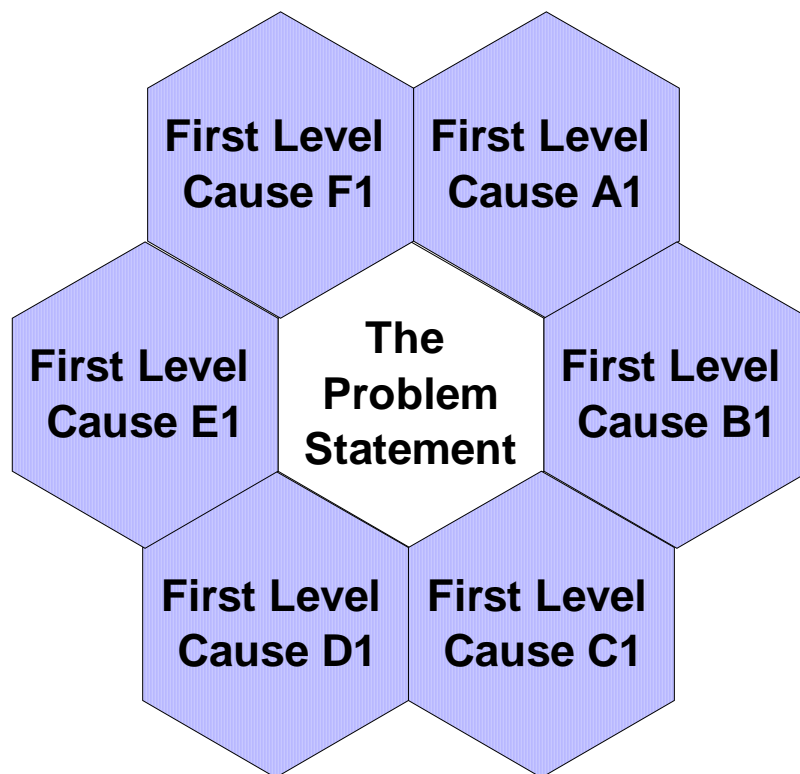
Step 6: Beginning with first-level Cause A1, ask the following question: "Why is A1 a cause for the problem?" The answer will be written on a green hexagon, labeled A2. Then go to Cause B1, and ask why it is a cause for the problem, and label the answer B2. Continue in this manner until all the other first-level causes have second-level causes positioned next to them as shown on the next page.
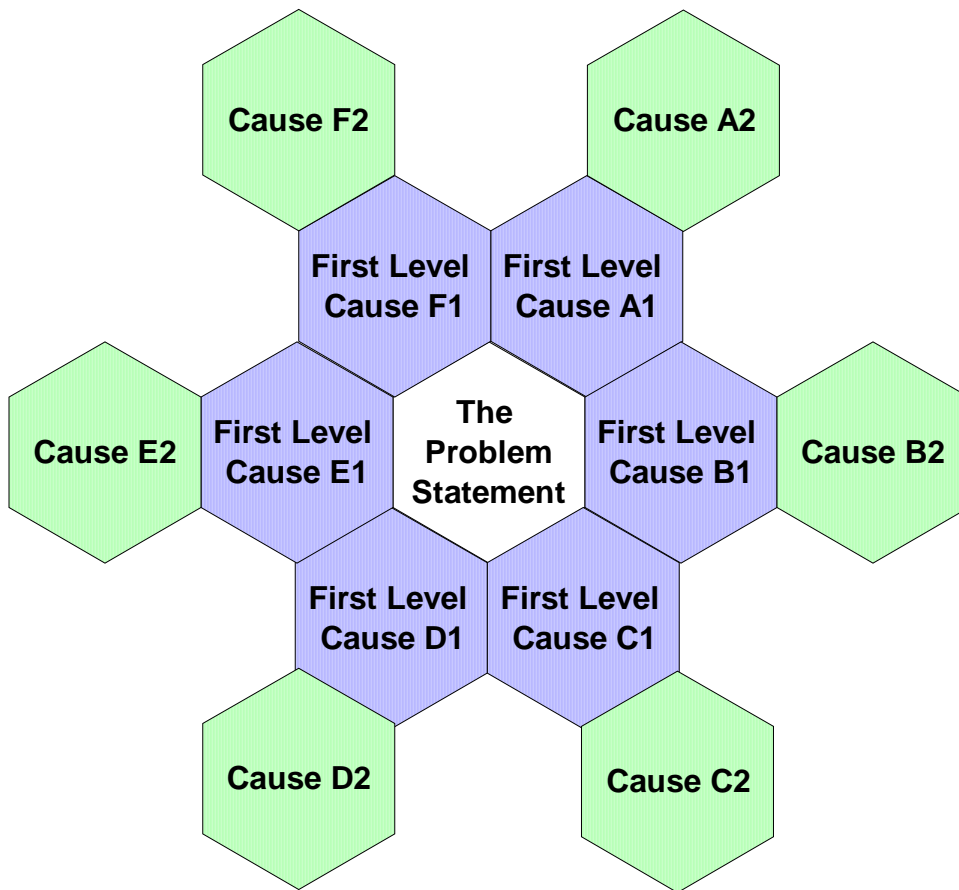
Step7: Continue on, beginning with Cause A2, to get to the third level causes by asking: "Why is Cause A2 a cause for the problem?" Label the answer as A3, and position it next to A2. Go on to each of the other second-level causes, and ask the same sort of question, and record the replies as level-three causes.

Step 8: Proceed as above until no more causes can be found and, at least, try to get to the fifth level for each causal string, A-F. A completed pattern might look like the example on the next page.

The final Five Whys Diagram

Step 9: As the higher level causes are developed, and following the exercise illustrated above, look for causes that appear in more than one place in the diagram. A cause that appears several times is likely to be a root cause candidate.

About Thinking Tools LLC (formerly Vision Works LLC)

The PURPOSE of Thinking Tools LLC is to develop and offer highly effective team-support tools and methods for innovative thinking, facilitation and training. Our VIS-IT tools focus thinking to generate greater insight, creativity and problem-solving capabilities! Our VIS-IT techniques make teams more productive! Together, our products and methods enable anyone to conduct Better meetings. On purpose. Please share your experiences and comments on this technique at www.facebook.com/thinkingtoolsnet.