

FIELD GUIDE TOOL #8

The Root Cause Worksheet

Chapter 8: Stop Asking Who Failed

DATE _____ COMPLETED BY _____

SITUATION _____

Use this tool whenever a problem has surfaced more than once. Work through the five stages before deciding on an intervention.

When to use it. Best used whenever the same type of problem recurs.

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Stage 1: Name the Pattern

Before diagnosing causes, be precise about what you are looking at. A named pattern is easier to trace than a vague frustration.

Question	Your Answer
What is the specific type of problem?	
How many times has this occurred in the last ninety days?	
What function or process does it involve?	
What is the downstream impact when it occurs?	
Is the impact consistent, or does it vary?	

Stage 2: Run the Five Whys

Start with the presenting event and ask why five times, or until you reach a structural condition. Write each answer in sequence.

	Response
Event: What specifically happened?	
Why #1: Why did this happen?	
Why #2: Why did that happen?	
Why #3: Why did that happen?	
Why #4: Why did that happen?	
Why #5: Why did that happen?	
Root condition identified:	

Stage 3: Classify the Structural Cause

The root condition you identified almost certainly belongs to one of five structural categories. Identifying which one determines what kind of solution is needed.

Category	Does this apply? Notes
Role Clarity: unclear ownership, overlapping accountability, gaps in responsibility	
Decision Rights: ambiguous authority, approval bottlenecks, unclear escalation paths	
Workflow Design: poor handoffs, missing steps, redundant reviews, unclear sequencing	
Metrics and Incentives: measuring or rewarding the wrong behavior, misaligned targets	
Feedback Loops: delayed detection, missing review cadence, no leading indicators	

Stage 4: Assess Impact and Frequency

Not all structural causes are equally consequential. This stage forces a prioritization decision.

Question	Your Assessment
How frequently does this structural condition produce problems? (Daily / Weekly / Monthly)	
What is the severity of impact when it does? (High / Medium / Low)	
What is the cumulative cost over 12 months if unaddressed?	
Does addressing this require cross-functional coordination?	
What is the effort required to address it? (High / Medium / Low)	
Priority assessment (High / Medium / Defer):	

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Stage 5: Design the Structural Response

Based on your classification and prioritization, define a response that addresses the cause rather than the symptom.

Element	Your Response
What structural change will address the root condition?	
What needs to stop in order to make room for this?	
Who owns the redesign?	
What leading indicator will tell you if the change is working?	
What is the review date to assess impact?	
What performance conversation (if any) is still needed?	

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Before finalizing your response, confirm:

- ☐ You have identified a structural condition, not just an individual action.
- ☐ Your response addresses the condition, not just the symptom.
- ☐ You have named a leading indicator to track effectiveness.
- ☐ You have set a review date.
- ☐ You have been explicit about what work will stop to create capacity for this.