



Root Cause Analysis: Identifying Opportunities for Systems Change

Overview

Some problems are simple. You roll over a pot hole and your bike chain breaks, you have the tool and the knowledge to fix it, you are soon on your way. The solution is easily learned and repeatable. Cause and effect are immediate and obvious. Some problems are complicated, your car won't start, you tried jumping your battery but that's not the problem. So, you call a mechanic, who, through trial and error will fix your car. The solution required a professional, the cause and effect were not as evident, but the problem can be solved. Some problems are complex, such as homelessness. The homeless in your community today can be housed but that solution is only a short-term fix. The causes and effects are multiple and separated over time, sometimes decades. Critical stakeholders have different perspectives as to why the problem exists and how it can be solved. There is no one solution, there may never be a solution, just opportunities to make things a bit better. This is the challenge of a complex problem and systems change.

System level change requires a deliberative process that incorporates multiple stakeholders, perspectives, barriers and opportunities. Systemic problems are ingrained and cause and effect are separated over time and therefore hard to link. And all too often we rely upon our own or a small pool of expert knowledge to find answers.

For example: a predominantly white women's voting organization, let's call them WeVote, decides that it needs to diversify. It spends the next year developing a JEDI policy that is disseminated to all its chapters. Five years later, WeVote is still predominantly white. In response the organization hires a diversity trainer for all of its chapters and members. Five years later, WeVote is still predominantly white. So, the organization hires a marketing firm to reframe the nonprofit, highlighting the few members of color in its media, brochures and promotions. Five years later...you guessed it. Systemic problems run deep. They have multiple causes that change over time, thus they are never solved but they can be improved upon.

The following presents the EFCWest approach to Root Cause Analysis Training for Systems Change. A sample agenda follows the training discussion. Also attached is a presentation sample of Training Session #1, Parts 1 & 2 which includes problem identification (illegal dumping in East Oakland) and the Five Why Exercise using PESTEL to drill down on potential root causes.



Training Sessions

All sessions below include presentations and breakout work.

Session 1, Part 1: What's the Problem?

Session 1 is a learning session to explore problem types (simple, complicated, complex) and to better understand how to identify our approaches based on the issue we are trying to address. This is followed by an introduction to systems thinking, and identifying the variables and feedback loops within a system.

Outcome: By the end of this session participants should be grounded in the basic concepts of systems thinking, which will enable them to further explore complex issues through root cause analysis.

Session 1, Part 2: Root Cause Analysis and the Five Whys

In this Session the Root Cause Analysis and PESTEL tools are introduced. With Root Cause, we take a simple approach and ask **why** a problem exists. But rather than stopping at our first answer we drill down using Five Whys (or more or less depending on the answers). For example, going back to WeVote, our women's voting organization, the problem is the lack of DEI. Our first answer as to why we lack diversity may very well be that we have no diversity policy. We could stop there and implement a policy, but to no effect. So instead, we drill down on the first and following answers until we arrive at what we believe might be a root cause.

- Why don't we have a diversity policy?
- Because we just identified it as an issue.
- Why did we just identify it as an issue?
- Because we are a predominantly white organization.
- Why are we predominantly white?
- Because our leadership is completely white.
- Why is our leadership completely white?
- Because the organization was founded by white women who invited their own social set to join. That practice still remains, thus creating a white supremacist legacy.

Assuming our final why, our *root cause*, is correct, it becomes obvious that writing a diversity policy, providing diversity training and hiring a marketing firm will not be effective in changing the legacy of white supremacy within the WeVote system.

In addition to the five why process, we will also use PESTEL to ensure a systemic view. PESTEL is a guideline to help analyze complex problems and stands for **P**olitical, **E**nvironmental, **S**ocial, **T**echnological, **E**conomic and **L**egal/Regulatory. By using PESTEL to analyze the lack of diversity, we



don't just stop at one subject answer, but instead ask: is there a political reason (or reasons) why we have no diversity? Is there an economic reason why we have no diversity? And so on.

Outcome: By the end of this session participants will have identified root causes for their own organizations or community.

Session 2: Flipping Your Problem Into an Opportunity

In this session, participants will grid their root causes and identify the problems where they have the capacity and the leverage, to potentially change the system. They will then write full problem statements and flip those problems into opportunities to be pursued.

Example: After drilling down and identifying multiple root causes, "solutions" are ranked to help participants decide where they have the leverage to make change and where they cannot. In some cases, a root cause may require changes within the system that an organization cannot affect. For example, if a root cause is capitalism, an organization will probably decide that they do not have the tools (at least not right now) to change our economic system.

However, let's return to WeVote and their root cause: the organization was founded by white women who invited their own social set to join, a practice that remains today. WeVote believes that they can tackle that root cause and in so doing, flip their problem into an opportunity:

WeVote has the opportunity to reach out to diverse organizations to ask them to join and/or partner with WeVote, and to elevate the few women of color into positions of leadership in order to attract new and diverse members.

Outcome: Participants will have identified opportunities to test for their own organizations and communities.

Session 3: Identifying and Testing Assumptions

Testing assumptions is the key to accessing system knowledge and driving change. Multiple assumptions will be inherent within our root causes. In this exercise, participants will identify their assumptions and map a plan to test them. They will also identify the stakeholder voices that are "missing," and should be interviewed for the analysis so there is a more systemic view of the opportunities. Following this session, participants will build their own homework assignment to test their assumptions. They will have several weeks to apply research, hold interviews and use other approaches to refine their opportunity accordingly.

Example: Within the WeVote opportunity there are several assumptions that need to be tested through research, stakeholder interviews and outreach.



- Assumption #1: WeVote can successfully identify and reach out to diverse organizations
- Assumption #2: Members of diverse organizations would be interested in joining WeVote
- Assumption #3: WeVote has something to offer both diverse organizations and diverse members
- Assumption #4: Diverse members within WeVote are interested in accepting positions of leadership and working to attract a more diverse membership

Outcome: Participants will have mapped out opportunities to test and research for their organizations and communities.

Session 4: SWOT

Once the assumptions have been tested and the opportunity refined, based on stakeholder feedback and other research, participants prepare a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) on their potential project. Most importantly, they will better understand what internal weaknesses exist and what external threats may act as barriers to success. Working together, teams will identify solutions and approaches to mitigate these obstacles.

Outcome: Participants will have identified critical obstacles to success.

Session 5: Refining the Opportunity & Project Planning with Backcasting

In this final training session, opportunities will be refined and participants will use backcasting to develop an action plan to address their root cause and successfully identify strategic targets or policies for systems level change that will address racial and economic injustice.

Outcome: Participants will have used backcasting to develop an implementation plan. Backcasting is a tool that allows participants to start with the goal (or goals) they expect to have achieved at the end of a specified planning period (usually 1-5 years). From that point of success, users then work their way backwards in 1 to 6-month increments (depending on the plan period) to determine what must be implemented in order to reach their goals.

Session 6: Team Convening and Sharing

Teams come together to share and present their experience and learning, and identify next steps.



Root Cause Analysis for Complex Issues Sample Virtual Teaching Agenda	
DAY 1: Root Cause	
Check-In, Networking	8:30 – 9:00
Intro and Issue Identification	9:00 – 9:15
Presentation: Root Cause Analysis Presentation, Q&A/Discussion	9:15 – 10:00
Screen Break	
Exercise: Root Cause Analysis	10:10 – 12:05
Day 2: Finding Your Leverage Point	
Q&A/Feedback with Facilitators	8:30 – 9:00
Exercise: Root Cause/Report Out and Group Input	9:00 – 10:00
Presentation: Understanding Your Leverage Points and Using a Prioritization Grid	10:00 – 10:25
Screen Break	
Exercise: Identifying Leverage Points and Using the Grid	10:35 – 11:20
Presentation: Creating Problem & Opportunity Statements	11:20 – 11:35
Exercise: Writing a Problem Statement	11:35 – 12:05
Day 3: Problem to Opportunity	
Q&A/feedback with facilitators	8:30 – 9:00
Exercise: Writing Problem Statement (Continued)	9:00 – 9:25
Presentation: Flipping a Problem to Opportunity	9:25 – 9:40
Exercise: Writing an Opportunity Statement	9:40 – 10:20
Screen Break	
Presentation: Identifying and Testing Assumptions	10:30 – 10:45
Exercise: Identifying and Testing Assumptions	10:45 – 12:30
Homework Discussion and Google Drive Set up	12:30 – 1:00
Day 4: SWOT	
Q&A/feedback with Facilitators	8:30 – 9:00
Report Out: Homework Review and Learnings and Refined Opportunities	9:00 – 10:00
Exercise: Refining Opportunities	10:00 – 10:20



Root Cause Analysis for Complex Issues Sample Virtual Teaching Agenda	
Screen Break	10:20 – 10:30
Exercise: Preparing a SWOT for the Opportunity	10:30 – 11:00
Report Out: Targeting Weaknesses and Threats and Next Steps	11:30 – 12:00
Day 5: Backcasting	2:45 – 3:00
Q&A/feedback with Facilitators	8:30 – 9:00
Report Out: Refined Opportunities	9:00 – 10:00
Presentation: Backcasting	10:00 – 10:20
Screen Break	10:20 – 10:30
Exercise: Backcasting Your Opportunity	10:30 – 11:30
Report Out: Milestones and Implementation	11:30 – 12:00
Day 6: Team Convening and Sharing	2:45 – 3:00
Networking	8:30 – 9:00
Report Outs: Team Presentations	9:00 – 10:20
Screen Break	10:20 – 10:30
Report Outs: Team Presentations	10:30 – 11:30
Final Thoughts and Next Steps: Brainstorm	11:30 – 12:00