



Why You Need to Ask Why

By Mitch Ditkoff

Some years ago, there was a big problem at one of America's most treasured monuments — the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC.

Simply put, birds — in huge numbers — were pooping all over it, which made visiting the place a very unpleasant experience.

Attempts to remedy the situation caused even bigger problems, since the harsh cleaning detergents being used were damaging the Memorial.

Fortunately, some of the National Parks managers assigned to the case began asking why — as in **“Why was the Jefferson Memorial so much more of a target for birds than any of the other memorials?”**

A little bit of investigation revealed the following:

- The birds were attracted to the Jefferson Memorial because of the abundance of spiders — a gourmet treat for birds.
- The spiders were attracted to the Memorial because of the abundance of midges (insects) that were nesting there.
- And the midges were attracted to the Memorial because of the light.

Midges, it turns out, like to procreate in places where the light is just so — and because the lights were turned on, at the Jefferson Memorial, one hour before dark, it created the kind of mood lighting that midges went crazy for.

So there you have it: The midges were attracted to the light. The spiders were attracted to the midges. The birds were attracted to the spiders. And the National Parks workers, though not necessarily attracted to the bird poop, were attracted to getting paid — so they spent a lot of their time (and taxpayer money) cleaning the Memorial.

How did the situation resolve? Very simply.

After reviewing the curious chain of events that led up to the problem, the decision was made to wait until dark before turning the lights on at the Jefferson Memorial.

That one-hour delay was enough to ruin the mood lighting for the midges, who then decided to have midge sex somewhere else.

No midges, no spiders. No spiders, no birds. No birds, no poop. No poop, no need to clean the Jefferson Memorial so often. Case closed.

Now, consider what “solutions” might have been forthcoming if those curious National Parks managers did not stop and ask why:

1. Hire more workers to clean the Memorial
2. Ask existing workers to work overtime
3. Experiment with different kinds of cleaning materials
4. Put bird poison all around the memorial
5. Hire hunters to shoot the birds
6. Encase the entire Jefferson Memorial in Plexiglas
7. Move the Memorial to another part of Washington
8. Close the site to the general public

Technically speaking, each of the above “solutions” was a possible approach — but at great cost, inconvenience, and with questionable results.

They were, shall we say, not exactly elegant solutions.

Now, think about your business... your company... your life.

What problems are you facing that could be approached differently simply by asking why.... and then why again... and then why again.. until you get to the core of the issue?

Think about it. If you don't, you may just end up solving the wrong problem.

The Five Whys Technique

1. Name a problem you're having
2. Ask why it's happening
3. Get an answer
4. Then why about that
5. Get an answer
6. Then ask why about that — and so on, five times

Mitch Ditkoff is the co-founder and president of Idea Champions, an innovation consultancy headquartered in Woodstock, NY. Why? Because that's what he wanted to do after he stopped being a speechwriter in 1986. Why? Because he realized, after a lot of soul searching, that creativity is suppressed in most organizations. Why? Because most business leaders, regardless of how much they claim that innovation is one of their top priorities, have a low tolerance for the ambiguity that accompanies the creative process. Why? Because their Boards of Directors are addicted to short-term results and will eventually fire any senior leader who doesn't deliver quick profits. Why? Because most of the people who sit on a Board of Directors bought expensive homes in their 20's and were saddled with big mortgages when they should have been hitch hiking in faraway places, reading the Tao Teh Ching, or volunteering in an old age home.