

Tip Sheet: The Elevator Speech and the Five Whys

The Elevator Speech

The Elevator Speech is a process you can use in many places in your life. When you are **learning something new** and **need to be able to explain it to someone else**, the Elevator Speech helps you **clarify your own thinking**, and to **design a clear, concise way to express yourself to others**. It can describe a program, a process, a product, an event, or many other things in daily life.

An effective Elevator Speech can be delivered **in the time it takes to get on the average elevator, ride to a different floor, and get off** (30 to 45 seconds).

The Elevator Speech **answers the Journalistic Questions** (who, what, when, where, why, how, and how well). An effective speech also **shows that the speaker has explored the deeper meanings** of the subject the speech is about. **Asking yourself the "Five Why's"** before you write your speech can help you explore the deeper meanings of your subject.

The Five Whys

To explore the deeper meanings in any assumption, **ask the question "why" five times in a row**; each new "why" question **answers the previous "why" question**.

Asking this question at least five times reveals the deeper reasons or "root causes" under any answer we might give. Use this technique to explore deeper meanings, and dig under assumptions, opinions, or actions.

EXAMPLE:

Younger students don't like hearing that they have to pass a test in order to graduate from high school. Here's a typical exchange between an older and younger high school student:

1. Q: Why do you think you have to take the test?
A: To show that I've learned the skills.
2. Q: And why do you need to show you know the skills?
A: So I can get a job.

3. Q: And why do you think it's important to have a job?
A: So I can feed my family and take care of myself.
4. Q: And why is that important?
A: So I'm not a "burden."
5. Q: And why does that matter?
A: Because I want to live in where everyone does their own part, and can take care of themselves and others.

HINTS:

Asking people the same question five times in a row can come across as annoying or challenging. It's good to tell people that you are about to do an exercise to get to the deeper meanings of a subject before you ask your first "why." Try to keep in mind the deeper meanings in mind, and ask clarifying questions along the way, as you lead students through this set of questions or inquiry. An example of a clarifying question is: "When you say 'burden,' what do have in mind?"

When people try to use this technique and go off track, it's usually because they say "why else?" or "what's another reason?" instead of asking "why" *about the answer they just heard*. One hint is to start your second question with the word "and."

Source: OSPI Student Engagement Initiative

Elevator Speech compiled from National Points of Light Foundation and other sources.

Five Whys compiled from conversations with T. Stensager and materials originally from R. Ross, cited by P. Senge (1994)