Make Practicing Less Frustrating With the 5 Whys Technique

by Dr. Noa Kageyama ·

It seems that every child goes through a phase in toddlerhood where they respond to everything you say with the question “why?”

I’m not sure if they do this because they genuinely want to know why Target closes at 10pm, or why they can’t skip school on their birthday, or why Daddy does not like eating fermented soybeans. Or if they simply enjoy watching us squirm and get increasingly frustrated.

Annoying as the never-ending whys can be, the question “why” is actually a useful tool in the practice room. Haven’t you ever gotten discouraged about a passage that you just don’t seem to be capable of playing? A note that never speaks right? A shift that is frustratingly inconsistent?

Sometimes the right questions can make all the difference in the world, and “why” is a pretty good place to start.

How so?

Cause and effect

Every cracked note, squeak, crunch, missed shift, and intonation glitch has an underlying cause.

As obvious a statement as that might be, when we struggle with something that is challenging, it’s easy to forget this and just conclude “I suck” or “I can’t do this.”

These statements might feel very true in the moment, but the problem is that they’re something of a dead end when it comes to finding way to improve. I mean, what is the solution for “I suck?” Play it again, but don’t suck this time?

Though critical statements like this naturally and automatically pop into our stream of thoughts, they only leave us feeling discouraged, and more likely to give up and question our abilities.

The 5 whys

Rather than letting the tricky section get you down, try experimenting with a technique from the business world called the “5 Whys” that could spare you some frustration and discouragement.

The 5 Whys technique is based on the premise that underlying the missed notes or other technical glitches you are struggling with, is a root cause. That there is something you are doing (or not doing) that produces the undesirable result you are getting out of your instrument – but which may not be immediately apparent.

And when it comes to creating a recipe for frustration, there’s nothing quite like diving in to fix the problem without first taking a moment to identify the underlying cause.

As one of my advisors in grad school liked to say, “If you misdiagnose the problem, you’re probably going to misdiagnose the solution.”

Often, “diagnosing” the problem is not nearly as difficult as you might think. And once you’ve identified the root cause, you will be able to identify the solution – and once you’ve got the solution, frustration recedes into the background, and you’re back on track, being productive in the practice room.

## Focus on solutions, not problems

Say you cracked a note, and the voice in your head says “I suck.”

The first step is to shift your focus away from “I suck,” and instead direct your line of questioning to “I cracked the C.”

Beginning with the question “Why did I crack the C?”, keep asking the question “why?” until you arrive at the root technical cause of the cracked note. It may not even take you 5 whys. It might only take 2 or 3. Or it may take 7.

So what did you do that resulted in the cracked note? Did you tighten up? Forget to do something important with your breathing or technique? Maybe you were thinking about one thing, when you should have been focused on something else? Or was it fatigue? Lack of preparation or proper warm-up?

Once you have the answer, it’s just a matter of implementing the solution. The solution may not be an instantaneous fix of course, but at least you are headed in the right direction, focused on solutions, instead of putting yourself in a corner, beating yourself up about the problem.

**The one-sentence summary**

“Every solution to every problem is simple. It’s the distance between the two where the mystery lies.” ~Derek Landy