



What is a Root Cause?

There are many "Root Cause Analysis" methods, procedures, and approaches on the market today. None of these methods define "root causes." They say they do, but they do not.

The people that develop Root Cause Analysis methods, as well as those who practice these methods, have confused one another. **No-one can agree on what a "root cause" is, and yet most people say they're defining "root causes."** Saying it differently, everyone says they do "Root Cause Analysis" these days, and yet everyone is doing something different. Think about it..., hundreds of thousands of people all over the world are doing "Root Cause Analysis," with few people having the same understanding of what it is. Few other pursuits in life exhibit such a variation in understanding. This should alarm everyone. The phrase "Root Cause Analysis" has become problematical.

The Problem with Root Cause Analysis

Root Cause Analysis has become whatever people want it to be. There are so many variations of Root Cause Analysis these days that it has become almost meaningless. Root Cause Analysis is no longer being taught by Failsafe because we have deemed it an overused, little-understood, and inappropriately applied phrase. Beware of those who say they do "Root Cause Analysis." Question them. Ask them what they mean by "root cause." If you do, you'll see the problem.

Although the general pursuit of a "root cause understanding" seems ultimately worthy, business people do not appear to want to pursue this understanding. This might be because when they pursue "the cause of the cause of the cause..." they quickly find themselves addressing things that appear to be outside their control. Inquiries of this sort begin to question previous things like, "how Joe was raised as a child." Even more, the way Joe's parents and then grandparents were raised can easily become "causal factors," as well as many other cultural and societal issues of each age. This "cause of the cause..." pursuit appears to be never-ending, and in-the-limit would seem to take an investigation back to "the beginning of time" (literally).

The cause of the cause of the cause of the cause.... Please ask yourself where this questioning would take you. True Root Cause Analyses will force you to look beyond your own organization, and into things like local culture, family situations, and national



mindsets. But each of these things are, in turn, also caused by something. It is an undeniable fact of life that things today are caused by things that happened "yesterday." Since each layer happened PRIOR TO the one before, the Root Cause of all our problems must be at the beginning of time. Think about it.

Because we do not intend to trace our problems to "the beginning of time", we choose other ending-points for our inquiries. Even more, we choose what kinds of things to look for, and by default, what kinds of things to ignore. Each Root Cause Analysis consulting company has chosen to pursue different kinds of issues, in different ways – each of them calling their product "Root Cause Analysis."

Companies hire these consultants to train their people in "Root Cause Analysis." Typically, after being trained, most companies "pick and choose" what they want to embrace (from amongst the consultants' advice). Everyone involved, from the consultant to the trained company, to the individuals within the trained companies have made choices: "this is the depth I'm willing to probe; these are the kinds of things I'm willing to ask; this is how far I'm willing to take the inquiry." Hundreds of thousands of people all over the world are doing "Root Cause Analysis," based on millions of limiting choices – splintering, diluting, and confounding the endeavor called "Root Cause Analysis." A few years ago, an 850-member web-based forum, with Root Cause Analysis professionals from all over the world, tried to define "what is Root Cause Analysis." They could not come to a consensus! Everyone is doing Root Cause Analysis, yet no-one agrees on what it is.

This present situation is absurd (at best), and deadly (at worst).

A Potentially Deadly Situation

In today's world, where most people have much more to do than they have time to do it in, few people spend much time thinking about "why things go wrong." When people are forced to start doing root cause analysis (usually because of governmental mandates), they try to fit it into everything else they are already doing. Typically, people search the internet or talk to contacts in other companies to find a quick way to fulfill this requirement. They find various offerings of Root Cause Analysis, each suggesting something different – none of them addressing "root cause." They pick something they like (from amongst all the offerings), then start doing their Root Cause Analyses.



But when the people who've given little thought to this think they have arrived at a "root cause" understanding of something (consciously or subconsciously), they naturally stop their inquiry. In our fast-paced world, this has caused many people to have been lulled into a false sense of security. They think they have understood the root of their problems, but they have not. Suddenly and unexpectedly ugly, even deadly problems continue to emerge, all caused by unacknowledged and underlying issues that were hiding behind the cloak named "Root Cause Analysis." Because of this, it could even be said that the endeavor we call "Root Cause Analysis" has become one of the causes of our problems. The repetitive misuse of the phrase has lulled hundreds of thousands of people into believing that they actually have a "root" understanding of something, when they've only scratched the surface.

Clouded in Unnecessary Complexities

Think about the "root cause analysis" methods that exist today, and what it takes to be able to use them proficiently. Does it really require days and days of training to "learn from things that go wrong?" If so, shouldn't we be sending our spouses and children to "root cause analysis" classes to help them learn from their problems? What about the billions of people who have lived since the beginning of time who never learned root cause analysis? How did they survive?

The reader might respond: "It is not appropriate to compare the billions of people who have lived since the beginning of time to today's human societies. We did not have complex, highly hazardous processes capable of instantly destroying significant numbers of human beings until recently. These days, therefore, we are almost forced to understand why things go wrong to a much deeper level than ever before."

Although this might be true, it is disturbing to see what many people are doing to "understand why things go wrong to a much deeper level than ever before." Our complex systems seem to be the starting and ending point of our inquiries. Many investigative methods compare the state of things after an event to the way things were designed to have been. For example, if barriers were designed into a facility to deflect unintended releases of energy, "let's check the condition of the barrier in our root cause analyses." If procedures were developed as part of the design process, "let's check to make sure people followed the procedures." When investigative methods use the "system" as their starting point and ending point, they will be as complex (or as simple) as the system they are investigating.



Something is wrong with this kind of investigative method – seriously wrong. What if the causes of the problem have nothing whatsoever to do with the system?

One person said: “Having to restrict myself to finding flaws in the “system” reminds me of the board game called “Life.” The underlying assumption of the game is that a person must go to college to be successful, which is not true. The same thing happens with investigative methods that force us to look for system-related causes! What if the causes are not system-related?” Failsafe suggests **“the root causes of our problems are never system-related!”**

Human Beings Cause Problems, not Systems

We are the root causes of our problems. We always have been, and we always will be. The common thread, even when pursuing the causes of the causes back to the beginning of time, is people. Whether addressing “the way Joe was raised as a child,” or “the way Joe’s parents raised him,” or any of the “cultural” or “societal” influences, the common thread is people.

People cause problems, not systems. Even more, it’s the same kinds of people-issues that caused “yesterday’s problems” that will cause “tomorrow’s problems.” The only constant factor throughout human history is humanity – and we’re the same today as we were yesterday.

Therefore, in the midst of trying to learn from things that go wrong there is something fundamentally wrong when we avoid looking at ourselves. Yet think of all the investigative methods in existence today. Most (if not all) seem to intentionally side-step people. How often have we heard “it’s not people that cause problems, it’s our systems.”

Think about where this kind of thinking takes us. If we think it is not people that cause problems, but rather our systems – and if our systems are becoming more and more complex – then identifying the causes of our problems will also be a complex endeavor. The corresponding investigative processes will consume a lot of manpower and energy, focusing people on the intricacies of their systems, slowly but surely insulating them from the real causes of their problems – themselves! It’s like being trapped in a prison where it’s impossible to escape. The situation is so serious that it



could be said that any investigative method that discourages people from looking at themselves is in itself a significant cause of our problems.

Helping People to See Themselves as Part of the Problem

It is time to reorient our investigative methods – to intentionally, even aggressively escape from the prison that obstructs our understanding. Instead of side-stepping people, we ought to be focusing on people. This does not mean, however, a return to “the blame game.”

On the contrary! Imagine a world where everyone looked at themselves rather than pointing fingers at other people and things. This is introspection, not blame. Our RCA efforts ought to encourage, even require, introspection.

One of the most frustrating findings of formal Root Cause Analyses is that many of the underlying causes of major incidents are known AHEAD OF TIME. **Warning signs almost always precede major incidents, but are neglected.** Frustrating equipment, people, and systems are usually recognized, but often ignored until they result in disaster.

It is people that ignore and neglect these problems. In the limit, people cause problems – ALL people. We either do things we should not have done or neglect to do things we should have done. Although most people easily see these qualities in other people, it is rare to find individuals who can see their own role in things that go wrong.

Along these lines, a method has been discovered to help people see themselves as part of a problem. It is an outstanding method – one that can be used at home and at work. Latent Cause Analysis™ (LCA) is most understood in contrast to "Root Cause Analysis." Root Cause Analysis is a misnomer. No-one does it, and yet everyone says they do it. Root Cause Analyses that do not point to "Adam and Eve," or "The Big Bang," or "The Beginning of Time" are NOT Root Cause Analyses. Latent Cause Analysis™ is a more truthful, appropriate, and effective endeavor that helps everyone see themselves as part of the problem instead of blaming equipment, other people, or even systems. Latent Cause Analysis™ is Failsafe's version of Root Cause Analysis. LCA's are performed on any size of events. The rigor of the investigation is commensurate with the consequences. By definition, they always involve evidence-gatherers, stakeholders, and always define Physical, Human, and Latent Causes. Latent Cause Analysis™ requires people to consider one fundamental question:



What is it about the way I am that contributed to this event?

The answer to this question is a Latent Cause. Latent Causes are spoken admissions made by the people that contributed to the incident and answer the question: "What is it about the way I am that contributed to this incident?" This is exactly what needs to change to avoid future problems, since people cause problems then people *must* change. The only healthy way to change people is to present the evidence so they see their part and need to change, then they change. Evidence or truth changes people.

In Summary

There is a problem with Root Cause Analysis these days. The problem is that it focuses on everything except "root cause." **We are the root causes of our problems.** It is not our equipment or our systems, nor our society or culture. We, each of us – all of us – are the root causes of our problems. This does not mean we should return to the practice of blaming one another for things that go wrong. On the contrary, our Root Cause Analysis endeavors should help one another be introspective, connect the dots and see how we played a part in what went wrong. When we see our part then we can change.

Imagine a world where everyone would look at themselves rather than pointing fingers at others. Really! Try to imagine it.