



Developing for Your Future

Identifying the Real Problem

The skill: Identifying the real problem means looking past the obvious symptom to find what's actually causing it. When you solve the real problem instead of the surface one, your help actually lasts.

FACILITATOR NOTES

Time. about 60–90 minutes, run in one sitting. Works in a classroom, youth group, or club. Option A needs no materials or setup; Options B, C, and D use a real service activity arranged ahead of time.

Service today. Pick one option in Serve below and set it up before you begin.

Warm-up (5–10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

Keep this quick, short answers are great. Read the questions together.

- Think of a time something kept going wrong no matter how often it got “fixed.” What do you think was really causing it?
- When have you, or someone you know, jumped to a solution too fast and gotten it wrong?
- Why do you think people are tempted to fix what they can see instead of digging for the cause?

Learn (15–20 minutes)

Every problem has two layers: the symptom (what you notice) and the cause (why it keeps happening). It's tempting to fix the symptom, because it's right in front of you. But if you don't find the cause, the problem comes back. Identifying the real problem means digging beneath the surface before you decide what to do.

People who find the real problem do a few things:

- **Slow down before solving.** They resist grabbing the first fix that comes to mind.
- **Ask “why” more than once.** Each answer points toward a deeper one.
- **Tell symptoms from causes.** A symptom is what you see. The cause is the reason it keeps happening.
- **Check with the people affected.** The person living the problem usually knows the real cause better than anyone.
- **Name it in one sentence.** Before choosing a solution, they can say the real problem out loud, clearly.

See the difference. The park where your group meets is always covered in litter:

Quick fix: “Let's pick it up.” And it's littered again the next week.

Digging deeper: “Why is it littered? People drop wrappers. Why not use a can? The only trash can is way over by the entrance.” The real problem: there's nowhere convenient to throw trash.

Once you find the real problem, a better fix appears: add a can by the benches. Now the litter actually stops.

Why this matters in service and in life. In service, fixing the symptom wastes your effort, because the problem just returns. Finding the real cause means the good you do actually lasts, and that you're helping with what people truly need, not what you assumed. Beyond service, this is how you solve the right problem in school, in friendships, and one day at work, instead of spinning your wheels on the wrong one.

Two tools to use today:

- **The Why Chain.** Ask “why” about a problem, then ask “why” about that answer, and keep going (about five times). The last answer is usually closer to the real cause.
- **Symptom or Cause?** Before you fix anything, ask: “Is this the real problem, or just a sign of a deeper one?”

Try it now (2–3 minutes). As a group, pick one small, real annoyance in your space (late starts, a messy corner, low turnout). Ask “why” at least three times in a row, each answer leading to the next question. Notice if the real problem turns out to be different from the one you started with.

Serve (25–40 minutes)

Today you'll put this into practice in a real service activity. Here are ways to do it:

Option A — Fix a root cause where you are *(no cost, no prep, works in any setting)*

Look around your own building, site, or block for a small problem that keeps coming back: litter that re-piles, a door always propped open, supplies that always go missing, a spot that's always a mess. Run the Why Chain to find why it keeps happening, then fix the cause, not just the symptom (set up a labeled spot, request a bin, add a simple sign). A fix that lasts is worth more than one that's undone by tomorrow.

Option B — Tackle a problem that keeps coming back *(low cost, a bit more effort)*

Pick a recurring problem at a place you can help: a little free pantry that's always empty, a community garden that keeps struggling, a shared space that's always messy. Talk with the people involved and run the Why Chain to find why it keeps happening. Then take one action that targets the cause. Doing the right small thing beats doing a big thing that doesn't last.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll pick ahead of time a real place with a recurring problem the group can dig into, and arrange access to it and the people involved. A community organization may have one; JustServe.org can help find one.

Option C — Map the problem, propose the fix *(more effort; sets up real service)*

Choose a need your group cares about. Investigate the real problem behind it: ask the people affected, run the Why Chain, and look for the cause. Then write a short, clear problem statement (“The real problem is...”) with one realistic solution, and bring it to someone who could act on it, or use it to plan your group's next project. Defining the real problem clearly is often the most useful service of all.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll choose ahead of time a real need the group cares about and line up people affected by it to talk with, in person or by call, so the group investigates a true problem, not a guess. JustServe.org can help find an organization close to the need.

Option D — Help an organization understand a need *(formal volunteer role, set up ahead)*

Organizations often need help figuring out what people actually need before they can help. Volunteer to assist with intake, a sign-in table, or a short community survey at a food pantry, resource fair, or neighborhood event, asking good questions and listening for the real problem behind what people say. Search JustServe for a pantry, resource center, or community event, or ask a local nonprofit whether youth can help with intake or surveys.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll arrange a role with an organization ahead of time, and confirm any privacy rules, a script or question list, and adult supervision.

Before you go (all options): Work with a partner and stay in public, supervised spaces. Before you act on a conclusion, check it with the people actually affected, so you don't fix the wrong thing. Have your mentor help set up any visit or call.

Reflect (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

After serving, talk through a few of these together, then give everyone quiet time to write.

Was it hard to slow down instead of jumping straight to a fix? Why?

Did the real problem turn out to be different from the obvious one? How?

What cause did you find, and what did you do about it?

Where else in your life could asking “why” a few more times help you solve the right problem?

Then finish one or both sentences:

A problem I want to look at more deeply is...

Instead of fixing the symptom, I will try to...
