

## Root Cause, Not Symptoms

When a talented and more experienced teacher walks into a classroom of a struggling teacher, she sees symptoms and examples of poor teaching everywhere. Kids are not actively listening. The class is boring. The room temperature is stiflingly hot. It looks dirty and disheveled. There is too much teacher talk. The student work product is poor. The book baggies have books ranging from B-H. The list goes on and on....

Every issue could be fixed one by one, there are hundreds of problems, but it would be enormously time consuming to fix each problem individually as if it were separate and distinct, when in reality there is a much more efficient and sustainable way to go.

Individual problems are usually symptoms of a larger issue, or root cause. In the example above the root cause is the teacher's bar. From the temperature of the room to the book baggies, the teacher's standards are too low. Fixing her definition of excellence will net the scholars more and faster. You must always go to the root cause and determine the structural solution. This approach will conserve your time and energy, and impart greater, long-lasting change.

## How do you diagnose the root cause?

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### Identify Symptoms

Use scholar work, data and classroom observations to identify symptoms of poor or less than stellar practice. Consider the classroom and teacher holistically, looking at her ability to manage, intellectually prepare, instruct, and maintain a neat and orderly classroom.

### Drive Toward the Root

Analyze the symptoms to identify trends in adult practice. Use this analysis to determine the root cause holding teachers back from achieving excellence. Common root causes include: a low bar for excellence, lack of investment in behavior management beliefs, lack of preparation intellectually and organizationally.

### Name the Root Cause

Be prepared to name the root cause for the team or individual, and the changes you need to see in adult practice. Confront the issue directly (do not sugarcoat it, but say it graciously), with confidence and maturity, whether is it a skill or a will issue.

### Ask for Help

As a new leader this may take some practice and help from more seasoned leaders. Manage up and ask for support to strengthen your muscle for naming root causes of teacher practice problems.

## What happens after you determine the root cause?

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### Manage Change

You cannot manage what you have not named— out loud! You must name the change you need to see. For example, “Your bar is too low and you are not holding scholars accountable. We are going to work on dramatically raising your bar. If we succeed, your room will be cleaner, kids will have right books in book baggies, and scholar work will improve.”

## What do we mean by *will issue* vs. *skill issue*?

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### Will Issue

A will issue is an obstacle rooted in someone’s mindset or beliefs. Someone who has a will issue is being held back his or her own volition rather than ability.

### Skill Issue

A skill issue is an obstacle rooted in someone’s current abilities or skill set. Someone who has a skill issue is being held back by his or her ability to successfully implement a particular practice.