

TWELVE QUESTIONS to ask in an investigation

Getting behind the explanation of 'human error'

An investigation that suspects 'human error' should seek to understand why that error occurred. Rather than state what people should have done, and judge them, an investigation should explain why people took the actions or decisions that they did. If we assume that people generally do what makes sense to them at the time, the purpose of the investigation should be to understand why their actions and decisions made sense.

First of all, build a timeline of what you already know. This can be as simple as writing up events or actions on sticky notes and pasting them in time-order on a wall. As you gather more data from interviews, observations and documents, this timeline will be refined. It will also highlight gaps in your understanding of the event, leading to more questions to be answered.

Each question below may need to be asked several times: of different people, at different points in the investigation, and for each critical event in the event timeline. Of course, these aren't the only questions you'll need to ask!

REMEMBER: Look at the event from the position of those people whose actions and decisions you are trying to understand. For example, you may discover that all of the information that appears to have been available to those involved, may in fact have been available one piece at a time, perhaps not always prominently, and may have meant less to those involved, given the context that they had at that particular time.

1. What was your understanding of the process/situation at this time?
2. What information or data was available to you at this point?
3. What did that information mean to you at this time?
4. What was the process/system doing at this time?
5. What changes in the process/situation required you to change your behaviour?
6. What were other people doing at that moment?
7. What were you trying to achieve or accomplish at that point?
8. What assumptions were you making?
9. What options or alternatives did you have?
10. What were you focusing on?
11. What did you expect to happen?
12. At what point did you realise that the situation was different from what you believed it to be previously?