9 Whys

Idea In Short

When a team can describe its tasks but not why they matter, use 9 Whys to explore the purpose beneath the work. Participants first name activities they perform, then interview a partner by asking why those activities are important, following the answers with further why questions. The interviewer listens for a purpose the speaker recognizes and gives it a short, action-oriented title. Both partners take a turn, then the group reflects on the purposes that connect their work. Do not treat nine as a required number or push someone past a meaningful answer. Use the practice to make purpose clearer, not to test whether people have the right motivation.

A team may spend its days completing tasks while struggling to explain why those tasks matter. People can know what they do and still disagree about the purpose of doing it. 9 Whys creates a short, paired conversation that helps participants explore the meaning beneath their activities. One person interviews another, asking why the work is important and following the answers with further questions. The interviewer then gives the purpose a brief, action-oriented title. Partners switch roles, and the group reflects on the purposes that connect their collective work. The practice supports the Liberating Structures principle “Never Start Without Clear Purpose(s).”

Begin with actual work

The host invites participants to consider their role in a shared challenge and jot down activities they personally perform. Starting with real work keeps the conversation grounded. A participant might describe reviewing customer requests, coordinating a handoff, mentoring a colleague, or resolving recurring issues. The activity is a doorway into purpose, not the answer itself. The interviewer asks why it is important and then continues with questions that begin with “Why?”

The sequence can go as far as nine questions, but nine is not a quota. The interviewer

should listen for an answer that expresses a meaningful purpose and stop when further questioning would feel repetitive or intrusive. The questions should be genuine, not a challenge to justify oneself. “Why is that important to you?” can uncover a personal motivation; “Why does that matter?” can link it to a wider need. The conversation should remain centered on the participant’s own words.

Listen for the purpose behind the task

The interviewer’s role is to create space for reflection. They should not supply an answer, interpret the speaker’s motives, or turn the exchange into a performance review. After listening, the interviewer creates a short title, usually three to five words and starting with a verb, that captures the purpose. A phrase such as “Make care easier to access” can condense a longer explanation. The speaker can revise the title until it feels accurate.

Before sharing that title with others, the interviewer asks permission. This step gives the participant control over how their reflection travels beyond the pair. Some people may be comfortable sharing the purpose but not the personal story behind it. The facilitator can make clear that participation does not require disclosure of private experiences. The practice explores work purpose, not a person’s entire identity or life history.

Partners then switch roles. Equal time matters: each participant gets to explore their own work and listen to another person. In an online session, the host can send a clear signal for the switch. After the pair interviews, pairs can join in quartets to share what they noticed. A whole-group discussion can then ask what deep need or common purpose emerged across the interviews.

Build a mosaic, not a slogan

The group may discover several purposes that reinforce one another. One person may want to help colleagues do their best work, another to reduce friction for customers, and another to make a service more reliable. The group can look for a higher-order aim that connects these contributions without erasing their differences. A shared purpose should make the work more intelligible, not become a slogan imposed by leadership.

Facilitators can ask: What fundamental need appeared in several interviews? Which purposes feel connected? Where do people see the work differently? What does this imply

for the challenge we are addressing? These questions can make a purpose useful in decisions about priorities, roles, and meeting design. A purpose statement does not settle resource conflicts or replace a strategy. It gives the group a reference point for examining whether its actions fit what participants value.

Keep the conversation respectful

Repeated questions can feel powerful, but they can also become uncomfortable if asked mechanically. The host should model curiosity and make it acceptable to pause, skip a question, or keep a response private. A participant may discover that their stated task does not connect to the group's declared aim. That insight deserves attention, not criticism. Leaders should resist turning personal purpose statements into new obligations or using them to judge commitment.

The standard structure takes about 30 minutes in person and 25 to 30 minutes online. Pairs sit face to face without a table, with paper available for notes. The flow moves from individual reflection to pair interviews, optional quartets, and a whole-group discussion. A smaller online format can use 1-3-All instead of moving directly from pairs to quartets. The facilitator should allow enough time for each person to speak and to refine the purpose title.

9 Whys is useful when launching a project, clarifying the purpose of a meeting, or helping a group understand what motivates its contribution. It can also help leaders see where daily work and organizational goals may be misaligned. Research on purpose at work finds connections between meaning, motivation, and organizational outcomes, though a facilitation exercise should not be treated as a validated measurement of those effects. 1, 2 , 3

Connect purpose to a next decision

The conversation should close with a practical reflection. Ask what purpose emerged, what it changes about the current challenge, and what choice the group should revisit. A team might use the insight to redesign a meeting, adjust a service process, or clarify a priority. If a purpose theme cannot influence any decision, be honest about that limit. People are more likely to invest in reflection when leaders show how insights will be handled.

9 Whys gives participants a structured way to articulate why their work matters to them and

to the group. It works because the listener follows the speaker’s reasoning rather than supplying a ready-made mission. The result is not a universal statement that everyone must adopt. It is a clearer set of motives and needs that can inform the next conversation about what the group should do together.

- 1The power of purpose
- 2Meaningful work and employee engagement
- 3Purpose and performance

Summary

9 Whys helps a group connect daily work to the reasons people care about it. Repeated, respectful questions can uncover meaning that task lists leave implicit, while a short purpose title makes the insight easier to carry into collective discussion. Participants own their explanations; the interviewer’s role is to listen and reflect. The facilitator should protect choice and avoid treating an individual’s purpose as a performance commitment. Close by asking what shared need or aim emerged and how it can guide current work. A clear purpose can support decisions, but teams still need resources, coordination, and follow-through to act on it.