

# METHOD NINE WHYS



**Area of CoP Activity:** Learning and Developing Practice  
Taking Action as a Community

**CoP Lifecycle Phase:** Inquire  
Sustain

**CoP Success Factor:** Community Interaction  
Leadership

**EIGE Step:** Step 1: Getting Started  
Step 2: Analysing and Assessing the State-of-Play  
Step 6: What Comes After the GEP

**Group Size:** Unlimited

**Difficulty Level:**

**Time Needed:**

**Facilitator Preparation:**

**Participant Preparation:**

**Description:** This activity helps individuals and groups to crystallise what is important in what they do/their work. It also facilitates the identification of an unambiguous shared purpose, which leads to more freedom and more responsibility. The overall goal of this activity is to clarify the purpose of the participants working together, but also to show each individual the purpose, goal and value of their work.

**More Information:** [www.liberatingstructures.com/3-nine-whys/](http://www.liberatingstructures.com/3-nine-whys/)

## NINE WHYS<sup>1</sup>

### Short description

This activity helps individuals and groups to crystallise what is important in what they do/their work. It also facilitates the identification of an unambiguous shared purpose, which leads to more freedom and more responsibility. The overall goal of this activity is to clarify the purpose of the participants working together, but also to show each individual the purpose, goal and value of their work.

### When to use

If you want to instil motivation, engagement, and a sense of belonging, it is important to help your participants realise what they are working towards and to let them see the bigger picture. This activity can help identifying this shared purpose, common goal or vision.

### How to

#### A: Brief description

By continuously asking why someone is doing something, the real purpose of their work, action or project is being revealed. By exchanging the results of the interviews (where one person is asked “Why” up to nine times) common purposes, goals and values are being identified.

#### B: Detailed step-by-step guide

The central question of the whole activity is “why?”

- First, the activity starts by asking “What do you do when working on XYZ (the project, a challenge, etc.)? The participants are asked to make a list of the activities.”
- The next question is going to be “Why is this important to you?”
- Then keep asking, “Why? Why? Why?” You can do that up to nine “Whys”.
- It is possible that a participant cannot go deeper because they have already reached the fundamental purpose for this work – in this case there is no need to ask “Why” nine times.
- Once this happens, it will become clear to the questioned person who will sense that they have reached the ultimate answer.

The number of groups who participate in this activity is not limited. Each of the participants has an equal opportunity for participation and contribution.

The activity starts with the participants working in pairs, then they pair up again (into groups of fours) and then the whole group works together.

Process of the activity:

- First, each participant interviews his or her partner and starts with the question “What do you do when working on XYZ?”
- The person who interviews tries to get a deeper answer by asking “Why is that important to you?”
- The interviewer then goes on with “Why?” as long as the interviewee has not reached the fundamental purpose of his / her work.
- After that, they switch.
- Then they pair up with another pair and share their insights.
- To finish up, everyone is invited to participate by asking “How do these findings influence the next steps we take?”

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Liberating Structures, <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/3-nine-whys/>.

### Additional ideas / information

- The question “Why is it important to YOU?” is significant as well as the emphasis on YOU because it is all about the individuals, rather than their organisations.
- Sharing the different responses and reflecting on differences within the group can lead to define a common purpose.

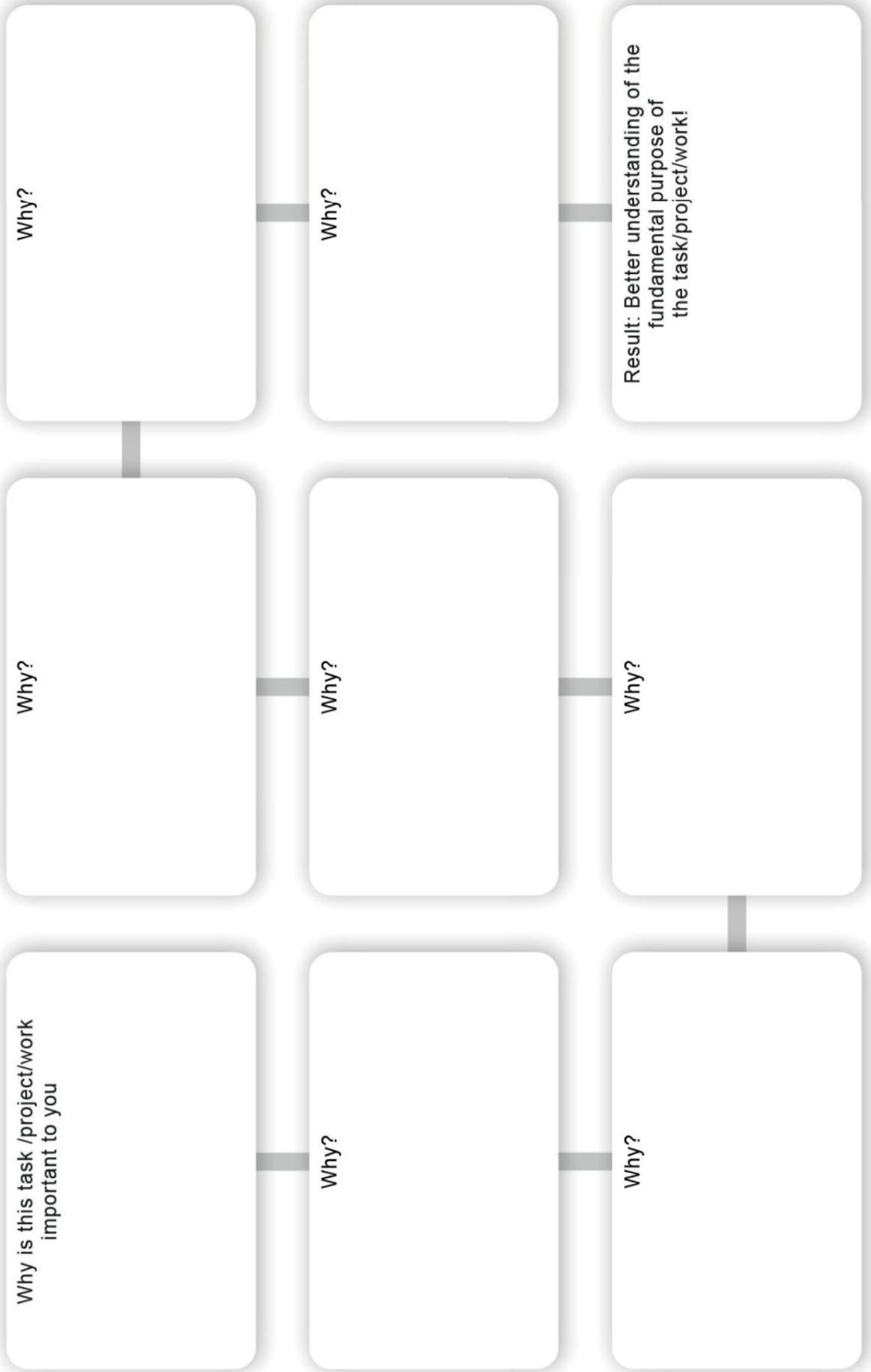
The Nine Whys activity can be adapted online and used in virtual meetings with the right preparation and technical support. One important aspect when adapting this activity online is to make sure that the group is not too big. As the first step is to work in pairs you would need a lot of breakout rooms when the group is too big. Time management in this activity is also very important because of the regrouping (pairs, then groups of fours and back to plenary). So when planning the session this should be kept in mind. For this activity, a web-based application that allows splitting up a group in sub-groups is needed, such as Zoom, Vispa, Whereby, GoToMeeting, or BigBlueButton.





Template

NINE WHYS



## REFERENCES

Liberating Structures – Innovation durch echte Zusammenarbeit. 2019. Available from: <https://www.liberatingstructures.de/>.