



Leading by Nature
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Hackathon: A hackathon is an event format that can help guide organizations and communities toward collective action. It starts with a clearly defined purpose and brief. Participants then self-organize into small teams to brainstorm and prototype new ideas. There are usually mentors who check in throughout the day with the team and guide them forward. The goal is for each team to present their ideas and solutions to a panel of judges, 'dragons' or investors at the end of the event.

Running a hackathon can be great for crowdsourcing and ideation. It is also a great way for nurturing a collaborative and open innovation culture. Participants forge stronger relationships across organizational siloes and get an opportunity to connect outside of the traditional organizational roles and responsibilities. Hackathons are very effective at bringing multiple stakeholders into the design process early on, ensuring a variety of parties challenge the design assumptions upfront before too much prototyping of solutions takes place. There is a simple truth that if you are part of designing the solution, you are much less likely to resist the change when it happens.

What is important here is a focused brief supported by pre-event contextual research to avoid getting sidetracked early on in the process. Also of importance is ensuring the right mix of skill types, operative experts and key decision-makers. Throughout the hackathon it is important that the facilitation team record everything that is being discussed. It is their job to capture, collect and then convert the ideas and insights of the hackathon into action and follow up.

A hackathon format that the founder of The Exponentials, Anton Chernikov, has developed called Brainstorm X works like this: the lead facilitator starts the event with a concise presentation, which clearly defines the purpose of the hackathon; participants then break out into pairs to share their stories and initial feedback on the presentation; everyone then gathers into a circle to introduce themselves within the context of the hackathon; what follows is a series of one hour brainstorm sessions around specific pre-prepared questions and challenges; each brainstorm group has a leader who starts by defining the scope of the brainstorm session; the brainstorm leader (preferably part of the overall facilitation team) encourages participants to spend the first 15 minutes of the session asking questions so people understand as much as possible about the challenge before jumping into solution mode. After 40 minutes all the brainstorming groups converge back into the circle to present back key insights. This fast-paced brainstorming approach means that several cycles of ideation and crowdsourcing can happen while groups are mixed up.