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Hackathons are about beginnings



By Chiara Condi

A few weeks ago I threw my first Hackathon. It was not what you would have ordinarily expected. It was about 70% female and most of the projects were non-tech. Most of the entrepreneurs (all women) were over the age of forty and most of the developers were under the age of twenty-three. As for the other participants they came from all horizons and backgrounds, a range of addicts and novices to the exercise, experts and learners. Unlike your typical Hackathon we had no specific tech challenge our participants had to solve within 48 hours; instead we [Led By HER] invited the community to contribute their collective knowledge to accelerate existing entrepreneurial projects. To make it more unusual, we removed all competition by awarding each entrepreneur a prize that had been donated by a member of our community (a day of professional consulting). We advertised that to participate no specific skill set was required, aside from the motivation to help. And we were fully convinced that would be enough.

Perhaps by now you got the point; what we wanted to highlight through the exercise was the importance of working together, and that that which we achieved over the course of those two days nobody could have ever done alone. People did a lot, but most importantly over the course of the two days through the act of helping they learned a lot. And that will stick with them a lot longer than any prototype or app.

Replacing competition with solidarity increased motivation instead of diminishing it; people were not there for the results, they were there for themselves. What matters most is not what people concretely do in the span those two days, nor is it what they achieve. What matters most is what the Hackathon activates within those two days, which has the power to make an exponential difference after. One person who was coerced into participating mentioned that prior to the event he did not believe in causes concerning women, but after two days spent with us he did. Young women entrepreneurs who were struggling with their own projects came to learn skills and emerged with self-confidence. Our sponsors, AXA and Orange, who were actively engaged in the teams, delivering workshops and filling business canvases left empowered by a human experience that taught them how much they were able to contribute to advancing women entrepreneurs and a conviction that they wanted to do more. Others fell in love with projects they still continue to support. Unlike other Hackathons it was about people just as much as it was about projects. And many of those people are still meeting. For all of us present over those two days, the Hackathon was just the start.

The first reason it was so powerful was also the reason why it was so hard. Day one people looked around and saw that everyone was unlike them: developer, non developer, student, entrepreneur, manager, so much younger, so much older, too scholarly, too technical or my favorite "too inexperienced in my field." Since human tendency is to go towards those who resemble us, people initially felt there was nobody they really wanted to work with. Perhaps it took longer to come together, but what happened once people did so was great. The fact that those groups would have never met in real life provided the entrepreneurs with ideas and solutions to their challenges they could have never thought of alone.

Diversity paradoxically also facilitated the sharing of ideas because as people delved more and more into the exercise they gradually abandoned their frames references to concentrate on what they had to give. Nobody there was an expert on any project and everyone was so unlike everyone else that people soon found they had nothing at stake in expressing themselves and building on other ideas. The more exposed and vulnerable participants became, the more they stepped

out of their experience of being a manager or a developer, the more they were willing to let others challenge or work with their ideas, the more they learned and grew. Those who got the most out of the experience were precisely those who gave the most.

The great experiment also worked because the entrepreneurs present approached the exercise as if they had nothing to lose. Through part wisdom part preparation they mastered the most valuable yet underestimated entrepreneurial qualities, which is non-attachment to one's ideas. Success is directly correlated to openness: a willingness to cling to one's vision while maintaining a distance from the idea itself. Love why you do it, but never be in love with what you do. And you cannot be afraid to lose something no matter how long you worked on it. Letting go is crucial. Only once you do so can you have the confidence to receive feedback for your project. And only once you do so can you recognize a better idea when you see it, seize it, and run with it.

Finally the event succeeded in creating such a strong propulsion for the future because of the continuity our entrepreneurs saw in their own stories; every experience, whether positive or negative became intertwined in the present state of their project. Everything moved them only in one direction and that was forward. There were several women who had launched activities that had not brought the desired profits or clients, or who had gone through several iterations of their projects, or others yet who had taken drastic shifts, but everything that had not worked out, became a turning point rather than an endpoint. From each of those places they grew, because those very experiences paved the way to where they were the day of the Hackathon. This continuity made them unafraid, and that eagerness to advance no matter what left participants excited and motivated to contribute everything they could to a narrative that as I write is still being written.

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