Mentor Handbook

About this handbook

This handbook brings together all six mentor guides into a single reference document. Read it before the event and keep it handy on the day.

Contents: (1) Role & Responsibilities · (2) Mentoring Best Practices · (3) Creative Facilitation & Workshop Agenda · (4) Team Development Framework · (5) Technical Mentoring · (6) Feedback Frameworks

Your event: [Event Name] | Date: [Date] | Lead organiser contact: [Name / Phone]

GUIDE 1 — MENTOR ROLE & RESPONSIBILITIES

What mentors do

Your role as a mentor is to help participants think more clearly, move past obstacles, and reach better solutions on their own. You are a guide, not a solver.

Mentors DO…	Mentors do NOT…
Ask probing questions that open up thinking	Solve problems or do the work on behalf of teams
Offer real-world perspective on feasibility	Take over decision-making from participants
Encourage creative and unconventional thinking	Spend all their time with one team
Support team dynamics when tensions arise	Evaluate or judge (that role is kept strictly separate)
Rotate across teams on a schedule	Give prescriptive instructions that remove participant agency
Give honest, constructive feedback on ideas	Mentor teams they will also judge at the final session

Practical details

Item	Detail
Rotation schedule	[See separate rotation schedule provided by organiser]
Session length	45–60 minutes per team visit
Number of teams	[X] teams — you will visit each team [Y] times
Office hours	One open slot per round for teams to request additional support
Contact during event	[Mentor coordinator name & phone]
Parking / access	[Venue access details]
Catering	Meals and refreshments included — you will be notified of timing

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GUIDE 2 — MENTORING BEST PRACTICES

The Socratic approach — your default mode

The most effective mentor mode is asking questions, not giving answers. Before you say 'you should do X', convert it to: 'What do you think would happen if you tried X?'

Five mentor approaches — use the right one for each situation:

Mode	When to use	Example phrases
🔍 Socratic Questioner (default)	Always — use this as your baseline	"Why did you choose this approach?" · "What problem are you really solving?" · "What assumptions are you making?"
🌍 Contextualiser	Team needs real-world grounding	"In my experience on similar challenges..." · "What actual users typically need is..."
🔧 Technical Expert	Team genuinely stuck on implementation	"Have you considered [tool/method]?" · "Here's a resource that might help..."
💚 Encourager	Team energy or confidence is low	"This is genuinely innovative." · "Every team struggles at this stage — it's normal."
🎯 Reality Checker	Scope is too ambitious for time left	"You have 6 hours left — what's the one thing you'd build?" · "What's must-have vs nice-to-have?"

Common mentor mistakes to avoid:

- ☐ Giving the answer instead of asking the question
- ☐ Spending too long with one team — stick to the rotation schedule
- ☐ Discouraging ideas prematurely during brainstorming
- ☐ Getting so technical that the team can't follow
- ☐ Making teams feel bad for their progress level
- ☐ Mentoring a team you will also be judging

Session structure (use this as a loose guide, not a script):

Phase	Duration	What to do
Opening	5 min	Arrive with warm, positive energy. Read the room. Ask: 'Where are you in your process?' and 'What would be most helpful to focus on?'
Main conversation	30–40 min	Draw on the mentor mode the team needs. Prioritise questions over statements. Offer options rather than one answer.
Closing	5–10 min	Summarise what you heard. Agree next steps: 'What will you tackle in the next hour?' Encourage the team genuinely.

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GUIDE 3 — CREATIVE FACILITATION TECHNIQUES

Use these techniques when teams are stuck, need to break out of conventional thinking, or are not generating enough ideas.

Technique	When to use	How to run it	Time
5 Whys	Team on surface symptoms, not root causes	State the problem. Ask 'Why?' 5 times. Each answer becomes the next 'Why?' The 5th answer is typically the root cause.	10 min
Crazy 8s	Team converging too early, ideas too safe	Fold paper into 8 sections. Set 8-min timer. Sketch one different idea per section — one per minute. No overthinking.	10 min
"Yes, And..."	Ideas being shut down before explored	Every response to an idea must start with 'Yes, and...' — build on it, never critique. Save evaluation for later.	15–20 min
SCAMPER	Need to break out of conventional thinking	Apply: Substitute / Combine / Adapt / Modify / Put to other use / Eliminate / Reverse. 'What if we reversed this process?'	15 min
Assumption Testing	Team confident but hasn't validated core hypothesis	List all assumptions. Rank by risk. Design the smallest test for the riskiest assumption.	15 min
HMW Questions	Problem not clearly framed	Reframe problem as 'How Might We...' questions. Generate 10+ in 5 min. Select the most interesting 2–3 to explore.	10 min

IDEATION WORKSHOP AGENDA (for pre-hackathon training session — 60–90 minutes)

Time	Activity	Facilitator notes
0–10 min	Welcome and warm-up	Energiser game. No content yet — just move and laugh.
10–25 min	Problem framing with HMW	Introduce a sample challenge. Teams generate 10 HMW questions in 5 min, then vote on the top 3.
25–40 min	Crazy 8s ideation	Silent sketching with timer. Encourage wild ideas. Share results — no critique yet.
40–55 min	"Yes, And" build-on exercise	Teams take their top Crazy 8 ideas and build chains of Yes-And responses.
55–65 min	Dot voting + selection	Each person gets 3 dots to vote. Teams identify 1 idea to prototype briefly.
65–80 min	Rapid prototype + pitch	Teams make a rough sketch/storyboard of their idea. 2-min pitch to the group.
80–90 min	Reflection and debrief	What did you notice about your thinking? What made some ideas better? Preview of hackathon format.

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GUIDE 4 — TEAM DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Understanding team stages

Hackathon teams move through predictable stages. Knowing what stage a team is in helps you choose the right intervention.

Stage	Signs	Your mentor role	Typical timing
Forming	Polite, uncertain, unclear who does what	Help team establish norms and roles. Use ice-breaker questions. Confirm everyone understands the challenge.	Day 1 morning
Storming	Disagreements, competing ideas, tension about direction	Normalise conflict. Facilitate productive debate. Help team agree on a decision-making process.	Day 1 mid-morning
Norming	Team settles on an approach, roles clearer, momentum building	Step back slightly. Validate their direction. Offer targeted technical or domain insights.	Day 1 afternoon
Performing	High energy, focused work, clear division of tasks	Check in briefly. Ask stretching questions. Help with scope management and presentation prep.	Day 2
Closing	Wrapping up, preparing to present	Help prioritise ruthlessly. Coach on storytelling. Encourage: 'what you have is enough'	Day 2 final 2 hrs

Interventions by team challenge:

Challenge	Signs	What to do
Unequal participation	One person dominating; others silent	Ask quiet members direct questions. Introduce silent brainstorming. Assign parallel tasks so everyone has a named responsibility.
Decision-making paralysis	Team debating same options; no progress	Introduce dot voting or a 2×2 matrix. Set a 15-min timer. Reframe: 'good enough now beats perfect too late'.
Interpersonal conflict	Tension, passive-aggression, complaints	Offer cooling-off period. Facilitate direct conversation focused on shared goals. Separate mediating from taking sides.
Scope creep	Constantly changing direction; core deliverable unfinished	Ask: 'If you had 2 hours left, what's the one thing you'd finish?' Introduce a parking lot for extra ideas.
Technical skill gaps	Team stuck on implementation problem	Provide targeted guidance or no-code alternatives. Pivot to concept submission if needed: mockups can be as valuable as code.
Burnout	Declining energy, irritability, quality dropping	Mandate a break. Check in on individual wellbeing. Give explicit permission to scale back ambitions.

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GUIDE 5 — TECHNICAL MENTORING APPROACHES

When technical guidance is appropriate

Provide technical guidance only when a team is genuinely stuck on implementation — not as a first response. Default to the Socratic approach first.

No-code and low-code options to suggest:

Need	Tool suggestion	Notes
App prototype (no code)	Figma, Canva, Glide, Softr	Figma for visual mockups; Glide/Softr for functional no-code apps from spreadsheets
Website	Webflow (free tier), Google Sites	Webflow for quality; Google Sites for speed
Survey / data collection	Google Forms, Typeform	Typeform has better UX; Google Forms is fully free
Data visualisation	Google Sheets charts, Tableau Public	Tableau Public is free and powerful for dashboards
Automation / workflow	Zapier (free tier), Make	Connect tools without code
Collaboration whiteboard	Miro, Mural, FigJam	All have free tiers; Miro is most familiar to teams
Video / multimedia	Loom (screen recording), Canva video	Loom for quick demos; Canva for polished video
AI-powered features	ChatGPT API (free tier), Google Gemini	Discuss ethical use — transparency in AI use is required per Code of Conduct

When a team's technical approach is too ambitious:

1. Identify the core hypothesis: what is the one most important thing to prove?
2. Find the Minimum Viable Prototype: the smallest thing that tests that hypothesis.
3. A clear explanation + mockup + user feedback = a stronger submission than broken code.
4. Guide them toward what they can actually complete well in the remaining time.

Common technical problems and quick fixes:

Problem	Quick mentor response
Team has no working prototype by Day 2 midday	Pivot to a well-documented concept: problem statement, solution overview, mockup screenshots, user journey, and impact case. Judges reward depth of thinking.
Team overcomplicating their technical approach	'What's the simplest version of this that proves the idea works?' Help them strip back to core functionality.
Team arguing about which tool/language to use	'What do most of you already know how to use? Start there. Optimise later.'
Platform/API not working as expected	First: check documentation and error messages. Second: try an alternative. Third: switch to a non-technical demonstration route.
Team spending too long on design/aesthetics	'Content and logic first, styling last. What does it do? Show that first.'

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GUIDE 6 — FEEDBACK FRAMEWORKS

Why feedback matters in a hackathon context

Feedback during the hackathon (from mentors) and at the end (from judges) is one of the most valuable learning experiences participants take away. Good feedback is specific, constructive, balanced, and actionable.

Framework 1 — WWW/EBI (What Went Well / Even Better If)

The simplest and most widely used framework. Suitable for quick mid-session feedback during mentor rotations.

WWW/EBI structure

What Went Well (2–3 specific positives):
→ Name the exact thing that worked and why it is effective
→ Be specific: not 'good idea' but 'your user research directly informed your solution design'

Even Better If (1–2 actionable suggestions):
→ Frame as an opportunity, not a criticism
→ Be specific: not 'more detail' but 'add a concrete explanation of how the revenue model works'

Framework 2 — SBI (Situation, Behaviour, Impact)

Use this for more nuanced feedback on team dynamics or individual contributions.

SBI structure

Situation: Describe the specific context — 'During the ideation session on Day 1...'

Behaviour: Describe what you observed — 'I noticed you consistently built on others' ideas rather than replacing them...'

Impact: Describe the effect — 'This created a much more collaborative atmosphere and I could see the whole team's energy lift.'

Framework 3 — Appreciative Inquiry for teams in difficulty

Use when a team is discouraged, stuck, or struggling to see progress.

Appreciative Inquiry approach

1. Discover: 'What's working right now, even in a small way?'
2. Dream: 'If everything went perfectly from this moment, what would your submission look like?'
3. Design: 'What's the one thing you could do in the next 30 minutes to make that more likely?'
4. Destiny: 'Who is doing what, starting now?' — commit to specific next steps.

Feedback to avoid:

- ☐ Generic praise: 'Great job!' — be specific instead: 'Your problem statement was sharp and focused'
- ☐ Vague criticism: 'This isn't quite there yet' — say what specifically needs to change
- ☐ Comparative feedback: 'The other teams are further along' — this deflates motivation
- ☐ Unsolicited personal feedback — stick to the work, not the person
- ☐ Overloading: more than 3 pieces of feedback at once is hard to process under time pressure

Post-presentation judge feedback guide (for final session):

Judges should give brief verbal feedback to every team immediately after their presentation. Written, more detailed notes can be shared within a week. Use the structure below:

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Element	Example phrasing	Time allocation
Positive opener	'What struck me most about your project was...' [be specific]	~30 seconds
Strongest innovation element	'The most creative aspect was... because...'	~30 seconds
One key development area	'The one thing that would significantly strengthen this is...'	~30 seconds
Encouraging close	'This is exactly the kind of thinking VET education needs — well done to all of you.'	~15 seconds

Remember

Participants may be presenting publicly for the first time. Many have worked 16+ hours in two days. Your feedback lands in a heightened emotional state.

Calibrate: be honest AND be human. A participant's confidence for the next year can be shaped by how you deliver feedback in 90 seconds.

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