



MIT MEDIA LAB

Open Leadership Camp

A new type of leadership development for the social sector



MIT Media Lab Learning Initiative

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Participants and organizers of the first Open Leadership Camp / Photo credit: MIT Media Lab/Jimmy Day

The Open Leadership Camp is a participant-driven three-day workshop for CEOs of nonprofit and public sector organizations, offered by the MIT Media Lab and Mozilla. It applies the principles of open source, open innovation, and the decentralized nature of the web to the way some of our most important non profit and public interest organizations work, and could work in the future, to help them reach more people and have more impact.

The camp introduces new technologies and new ways of thinking about organizational change, allows leaders to reflect on the future of their organizations, and gives them the space to make deep meaningful

connections with peers from other sectors. New types of alliances between technology innovators and public interest organizations are needed to tackle big challenges like inequality and access to education, and we want the camp to be a place where these alliances take shape.

Chicago Public Library is one of the largest urban public libraries in the United States. Our mission has remained unchanged — showing and connecting people to the world’s ideas and knowledge to create a strong and vibrant Chicago — but the way that we do it today in the information age needs to look much different from what we did it 10, 20, 50, or 100 years ago. The opportunity for us was really to use the open leadership camp to work on an open project to unpack how the library can look different today.

— Brian Bannon, Commissioner, Chicago Public Library —

MIT Media Lab & Mozilla — Building on a shared history

In March this year, MIT Media Lab Director [Joi Ito](#) and [Mitchell Baker](#), Executive Chairwoman of Mozilla hosted the first open leadership camp with a cohort of 14 participants, including the CEO of *Consumer Reports*, the CIO of the City of Detroit, and the CEO of WGBH. Together, we tried out how these ideas of innovation and working open that we use every day at the Media Lab and Mozilla, would resonate with leaders of very large, often very traditional, non-profit organizations. We had an amazing group of people who embraced the challenge of trying something new and were happy to experiment together with us.

The ideas of the camp build on the long-standing relationship between the Media Lab and Mozilla, and between Joi and Mitchell, who have been collaborators and friends for many years. Most recently Joi served on the board of the Mozilla Foundation, of which he’s now an Emeritus Member. A thread that runs through Joi and Mitchell’s work is how to apply the lessons they learned from building open organizations and applying open practices to a broader range of organizations. The camp is a first attempt to do that (and based on the success of the first one, we are running at least one more in the fall 2017).

Open leadership

What do we mean by “*open leadership*” and “*working open*”? There are many definitions of “open,” mainly describing what makes a piece of content open.

But for the purposes of the camp we're more interested in how the key elements of working open apply to the context of public interest organizations.

At its core, **open leadership is the practice of mobilizing your community to help achieve the aims of your organization.** Open leaders are designers and facilitators who provide a sense of purpose and create opportunities for participation, so that their organizations can be more impactful. There are three core design principles for successful open projects:

Communicate with the intent to be understood

Communicating in this way means helping people understand what you do, why you do it, how you do it, and how they can get involved. It may involve letting people see how your organization sets goals, makes decisions, and gets work done. The intent to be understood also comes with a commitment to being authentic, rather than trying to construct a particular public image.

Design your work to be extended

The idea behind the open source and free software movement is to share your work so that others can add to and build upon it. It involves granting the legal rights for others to do that (through open licenses), but the real value of working open gets unlocked when you not only share your work, but you also engage people and support them trying to extend it.

Organize around participation

One of the biggest benefits of working open can be in getting more people actively involved in your work. The level of participation we see in projects, such as Wikipedia, requires that you understand your organization as a community that has clear ways for people to join and to organize their collective work.

By the way, this definition of working open isn't supposed to be final or binding. True to the spirit of working open, we expect to make changes to it over time. And, based on feedback we received during the first camp in March 2017, we already have some concrete ideas for adjusting the definition. For example, the aspect of inclusion and equity that is so crucial to our work, doesn't yet come through strongly enough. And, while governance and decision-making could be covered under participation, it might be worth spelling those out separately as well.

Participants

For our first cohort we asked people whose opinions we trust to nominate who they thought were the right type of leaders for this program. We were specifically looking for CEO-level executives of large organizations who have a mandate for strategic change, and who provide leadership not only to their organizations but also to the fields in which they work. We did not focus on a particular sector but invited people from a wide range of non-profit organizations, such as the [New York Hall of Science](#), [Playworks](#), and [WGBH](#), and leaders from the public sector, including the [Chicago Public Library](#). We used two criteria — an annual budget of \$10 million-plus and a team of 100 or more people — to filter nominees, and we paid special attention to diversity. The process took a lot of time and work, but in the end it was well worth it. Bringing the right group of people together was crucial for the style of workshop we wanted to run.

“The people that were at the camp were great. It was particularly engaging because we came from such a range and diversity of backgrounds. I think I often find myself in rooms with other people looking at education and there were education folks but also a wide range of interests, approaches, and diversity of thought and of backgrounds: libraries, cities, a PBS station. [That] helped me think about how to apply this idea about open and it really changed how we are going to do some stuff around here.”

— Jill Vialet, CEO Playworks —

Curriculum

We organized the first Open Leadership Camp curriculum along three strands: cases, leadership, and projects.

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Cases

The case studies highlight specific examples of how open can be applied in different contexts. They serve as inspiration by highlighting some common

challenges and how they have been addressed. For example, faculty member Karim Lakhani introduced the idea of crowdsourced innovation and thinking about a community of collaborators through a case study of the T-shirt company Threadless. After that session, many participants said they were initially skeptical, but came away surprised by how much the insights from this case were directly applicable to their work. Other cases related to participatory policy-making and open philanthropy. We also heard from Joi and Mitchell who shared how the concept of working open was threaded into various points of their careers.

Leadership Skills

In this strand we explored some of the particular skills that are effective for open leaders. For example, the session on facilitative leadership described how leadership in open communities requires a different level of communication and negotiation skills. The skills sessions also allowed participants to connect their personal values with the purpose of their organizations using open strategies.

Projects

We didn't just want to introduce new ideas and concepts; we also wanted to allow participants to start applying them to their work. This strand covered the values and principles behind working open, and the tactics and strategies of applying open practices. We provided templates, such as an "open canvas," helped participants to develop a project pitch, and started planning how we could support the projects after the camp.

To design and facilitate the individual modules, we worked with a great group of collaborators, including Javier Prieto from MIT's Dalai Lama Center For Ethics & Transformative Values, David Eaves from the Harvard Kennedy School, Helen Turvey from the Shuttleworth Foundation, Sérgio Branco from ITS in Brazil, Aaron Ogle from the OpenGov Foundation, and a Mozilla board member, MIT alumnus, and Harvard Business School professor.

Not a typical executive education program

We want the Open Leadership Camp to be a true co-learning experience, and in our first camp we were fortunate to work with a group of participants who fully embraced its participatory style. All those involved combined deep expertise in their fields with an interest in engaging deeply with each other and with new ideas of working open. And, in addition to working through

the curriculum, the connections we all made allowed a more personal type of sharing stories and experiences that were equally important as the material we covered in the curriculum.

For me, it was just a moment that had a real staying power and an important affirmation because it's easy to lose sight of core values, core purpose, in a kind of daily-ness of our work. Effective leadership is anchored in the values that are often most personal and most intimate to us. All of us who lead organizations, of course, are caught up in daily grind of what we do. There is often not enough time [...] to step back and reflect.

— Margaret Honey, President NY Hall of Science —

We also asked our participants about what they took away from the camp, and what we might do differently in the next one. A few mentioned that the experience of the camp allowed them to reimagine how their organizations might fulfill their purpose going forward. Others said they were able to step back and use “open” as a way to trace the purpose of their organizations back to their own personal values. And, almost everyone commented on the strong connections they made with other leaders, often from different fields.

Among the things we plan to do differently next time is how we integrate other participants from each of the organizations into the face-to-face workshop. During the first camp, we asked a second team member from each organization to join the workshop about halfway through. The goal was to better connect senior leadership to implementation to increase chances for the new ideas to make their way into the fabric of the organization. However, we underestimated the complexity of having two groups of people starting at different times in the camp, and we will try a slightly different format next time.

What's Next?

Our inaugural camp showed that there was strong interest from the kinds of leaders we're hoping to reach, and that they took away something useful from this kind of shared learning experience. We also had a lot of fun organizing and running it. That's why we've decided to organize a second Open Leadership Camp at the Media Lab in the fall this year and are tentatively planning a third camp for spring 2018.

We are also in the process of sharing more of the materials from the first camp, and plan to publish several articles and papers related to open leadership, including a case-study about Philadelphia's Office of Innovation and Technology, which talks about ways to attract, retain, and manage digital talent in government. We will continue to work with our friends at Mozilla to connect our efforts with other [open leadership programs](#) for different audiences.

And finally, we see a number of other opportunities that we might tackle in the future, such as a more comprehensive open version of the curriculum, so that others can run similar face-to-face workshops without us, regional or sector-focused camps, or an online camp that could scale to thousands of participants.

The first Open Leadership Camp wasn't just a valuable learning experience; it also allowed us to develop new types of alliances. The Media Lab's membership model connects researchers with large corporations, but it wasn't designed for nonprofit or public sector organizations. The camp brought us together with organizations that we consider key allies in tackling some of the most intractable challenges of the future. Together we started connecting the benefits of open strategies and practices to the strategic goals of public interest organizations.

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