



## How to Put Together a Tech Festival

**An internal guide for Aspiration festival facilitators and team members.**

The purpose of this document is to provide a step-by-step guide for creating Aspiration technology events on the model of the California Non-Profit Technology Festival, defining goals, setting agendas and conducting outreach to partners, facilitators and participants. This goal of this guide is to provide a set of procedures and guidelines for team members to follow to put together future technology events structured on Aspiration's *Unconference* approach.

### **Background: The Story of the California Non-Profit Technology Festival**

The *California Non-Profit Technology Festival* is a bi-yearly statewide festival that brings together nonprofit staff and social justice activists who are using and have a passion for technology as an instrument of social change. These events bring together participant seeking guidance on how to apply technology to their work with those providing technical support and capacity building for their own and other organizations.

The overall goal of the event is to build capacity and community around technology for social justice causes across California and serve as a model for similar efforts worldwide. While indeed a "tech" event, the festival is designed to invite ongoing dialog about how principles and practices of social justice should inform how technology is employed, in ways that are consistent with the values and spirit of those working for a more just, equitable and just world.

Central to the event's objective is to honor emerging technology leaders across the state, especially among youth and in underserved communities. Our events are designed to maximize collaborative, learning and networking opportunities for these emergent leaders committed to helping others leverage technology for social change.

## Overview: A Three-Stage Process for Creating Aspiration Events.

To begin the process of putting together an Aspiration event, we can start by identifying the three main categories or stages of our internal and external work.

### Outreach

The process of connecting people and organizations with the event, as participants, facilitators, trainers and funders.

### Agenda

Setting objectives, sessions and topics for the event. Many of these sessions are proposed and facilitated by the participants themselves, following an *Unconference* format that taps into the knowledge base and addresses topics those convened most want to learn. You will be identifying facilitators pre-event, but many more will emerge at the event itself.

### Communications

*(insert additional text – definitions of communication efforts)*

## Defining Outreach Goals

Aspiration events are first and foremost convened to strengthen ties and social networks among technology users in the non-profit and non-government sectors. Our goals are driven by the desire to train and empower NGOs and activists to use technology efficiently in their work.

To accomplish this goal, we need to be intentional about both internal outreach and relationship building efforts.

Aspiration's outreach approach is intentional in two regards:

### 1. Statewide

- a. Locally – The area where the festival will be held.
- b. Regionally – i.e: Northern California, Southern California, Central Valley

### 2. The Non-Profit Tech Supply Chain

- Nonprofit staff

- Activists
- Funders
- Trainers / capacity builders
- Developers
- Cooperatives
- Funders

**Insert Organizational Chart:**

**Nonprofit Supply Chain**

We need to identify the following groups ahead of time.

- Partners
- Facilitators
- Organizations / Participants for outreach
- Event sponsors / funders

## **Types of Partners**

Partners can serve a number of different roles:

### **Co-Organizers**

Help plan events, and make sure their interests and community are represented at the event.

### **Community Partners**

Help spread the word to their networks and bring folks out to the event.

### **Agenda Partners**

Facilitate sessions on topics they are passionate about.

## Goals for Partners

Identify at least 3 – 5 co-organizing partners. At least two should live locally in the city where the event is to be held.

As an Aspiration team member, your responsibilities in managing partner relations should include the following tasks:

- Get final approval on event announcements
- Post announcement in all promotional materials and newsletters
- Post event logo and information to website
- Send event outreach and “Spread the Word” texts.
- Send participant list as it grows
- Link to social media
- Check in monthly with partners prior to event
- Get feedback on early drafts of agenda
- Look for opportunities to connect partners with each other prior to the event
- Offer gratitude to partners for their participation in the event.

## Facilitators

A *Facilitator* is simply a person who brings their knowledge and capacity building skills and can lead skill-sharing sessions at the event.

Up to one-fifth of festival participants are identified as facilitators in advance of the event. This means that as the event organizer, for every 100 anticipated participants, you will want to identify 20 people ahead of time who are willing to :

- Lead collaborative, small group discussions on their topic of expertise.
- Bring an ethic of sharing and learning to sessions, rather than a one-way, ‘fire-hose’ approach to training.
- Attend at least one pre-event call with the festival lead organizer to learn how to design a session.

## How to identify facilitators

In seeking out potential facilitators and session leaders, we should focus on the following groups:

- People who have previously attended tech fests.
- People who have led sessions at other events.
- Experienced trainers and workshop leaders.

- Organizations we want to build relationships with (i.e.: nonprofits, NGOs, technology and social justice activists.
- Capacity builders
- Emerging leaders
- Youth and youth developers
- Cohort participants
- Others recommended by festival partners and participants.

Many more festival participants step up and volunteer to facilitate sessions over the course of the event. However, identifying as many of these folks prior to the event is critical to develop leadership and build a backbone for the festival agenda.

Facilitator and Participant Guidelines:

[http://facilitation.aspirationtech.org/index.php?title=Facilitation:Facilitator\\_Guidelines](http://facilitation.aspirationtech.org/index.php?title=Facilitation:Facilitator_Guidelines)

## Creating the Agenda

### The Aspiration approach to Unconferencing and Agenda Hacking.

You may be familiar with the ‘unconference’ or ‘open space’ model that aim to make conferences more participant-driven and collaborative in nature. At many such events, session times and slots are claimed on a first come, first serve basis, favoring more assertive participants and keeping many from having input on the agenda.

Aspiration’s intentional approach to the unconference format is designed to give all participants equal input into the agenda and set a collaborative and communal tone for the event. You can read a detailed guide to Agenda Hacking [here](http://facilitation.aspirationtech.org/index.php?title=Agenda:Hacking) (<http://facilitation.aspirationtech.org/index.php?title=Agenda:Hacking>).

Briefly, agenda hacking is a process by which participants collectively brainstorm a list of topics, propose new sessions, and allocate session topics iteratively for the each day’s agenda. We do this exercise at the start of each day of the event, ensuring that all attendees play a vital role in the process.

### Pre-Engagement: Inviting facilitators and participants into the process

As you start to identify facilitators and partners, the pre-engagement process begins. Pre-event collaboration offers the potential to make optimal use of “face time” at events. Inviting these folks into the process early and often is a great way to discover potential session topics and immerse them in our participatory agenda format.

Conduct one-on-one interviews with facilitators in advance of the event. These pre-event interviews are a chance to ask facilitators what skills and expertise they bring to share and what they want to get out the event. In fact it is ideal to conduct pre-interviews with ALL festival participants whenever possible, as they offer a wonderful opportunity to let identify promising facilitators and invite them to co-create the agenda, as well as to spot potential problems.

### Some pre-event interview questions for participants and facilitators

#### Personal

“Briefly describe your work and your interest in the event.”

“What do you personally want to get out of the event?”

“What would make you feel like your time at the event has been well spent?”

#### Agenda

“What are the most important things for this group to discuss in our time together?”

“What topics do you want to make sure are addressed in the agenda?”

“Are there any relevant topics on which you’d like to share your experiences?”

What topics or issues do you think participants or most likely to disagree on or desire to debate?”

### Talking to facilitators: Tap into their passion.

Think in meta terms about what the facilitator is doing, the thing that they bring to the table. Engage them and draw out the unique knowledge, perspective, or teaching opportunity they have to offer.

#### Example One:

Facilitator: “I teach video editing.”

Ask: “Would you be interested in leading a discussion on how to teach video editing.”

Move the conversation from *What* skill they teach, to *How* to teach that skill.

#### Example Two:

Facilitator: “I work with a cooperative that does design and development of websites. I work in the development side and know Wordpress.”

Then respond: “A lot of our nonprofits work with designers and developers and wonder about the best questions to ask to start a technology project. Could you offer some advice around this topic?”

Propose further questions. Go deeper into the topic. Anticipate participant’s questions and start thinking about how to engage them in sessions.

## **At the event: Setting the agenda.**

While technology and tech strategy are a primary focus of the event, many of our sessions and workshops also engage with the greater purpose of promoting social justice in California, and we take time to learn about and reflect on work being done in this regard by organizations and activists across the state.

Sessions generally fall into one or more of the following categories:

### **By Issue Area**

Creating space for participants working on specific campaigns and causes.

### **By Region**

Inviting participants from different parts of the state to share what they are doing, achieving, and learning in their area of focus.

### **Participant-led sessions**

More than half of the agenda will be built by participants both before and during the event, covering topic, tools, themes and issues proposed by those in attendance.

### **Learning by making**

Hands on workshops for sharing essential technology skills.

Aspiration events de-emphasize lectures and presentations in favor of small-group discussions, or break-out sessions, so called because we start with a larger group discussion and then break out into smaller, focused sessions self-organized by the participants around their own interests and passions. The format is designed to be highly interactive, enable learning and peer sharing, and support collaboration.

## **Sample Event Agenda**

The following is a streamlined example of a daily agenda, taken from the **Spring 2014 California Non-Profit Technology Festival** in Los Angeles.

## DAY I

### Coffee / Registration

#### Opening Circle

The Opening Circle is an opportunity to let everyone's voice be heard and set the participatory tone for the event. Participants are seated in a single, large circle, facing one another. Each attendee introduces him or herself and is encouraged to briefly share a few words about themselves, their work and their thoughts on the event. Participants are also encouraged to put away electronic devices and other distractions and listen actively to these introductions. Encourage participants to not just hang out with friends but to seek out and meet new people.

#### Interactive Group Exercises.

Exercises and games help build a sense of community among participants, stimulate session topics and inspire further connections and learning opportunities.

Examples of exercises employed at Aspiration events have included:

- **Spectrogram**  
A line is laid out on the floor with colored tape, one end marked with "Strongly Agree", the other with "Strongly Disagree." The facilitator reads a series of controversial statements. Participants stand in place along the line according to their reaction. Each participant is asked to explain his or her position. The result is often animated and passionate conversation, building community as well as helping participants to identify topics to pursue and people they might want to connect with.
- **Strong Wind Blows**  
Sitting in the circle, one participant stands and makes a true statement about her or himself. All others for whom the statement is true then stand and move to a new seat. The exercise allows people to identify fellow participants with similar ideas and values and to better know one another.
- **Speed Geeking**  
A riff on speed dating, participants get to give five-minute presentation on a current project, tool or idea of their choice, while the others rotate around the room to experience each demo. The presentations are strictly timed to five minutes each, plus one minute for questions, forcing each demonstrator to tightly hone their presentations for the allotted time while allowing each listener to experience a maximum number of projects and tools.

### Introductory Discussions

### Agenda Creating and Hacking



## **Interactive Project Showcases**

**Lunch**

**Breakout Sessions I**

**Break**

**Breakout Sessions II**

**Closing Circle**

**Happy Hour**

## **Day 2**

**Opening Circle**

**Strategy Mapping Session**

**Break**

**Hands-on Breakout Sessions**

**Lunch**

Encourage participants to sit with folks they don't already know.

**Afternoon Breakout Sessions**

**Break**

### **“Where Do We Go From Here” – Individual Commitments**

Participants write on business cards their intentions, thoughts and strategies for moving forward with the knowledge and tools gained at the event. These statements are sorted and posted on the wall in three categories, as follows.

- **“I will” statements**
- **“We should” suggestions**
- **“Don't forget” learning / teaching points**

**Closing Circle**

Summarize what has been learned and the possibilities for moving forward.

## Making the event work

Whether brainstorming topics in the agenda hacking activity or in the individual sessions, the spirit of an Aspiration convening is to be a supportive, collaborative and empowering experience for every participant. Every single person in attendance is an ambassador to the spirit of the convening, absolutely vital its ongoing success.

To this end, some guiding principles to keep in mind during, before and after the event.

**Include everyone in the circle.**

**Ask questions early and often.**

**Embrace the spirit of sharing.**

**Share first, debate later.**

**Invite participants to bring others with them to subsequent events.**

**Help us to realize the full potential of this gathering.**

## Communications

Getting the word out and getting feedback

### Internal Communications

- Draft outreach list.
- Draft facilitator list.
- Share progress with internal staff – team members and get input.
- Share event information with partners.

### External Communications

#### Promoting the event

Aspiration's external communication and outreach efforts are strongly focused on our constituents, partners and facilitators. We generally eschew general press coverage, concentrating on outlets that directly reach our audience; grassroots activists, especially youth, developers, funders and decision makers working for social justice.

Such outlets include

- Youth Journalists**

- Social Justice / Technology Blogs**
- NGOs**
- Aspiration website**

Pay careful attention to language, tone and emphasis when putting together a promotional package for an event. Consider the needs of our non-profit audience. A significant number of readers will be non-technical or tech agnostic.

Promotional materials may include some or all of the following.

- One pager** – Introduction or pitch page for the event
- Brochure**
- Case Studies** – Positive testimonials and narrative accounts from previous festival participants
- Poster**
- Print ads** for papers, newsletters and other print publications
- Web banners**

## Getting Feedback

Soliciting feedback after the event is essential for improving future events and better serving the needs and goals of our participants.

A simple survey can generate invaluable data and foster strong, ongoing relationships between Aspiration and our participants, constituents and facilitators. It can be distributed at the event or mailed afterwards to all registered attendees.

Begin by thanking the attendee for their participation in the festival. Invite them to offer feedback on the following.

### Outcomes

“Did the event change your thinking about nonprofit technology? Elaborate”

“What were two or three most useful things for you about the event?”

“How do you see yourself applying what you’ve learned at the event?”

“Would you recommend future CA Tech Fest events to other people?”

### Agenda

“Was the agenda format too structured, unstructured, or about right?”

“Which sessions did you find most beneficial?”

“What was not covered that you’d like to see included in the agenda?”

“Was the Wiki a useful part of the event?”

## **Logistics**

Have respondents rate the effectiveness of aspects of the event from 1 – 5.  
(1) = Strongly Disagree, (5) = Strongly Agree.

- Venue
- Food
- Format
- Pacing

## **Other Questions and Suggestions**

Invite respondents to offer a quote about their experience, as well as additional suggestions that would improve the experience for them.

## **Conclusion**

For more information on facilitating and organizing Aspiration style events, please refer to the Wiki at

[www.aspirationtech.org](http://www.aspirationtech.org)

[facilitation.aspirationtech.org](http://facilitation.aspirationtech.org)

[catechfest.aspirationtech.org/](http://catechfest.aspirationtech.org/)