# Learning forward

A design driven framework for how to proactively steer innovation projects

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# Transforming the system means passing through zones of uncertainty

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# Introduction

When you work with innovation you have to accept the fact that you are navigating in the unknown. You might have a clear idea of a problem that you are trying to solve or a methodology you know exactly how to apply. But you cannot control the outcome in advance - you must remain open, curious and responsive to the insights and developments that emerge during innovation processes. Therefore, the key to succeeding is to adapt and transform what you learn into - if not something new - then definitely something better.

This framework is based on the banal fact that learning is a primary driver for innovation. And it is also based on the painful experience that many innovation projects will downplay the importance of learning, giving way to strategic considerations, political interests or technological aims. We cannot avoid learning when we interact with the world, but the question is how we listen to and react to what we learn.

**A DESIGN DRIVEN FRAMEWORK FOR INNOVATION PROCESSES**

This framework is based on design principles - an innovation approach that is agile, iterative and user driven at its core. The framework is made for facilitators and managers of innovation processes in both the public and private sector. It can be applied for both high level mission-driven innovation programmes and smaller more targeted innovation projects. It provides a model for how to organize learning and it gives actionable insights into how to collect, process and adapt to learning in a team or organisation across stakeholders.



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# *Start learning* Bringing your hypotheses to the front

To design and guide your learning activities, you must be well reflected on what you are setting out to learn. As soon as you have defined your innovation process, you are most likely already working with a set of ideas and hunches that affect how you approach it. Bringing these hunches and ideas into the light is the core of a hypothesis driven approach. Your hypotheses are the specific assumptions, ideas and hunches that define how you approach a process. They describe what you think you know, but actually do not know yet.

A hypothesis driven approach gives you guiding principles for how to iteratively work with learning.

The benefit of working with hypotheses is that you can test them. In a process with an unknown outcome, what guides your way forward is the constant test of, and learning from, your hypotheses by acting them out in specific activities.  Testing your hypotheses will help you uncover potential pitfalls or potentials in your process or whether you are really understanding your user's behavior. Working actively with hypotheses will also help you adjust, reframe or even pivot your process to ensure it creates the necessary impact.



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# *Team exercise*
# 4 steps to build your hypotheses

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1

**BRAINSTORM**
Take the time to brainstorm all the questions you are exploring in your process on post-its. Some are obvious and clearly articulated, some are scientific and based on existing findings, some can be more curious hunches and others can be more tacit and could even make up for bias that affect how you approach the process. Use a separate post-it for each question.

2

**PRIORITIZE & ORGANIZE**
Organize your questions into these groups:

01: What we know
02: What we think we know
03: What we are unsure of

3

**TURN YOUR QUESTIONS INTO HYPOTHESES**
Now focus on the last two categories of questions to transform these into hypotheses. Try to reframe the questions in a way so you focus on the value or impact of your hypothesis.

**We believe that**
**[creating this experience]**
**For [this person/user group]**
**Will [achieve this outcome]**

**TIP**
Remember to formulate hypotheses for both your content related questions (project outcomes and goals) as well as process-related questions (how your team works and how your process and methodology should be designed).

4

**DESIGN HOW YOU WILL TEST THE HYPOTHESES**
Think about where, how and and when you can test your hypotheses in your process and how you can collect data to give evidence to your findings (e.g through data collection, research, interviews, usability tests).

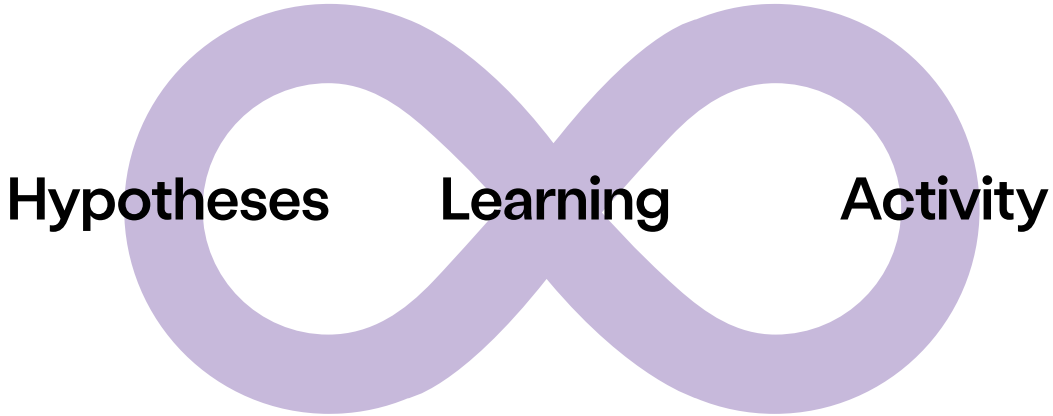
Answer the questions below for each hypothesis:

**HYPOTHESIS**
We believe that...

**TEST**
We will do/make...

**EVIDENCE**
We will know the hypothesis is valid when we get...

# Learning as an iterative process




Once you have your hypotheses, you can start testing them in the innovation process. Defining and testing your hypotheses is not just an introductory exercise - it is ongoing and must be repeated several times throughout the process.

As you move forward, this process lets you sharpen both your hypotheses about what is at play as well as the activities leading to the final outcome of the innovation process. Your outcome will have a better chance of hitting the spot since it has been derived through rigorous testing before being put to the ultimate test of reality.

# *The Learning* Mechanism

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**LEARNING AT DIFFERENT PACES**

Now we zoom in on the intersection between the two loops - where the learning happens. In traditional projects most of the energy is spent in the two loops - on planning the activities that have to be conducted in the project period and (maybe) formulating hypotheses to guide the process. If hypotheses are formulated, there is a risk that they will not be subject to change throughout the project period. Ending up as static and passive assumptions. The spot in the middle, is, therefore, a highly underestimated place but, nonetheless, this is where we are going now.

On the next pages, you will be presented to a model that you can use as a framework for designing your own learning mechanism in your innovation process. The model takes into account how learning happens constantly and runs at different speed in different areas of a process. Therefore, when we drive innovation processes we must react and adapt to learning at different paces. What we learn might affect how we work on a daily basis, yet it could also fundamentally challenge the strategic direction of our work.

The learning mechanism offers a way to organize learning in cycles with different paces that trains the team in how to proactively react and adapt to new insights on different development levels.

# *The Learning* Mechanism

There are four elements that should always be present in the learning mechanism.

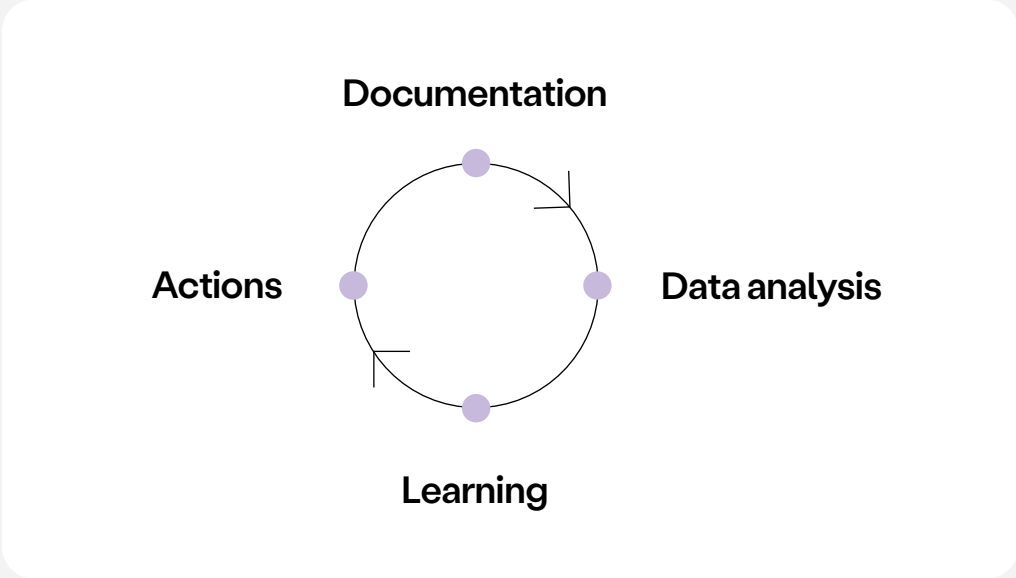
**DOCUMENTATION**
Collecting data, insights, numbers and results. Your documentation should relate directly to informing your hypothesis. Several processes are designed with a majority of documentation activity towards the project ending - think about how you can track and collect relevant data throughout the process.

**DATA ANALYSIS**
Processing, analysing and preparing the data to make the data available to the target group and project team.

**LEARNING**
Sessions or activities where you interpret which consequences the processed data has and how it should inform your process and its hypotheses.

**ACTIONS**
Adjustments, changes, improvements that serve as consequences of what you have learned.

Some of these elements are often naturally embedded in projects. The important point here is how these four elements interact as they are highly interdependent. Data in itself has limited value. It will not provide any value to the project before it has been processed into insights that can be acted on in the forthcoming steps of the process. By the same token, insights without consequence and actions will be of limited value. Be aware that the Learning element may seem redundant at first glance but this is often the one that is left out in the heat of the project. Thus, breaking the chain of learning and giving way to accumulated documentation with no purpose (the good old report in the drawer) and actions that are meaningless to the process (delivering on activities in the project plan and not considering whether these are the activities to bring you closer to the end goal). This is pinned put in more detail in the following.



# Learning loops

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One of the key elements of the learning mechanism is to take the time to define intervals and points of impact, learning loops, where you actively process your collected data and transfer it into new activities.

The act of processing learning is a quite simple and intuitive process with three steps:

**SHARE**
Share the analysed data

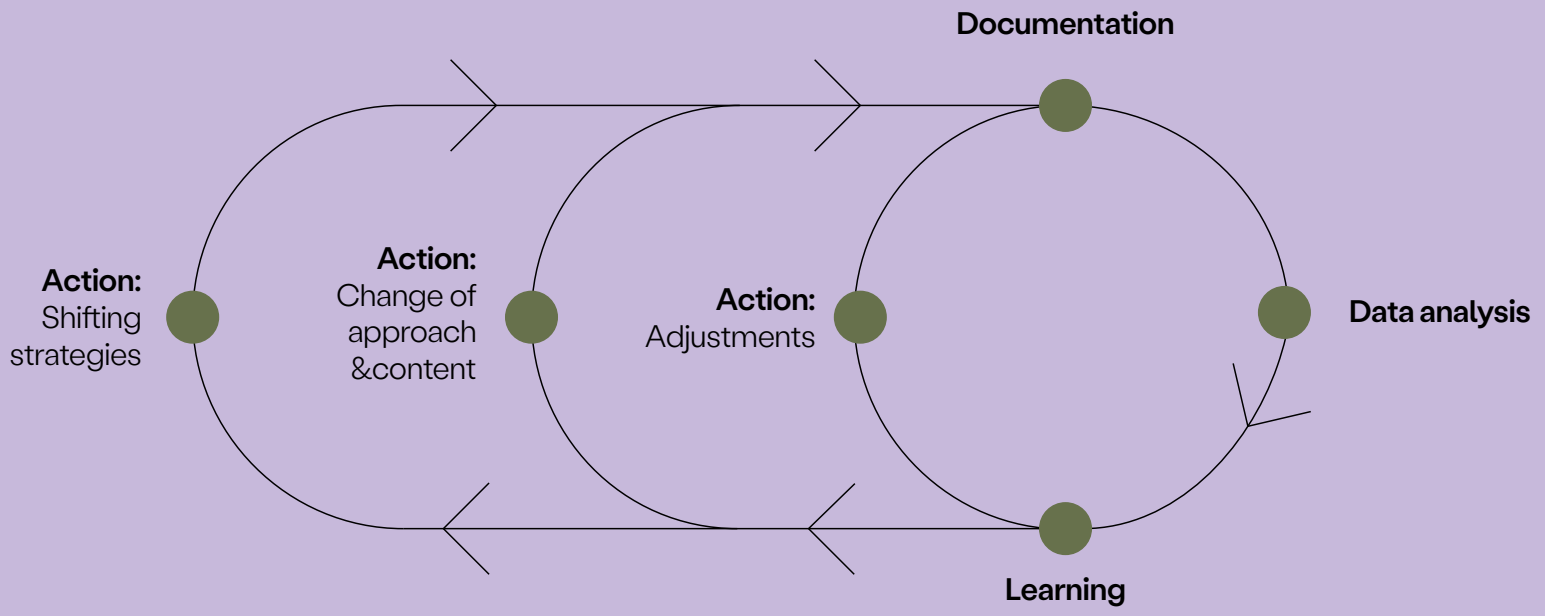
**LEARN**
Discuss which new insights this data brings to the process

**REACT**
Decide which new actions the learning gives rise to

It can be overwhelming and ineffective for teams to constantly revisit aims every time new insights challenge a process. To avoid this, the learning mechanism lets you organize at which intervals and on what level, you want to address and process what you learn.

The model describes how you can organise learning to take place in a varied frequency depending on the nature of the actions that need to be taken. To incorporate this framework into your process you must try to identify the different occasions that are available in your process where teams/partners/collaborators meet around the project to steer it forward. In some cases it can be necessary to build new learning activities into your project - such as knowledge sharing sessions.

# Actions in the learning mechanism




Here, the actions at different intervals have been added to show how the actions at different levels run in different intervals - different learning loops. From minor adjustments in the everyday managing of the process to entirely shifting strategies affecting the direction of the process.

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# Structuring the learning loops

This table gives examples of how to structure the different actions in the different loops based on the learnings you have made. Try to fill out the model with your team based on the needs and characteristics of your process.

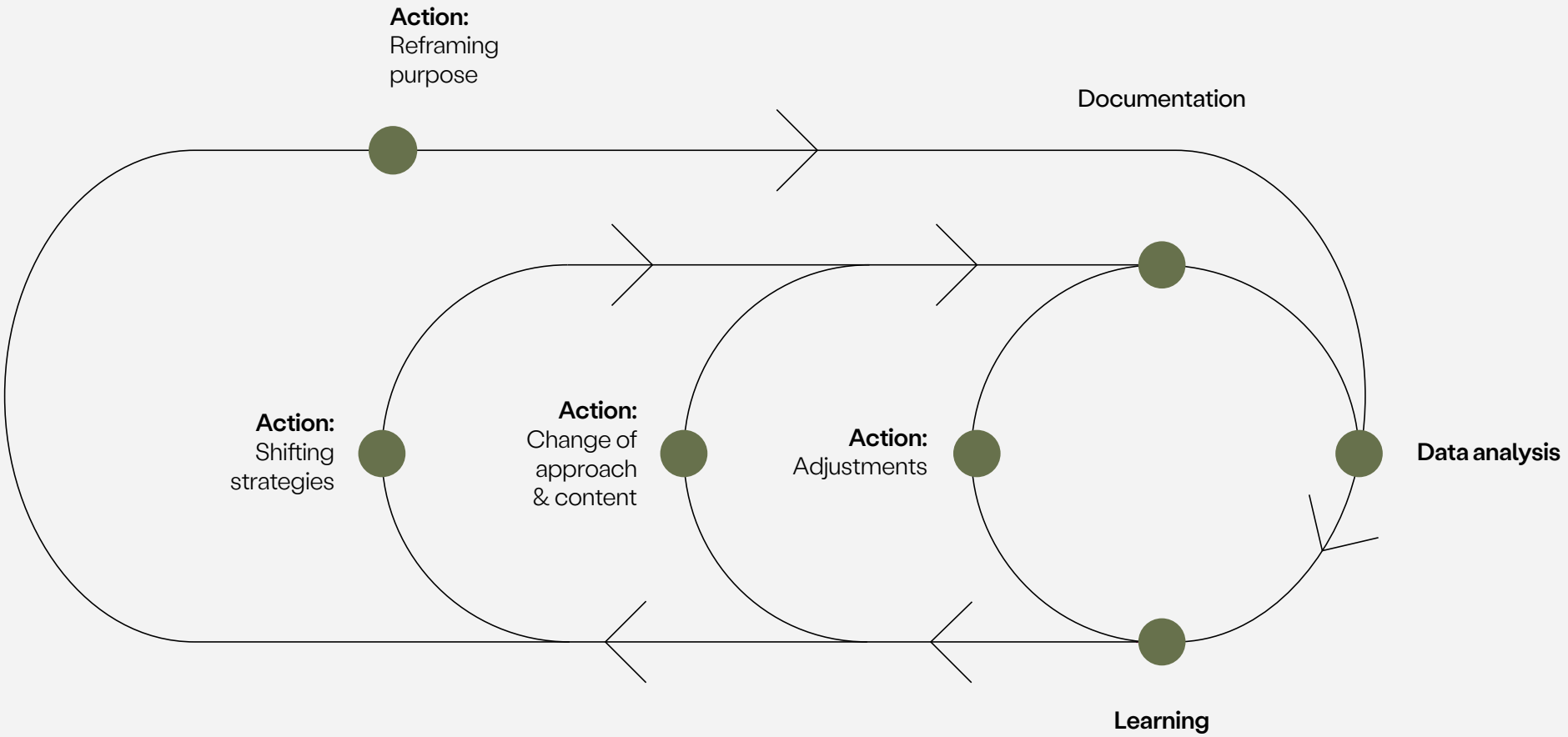
| | ADJUSTMENTS | CHANGES IN APPROACH & CONTENT | SHIFTING STRATEGIES |
|---|---|---|---|
| ACTIVITIES | **Team meetings**<br>**Peer-to-peer sessions**<br>**Prototype tests** | **Steering group, consortia and partner meetings** | **Advisory board meetings**<br><br>**Internal capacity building activities** (knowledge sharing, workshopping, courses etc.) |
| AIM | **Minor and ongoing adjustments and improvements of activities** | **Decisions that affect activities, process and sometimes budget** | **Strategic decision that will affect the long term direction of the process** |
| CADENCE | **Frequent** (daily/weekly) | **Monthly or bi-monthly** | **Infrequent** (eg. quarterly) |

# Reframing purpose

In the above, we have outlined how to build activities of collecting, analysing and interpreting data into new actions in your process. However, if we take learning seriously we must also be critical about how the learning that we collect and process will inform and possibly alter our broader strategic narrative - across projects and throughout the organisation. Therefore, the final and most far-reaching learning loop in the model helps us raise or gaze from the current project and to our project portfolio or organisation at large. Just like we apply learning loops within a project, we can learn across projects, organisations and even society if we have the right setup.

This is especially relevant for innovation processes that maneuver in a context where different projects run in parallel and inform each other - such as mission-driven portfolios or broadly scoped innovation programmes. Here, the insights from one project can potentially translate into actions that will define a completely new partnership.

As was the case with the former learning loops, think about who should be involved in these sessions for which activities and at which cadence. Formats could for instance be management or board meetings but the nature of these activities really do rely on the nature of the process and the collaborative parties.

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# Make it yours!

With this model, we have given you a step by step guide on how to integrate a learning framework into your innovation process. Several of the steps are intuitive, some even obvious, but the important focus here, is that you design and maintain a constant curiosity and a rigorous persistence on allowing what you learn to improve and sometimes challenge your process.

Your task is to adapt these steps into a process that supports and compliments your given context, innovation process and the way you work to align team, partners and stakeholders around you goal.

Enjoy!

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