

How to Run a 5-Day Innovation Sprint

With Sierra Calhoun-Pollard, Ph.D; Director of the Blackstone LaunchPad at the University of Florida, and CEO of The Winnovation Agency

Sierra has built a rapid-fire innovation process that brings together industry partners and cross-disciplinary teams to turn complex challenges into validated prototypes in less than a week. Her 5-Day Sprint model has been adopted by universities and corporate partners alike. It works because it blends the discipline of design thinking with the urgency of real-world execution.

In practice, this sprint model helps organizations learn faster, unlock new ideas, and build a culture of experimentation... all in five days.

The 7-Step Process to Generate Faster and Better Ideas

Step 1: Frame the Challenge (Pre-Sprint)

Before sprint week begins, meet with your corporate partner or business sponsor to clarify the problem space.

- Focus on the Goldilocks Zone — not too broad, not too narrow.
- Avoid pre-baked solutions; identify a real gap or unmet need.
- Rephrase vague goals (“We need more customers”) into problem statements rooted in user pain points.

Output: 1 clear problem statement and “How Might We” framing question.

Step 2: Craft a Strong “How Might We” Statement

A “How Might We” statement is your North Star. It must empathize with real users and anchor your sprint in human context.

Sierra’s Rule of Thumb:

1. Start with empathy. Connect to a real person, not a process.
2. Anchor it in a target audience.
3. Focus on the root cause, not the symptom.
4. Keep it open-ended — invite exploration, don’t dictate the answer.

Output: A human-centered challenge question that inspires creative exploration.

Step 3: Day 1: Immerse and Empathize

Kick off with a short industry presentation from your partner; 20–30 minutes on who they are, their mission, and their challenge. Then teams dive into research mode:

- Conduct quick interviews or observations.
- Capture pain points, motivations, and barriers.
- Build empathy maps to synthesize what users feel, think, and need.

Goal: Understand the user deeply before ideating a single solution.

Step 4: Day 2: Ideate at Scale

Quantity over quality...at least at first. Run gamified ideation sessions to produce as many ideas as possible.

Tools Sierra Uses:

- Crazy 8's sketching game
- "Worst Possible Idea" brainstorming
- Open wall of sticky notes. If it's not full, you're not done.

Teams then cluster and select ideas that align with top pain points.

Output: 3–5 concepts per team ready to prototype.

Step 5: Day 3: Prototype

Move from discussion to creation.

- Encourage low-fidelity prototypes (sketches, paper mockups, Figma screens, cardboard models).
- Combine individual sketches into a unified concept.
- Use available materials. Speed matters more than polish.

Sierra's mantra: "The robot doesn't have to work. It just has to communicate the idea."

Goal: Make ideas tangible enough to test.

Step 6: Day 4: Test and Validate

Get real-world feedback fast.

- Put your prototype in front of your target audience (customers, users, or peers).
- Ask open questions, avoid leading ones, and capture reactions.
- Validate assumptions: What works? What doesn't? What surprises you?

Teams decide whether to pivot, refine, or double down based on evidence.

Output: A refined prototype with early validation and learning insights.

Step 7: Day 5: Pitch and Reflect

Each team presents a 5-minute pitch followed by 4 minutes of Q&A.

Judges evaluate based on:

- Innovation & creativity
- Feasibility (can it work?)
- Viability (does it make sense?)
- Use of design thinking process

Celebrate learnings as much as wins. The goal isn't perfection at this stage. It's speed, empathy, and momentum.

Why This Works

It compresses the full design thinking cycle (empathy, ideation, prototyping, validation, and iteration) into five days of structured collaboration. This model works because it creates psychological safety to experiment, forces decisions through time pressure, and gives teams a tangible sense of progress. The result is more than just new ideas. It's a culture of people who know how to create them.

Start Your Own 5-Day Sprint in 30 Days

(A starter plan you can copy)

- **Week 1:** Choose your challenge and define a “How Might We” statement. Recruit a facilitator and 3–6 person teams.
- **Week 2:** Run pre-workshops on empathy and ideation. Share challenge brief with all participants.
- **Week 3:** Host your 5-day sprint (Day 1–5 as outlined).
- **Week 4:** Capture insights, host a short reflection session, and identify ideas to pursue further.

By Day 30: You'll have prototypes, user insights, and a shared language of innovation across your team.

Common traps → Practical Countermove

Trap

Teams jump straight to solutions

Groupthink during ideation

Perfectionism in prototyping

Shallow validation

Ideas die after the sprint

Countermove

Slow down: Reframe with a “How Might We” first.

Mix disciplines and gamify the process.

Go low-fidelity. Speed beats polish.

Test with real users (even 3 interviews can change everything)

Assign ownership to keep momentum beyond day 5.

Watch the full
live-playbook
build

www.highlinebeta.com/beyond-the-core

