

Lean Startup Entrepreneurial Training

By OIST Innovation

The Lean Startup Entrepreneurial Training offers researchers a practical introduction to the Lean Startup methodology, framed around the real-world commercialization of technologies developed at OIST. Guided by instructors from the NSF I-Corps™ network, teams of practice customer discovery through interviews, rapid validation of hypotheses, and iterative refinement of value propositions. The workshop shifts focus away from the invention itself and toward the human who will use the product. Some of the core lessons are:

- Start with the person, not the product. Presentations and early experiments should describe who you are helping, what problem they have, and why that problem matters to them, in plain human terms.
- Define first adopters precisely. Rather than assuming broad markets, identify the “first best adopters”: the specific group most likely to change their routine because your offering delivers concrete value.
- Value drives change. People change behavior only when they perceive clear value: time saved, cost reduced, or quality improved. Value must be specified for a narrowly defined customer profile before scaling.
- Testing beats polishing. Conduct interviews and experiments early (“do it first, perfect later”) to surface incorrect assumptions; workshop facilitators cautioned that roughly half of initial hypotheses are likely to be wrong.
- Metrics that matter. A sustainable business is predictable, repeatable, scalable, and adaptable. Focus on learnable metrics that validate whether a repeatable sales process and adoption pathway exist.
- Competitive advantage is not just lower cost. Claiming “we’re cheaper” is rarely a defensible long-term differentiation; instead, demonstrate how your solution integrates into users’ lives and workflows to create unique, hard-to-replicate value.
- Show impact, not process. When pitching, emphasize a clear user scenario that demonstrates the product’s impact; the specific development process matters less than the tangible outcomes for the user.

Teams should run structured customer discovery: craft hypotheses about users and value, perform targeted interviews, observe behavior in context, and iterate on the value proposition. Use early adopters as learning partners to shape product features and go-to-market approach. Design experiments that test whether a repeatable sales or adoption process exists before investing heavily in scale. Some recommendations are:

- Narrow target customer profiles to the most specific persona possible.
- Frame interviews to elicit the true cost of inaction for users.
- Replace “cheaper” claims with measurable impact statements (time saved, error reduction, etc.).
- Build a minimum viable demonstration that shows user impact in a real scenario.

This training reframes commercialization as a human-centered, evidence-driven process: identify who benefits, prove the value for them through rapid learning, and only then design for scale. The Lean Startup approach converts academic inventions into pragmatic, customer-validated ventures.