

Introduction to Open Space Technology (1/7)

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1. What is Open Space Technology?

Open Space Technology is a way to format a group meeting, retreat or conference that generates communication, collaboration, innovation, and other solutions to challenges and transitions. It convenes large groups of people, engaging them in constructive conversation on a focused topic in a highly participative manner. Supporting group sizes of 25 to over 2000, Open Space encompasses one to three days depending upon desired outcomes. Following a well-established process, the collective group takes responsibility for the detailed agenda and proceedings such that the outcome is always relevant and appropriate.

OST is based on the concept of a community of collaboration and a village marketplace of ideas. Participants continually move between community and the marketplace of issues and topics. This introduces a constant mixing and cross-pollination of group input, producing systemic and sustainable results.

Open Space is an intricately structured process founded upon passion for change and a balance of individual and group responsibility. Without passion, enthusiasm for an idea will soon wane, and without responsibility, there is risk that the ideas will never move forward. Some organizations are employing these session structures to accomplish strategic visioning, new product development and problem resolution as well as to address many other tough challenges which cannot be resolved without systemic intervention. Others are using these session structures to deepen insight and broaden understanding about future organizational concepts and markets.

Printed results of the complete proceedings may be made available by the end of the event through a shared ownership process. Open Space dissolves barriers to collaboration while effectively building alignment and shared purpose. Buy-in of proceedings and resulting actions are immediate and thorough. Minimal lead and design time is required.

The key factor to determining group size is adequate physical space. Since a successful outcome is predicated on good communication and dialogue, the introductory event and subsequent breakout discussions are conducted in a circle. The importance of the circle cannot be overemphasized. It is critical to the openness and authenticity of the communication.

Open Space is a large group process that brings "the whole system into the room." Open Space capitalizes on the richness and adaptability found in the harmonious integration (not homogenization) of diversity. Each person is fully heard and takes responsibility for their own contribution and learning. The collective knowledge of the entire organization is integrated and brought to bear on immediate solutions as well as long-term capabilities.

Open Space Technology Meetings are:

- Easy to organize, requiring very little lead time
- Effective for small to large groups (25-2000)
- Interactive
- Effective for existing organizations, coalitions, associations, or those that are newly formed
- Facilitated by only one or two facilitators, no matter how large the group
- Less expensive and less complicated than other large group methodologies

The use of Open Space Technology has been effective in a diversity of settings, cultures and countries. The method has been used by communities working towards peace, chemists designing new polymers, tribal and governmental leaders planning land use, community advocates and local government designing literacy programs, conference organizers holding conferences in this format, architects designing pavilions for the Olympics, etc. The dynamics and the results are always the same: input from stakeholders at all levels, new ways of thinking and working, large amounts of work done rapidly, bringing perceived competitors together on issues and projects, organizational flexibility, interdepartmental or intercommunity teamwork, a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of passion and energy for the challenges ahead.

Introduction to Open Space Technology (2/7)

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2. History of Open Space (OS)

Open Space technology was developed by organizational consultant Harrison Owen from Maryland, U.S.A.. In 1985, app. 85 consultants and facilitators gathered for the Third Annual International Symposium on Organization Transformation. The first two iterations of this continuing international event had been organized in a most traditional manner: pre-announced schedules of workshops, papers, panels, key speakers, and all the rest. But the consensus of participants was, that despite monumental planning effort extending over a long time, the real excitement came in the coffee breaks. In the Third International Symposium, Harrison Owen, experimented with an open conference format:

At the point of arrival, the participants knew only when things would start, when it would conclude, and generally what the theme might be. There was no agenda, no planning committee, no management committee, and the only facilitator in evidence essentially disappeared after several hours. Just 85 people sitting in a circle. Much to the amazement of everybody, 2 1/2 hours later we had a three day agenda totally planned out including multiple workshops, all with conveners, times, places and participants.

Observably, the operative mechanism was simplicity itself. As each person determined that they had some area of exploration they would like to pursue, they would write a brief description on a small placard, announce their topic to the assembled group, post the placard on the wall and sit down. When no further topics were posted, the original proposers determined the time and place for meeting, and anybody interested in a particular topic signed up. That was it.

(Comp. Harrison Owen: Opening Space for Emerging Orders)

As a definable approach to organizing meetings Open Space, however, has been in existence for somewhat more than 20 years. Probably, it has been around as long as Homo sapiens has gathered for one purpose or another. It is only that our modern wisdom has obfuscated what we already knew and have experienced from the beginning. In Kenyan Culture, for example, coming together in a circle to discuss important issues – known as “baraza” – has traditionally been deeply embedded in the village culture.

3. When to use OS and when not to use OS?

Open Space Technology is appropriate

- when a diverse group of people must deal with a complex and potentially conflicting material.
- when nobody knows the answer.
- when ongoing participation is required for success.
- when the knowledge and the expertise of stakeholders from all level are needed.
- when an existing organization needs re-energizing.
- when creative planning needs to be done quickly.
- when an organization faces challenges that need immediate action.
- when communication needs to improve.
- when opportunities for the future need to be explored.
- when an organization is in its embryonic stage, and needs to develop its vision and structure quickly.

Open Space Technology is not appropriate

- when the answer is already known.
- When the conference conveners feel the need to be in charge and control the outcome.

Introduction to Open Space Technology (3/7)

4. Requirements for Open Space

(comp. Harrison Owen: A User's Guide to Open Space Technology)

Open Space Technology requires very few advance elements. There must be a clear and compelling theme, an interested and committed group, time and a place, and a leader. Detailed advance agendas, plans, and materials are not only un-needed, they are usually counterproductive.

4.1 The theme:

Creation of a powerful theme statement is critical, for it will be the central mechanism for focusing discussion and inspiring participation. The theme statement, however, cannot be a lengthy, dry, recitation of goals and objectives. It must have the capacity to inspire participation by being specific enough to indicate direction, while possessing sufficient openness to allow for imagination of the group to take over.

4.2 The group:

The group must be interested and committed. Failing that, Open Space Technology will not work. The key ingredients for deep creative processes are real freedom and real responsibility. Freedom allows for exploration and experimentation, while responsibility insures that both will be pursued with rigor. Interest and commitment are the prerequisites for the responsible use of freedom. There is no way we know of to force people to be interested and committed. That must be a precondition.

One way of insuring both commitment and interest is to make participation in the Open Space event completely voluntary. The people who come should be there because they want to be there. It is also imperative that all participants know what they are getting into before they arrive. Obviously they can't know the details of discussions that have yet to take place. But they can and should be made aware of the general outlines. Open Space is not for everybody, and involuntary, non-informed participation is not only a contradiction in terms, it can become very destructive. This raises the obvious question of what to do with those people whom you want to involve, but who, for whatever reason, do not share your desire. There are two possibilities. The first is to schedule two sessions, and trust that the first one will be so rewarding that positive word of mouth testimony will draw in the recalcitrant. The alternative is to respect the wishes of those involved. In the final analysis it remains true that genuine learning only takes place on the basis of interest and commitment, and there is absolutely no way to force any of that.

The size of the group is not absolutely critical. However, there does seem to be a lower limit of about 20 to 25. Less than 20 participants, and you tend to lose the necessary diversity which brings genuine interchange. At the upward end of the scale, there have been successful Open Space Conferences with appr. 200 people.

4.3 The space:

The space required is critical, but does not need to be elaborate or elegant. Comfort is more important. You will need a room large enough to hold the entire group, with space to spare in which the participants may easily move about. Tables or desks are not only unnecessary, but will probably get in the way. Movable chairs, on the other hand, are essential.

The initial setup is a circle with a large, blank wall somewhere in the room. The wall must be free from windows, doors, drapes, and with a surface that permits taping paper with masking tape. The wall should also be long enough so that the total group may stand before it, and never be more than three to four deep. The center of the circle is empty, for after all we are talking about Open Space.

Introduction to Open Space Technology (4/7)

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If the room is very large, additional break-out areas may not be required, but they are always helpful. One breakout room per 20 people usually is a good formula. Best of all is the sort of environment in which there is an abundance of common space. If you are going to use a conference center or hotel, find one with plenty of conversation nooks, lobbies, and open grounds, where people may meet and work undisturbed, and without disturbing others. Breakout rooms should also be set up with chairs in a circle.

A separate room for meals is ideal, but sometimes it works to have meals buffet style in the main meeting room. Supplies needed include flip chart paper, masking tape, markers, computers (one per 10 people), a printer, and paper.

4.4 The time:

The time required depends on the specificity of result you require. Even a large group can achieve high levels of interaction combined with a real sense of having explored the issues in a matter of eight hours. However, if you want to go deeper than that, reaching firm conclusions and recommendations (as would be the case for strategic planning or product design), the time required may stretch to two or three days.

More important than the length of time is the integrity of the time. Open Space Technology will not work if it is interrupted. This means that "drop-ins" should be discouraged. Those who come must be there at the beginning, and stay for the duration if at all possible. By the same token, once the process begins, it cannot be interrupted by other events or presentations. These might come before or afterwards, but never in the middle.

5. Structural elements of Open Space

(comp. Harrison Owen: A User's Guide to Open Space Technology)

Although it is true that an Open Space event has no pre-determined agenda, it does have an overall structure or framework. This framework is not intended to tell people what to do and when. Rather, it creates a supportive environment in which the participants can solve those issues for themselves. Minimal elements of this framework include: Opening, Agenda Setting, Open Space, and Closing. These elements will suffice for events lasting up to a day. Longer events will require the addition of Morning Announcements, Evening News, and possibly a Celebration.

A standard Open Space Design, using all these elements appears below. If the event you anticipate lasts longer than the time indicated, simply replicate the middle day. If shorter, you will find that an Opening, agenda setting, Open Space, and Closing will suffice. Generally speaking, the minimum time required is five hours, but that is cutting it rather close.

5.1 Opening

We have found that a very informal opening works well, especially if the group involved is an intact work group. An evening meal and a time for catch-up conversation will effectively set the stage. Should the group not have any prior association, the simple device of having all the participants introduce themselves by giving their names and telling a short story from their lives to illustrate who they are will usually do the job. Detailed and involved "icebreaking" exercises do not seem to work very well, and more to the point, set the wrong tone. After all, we want Open Space. An integral part of opening the space is the announcement of the 4 principles and 1 rule of Open Space by the facilitator.

Introduction to Open Space Technology (5/7)

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(comp. Harrison Owen: A User's Guide to Open Space Technology)

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5.1.1 Four principles (comp. Lisa Heft, www.openingspace.net)

Whoever comes are the right people.

This principle reinforces that the wisdom to achieve solutions is present in the room and the group is not to worry about who is not present nor to panic about who is.

As Lisa Heft puts it:

Rather than wait for the 'expert' on a given issue, realize that whoever is moved to come to your discussion group has been moved by their passion for the issue, not just their organizational role. The best and brightest are convening to discuss something they really care about - across departmental or hierarchal lines. And what if nobody comes to your session? It may be that either you are a visionary ahead of your time, or there are so many great topics to choose...either way you have the choice to either join in another discussion or spend the time writing your thoughts down to enter into the meeting proceedings.

Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.

This principle keeps the attention on the best possible effort in the present, not worrying about what we "should have done". Even if the discussion is going off on a tangent, the people are asked by this principle not to try to control the discussion, because wherever it goes, may be exactly the direction for the breakthrough of new ideas. Follow the energy of the group.

Whenever it starts is the right time.

This principle reminds people that creativity cannot be controlled. It does not make sense to wait for a specific person to arrive, because time is precious and good ideas may be created in these first moments.

When it is over, it is over.

This principle encourages people to continue their discussion so long as there is energy for it. This may result in a short session not filling the entire time allotted, or it may result in a session longer than the time allotted. Since creativity and intuitive thinking do not happen according to a schedule, the groups are asked to follow the energy of the discussion.

5.1.2 The Law of Two Feet or the Law of Motion and Responsibility:

If people feel they are neither learning from nor contributing to a discussion, they are required to get up and move to another discussion, without waiting for the group to complete its conversation. Their fresh insights and creative thoughts are needed elsewhere. Whereas in some cultures this may be seen as rude and disrespectful, in Open Space it would actually be disrespectful to the process and to the greater group to sit and stay in a discussion for which the people felt they were not being useful. The result is a room alive with movement and animated discussion as people travel from group to group to use their best energy and thinking where it is most needed.

The law of two feet invites 2 animals to take part in the Open Space: the bumble bee and the butterfly.

There are always people in conferences who cannot get settled, who hop from one workshop to the next. People might think: "These guys are not serious about their job here. They should decide where to go and stay there." Open Space acknowledges the contribution of these people who hop from one flower to the next like bumble bees. They have an important function in nature as well as on this conference because they cross-pollinate between the different workshops. They take aspects of the discussion they just left to the next discussion. This law encourages people to be a bumble bee and honor the bumble bees around them for what they are and what they contribute.

And there are butterflies. They look very delicate and they are deceptive in their impact. Seeing a butterfly sit on a flower is such a precious moment of silence and awe. On conferences there are always butterflies. They may never attend a session; they stand in the coffee break area, by the pool or at the bar. People might think: "These guys should get back to work and join a discussion!" But maybe people have something to learn from them. They know how to take a break. They take care of themselves. And they might be joined by another butterfly and they might end up in an important discussion, the results of which will go in the book of proceedings. Open Space acknowledges their contribution. The law encourages people to be a butterfly or to learn from them and honor them for what they are and what they contribute.

5.2 Agenda setting:

The group sets their own agenda by identifying issues and topics that have heart and meaning to them; topics for which they have passion and interest and for which they are willing to host a discussion group. In the middle of the circle, there is a stack of paper and markers. People who are passionate about a topic, come to the center of the circle, write the topic on paper, announce their name and topic and then post it to the wall. In approximately 20 minutes, the wall is filled with topics. The agenda setting as well as the explanation of the principles and the rule are given below.

5.3 Open space:

Open space is exactly what the words imply, open space and time for the group to do its business. There is literally nothing here at the start.

5.4 Morning announcements:

A short period every morning for the group to catch up on what it is doing, where, when, and how. Nothing elaborate, no speeches, just the facts, nothing but the facts.

5.5 Evening news:

This is usually a time for reflection and occasionally fun. Not to be confused with a formal closing session, the approach is "What's the story?" -- with participants voluntarily providing the tale.

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5.6 Celebration:

If your Open Space event is like all the ones we have seen, particularly multi-day affairs, by the last night it will be time to celebrate, otherwise known as having a party. Even in "serious" undertakings like preparation of the corporate strategic plan, when it is over, it is over, and people will enjoy celebrating that fact. We suggest doing the celebration in the spirit and manner of the rest of the event. All of which means don't plan it in advance. It may be worthwhile to have some taped music if your people are inclined to dance, but other than that you will undoubtedly find that the talent you need is already available in the folks you have. Use it. Skits, songs, humorous reviews of what has happened, will amply fill the evening, and add to the learning experience.

5.7 Closing:

We try to keep the closing simple and serious. Simple in that there are no formal presentations and speeches. But serious, for this is the time for announcing commitments, next steps, and observations about what the event has meant. The closing event is best conducted in a circle with no "head table." Start anywhere, and go around the circle allowing each participant, who wants to, the opportunity to say what was of significance and what they propose to do. But do make it clear that nobody has to say anything. In very large groups, hearing from everybody is obviously impossible, but two or three folks may be asked to volunteer.

5.8 Book of proceedings:

In a recent conference 200 participants created 65 task force reports (a total of 200 pages) which were available as the participants left the conference. Mechanically, all that is required is a bank of computers (low-powered laptops will do) and a request to each group organizer to enter the results of their deliberations into the system. They can either type it in themselves, or for the "nontypables," a small group of secretaries will do the job. We print out each report as it is entered and hang it on the wall, providing an ongoing, real-time record of the discussions. The obvious advantage here is that participants find out what is happening, as it is happening, rather than waiting until the end when it is too late. Of course, having the book of proceedings at the end of conference, rather than six months later, is a pleasant and positive surprise.

5.9 Meals:

You will notice that meals are not listed on the agenda, nor are there any coffee breaks. The reason is quite simple: once the conference starts to operate in small groups, there is usually never a time when something of substance is not going on. And in accord with the Third Principle, it will take place in its own time. All of this creates a small, but not insoluble problem for such things as meals and coffee-breaks. Our solution has been to have coffee and other refreshments available in the main meeting room, so people partake when they are ready. No need for the whole group to get into lockstep, and stop an important discussion just because it is coffee-break time. Likewise with meals. We suggest buffets, open and available over a several hour period, so people can eat when they want to. There are two exceptions to the flexible meal/coffee-break schedule: an opening dinner if there is one, and dinner on the last night.

The whole point is that the pacing and timing of the conference must be determined by the needs of the group and its learning process, and not by the requirements of the kitchen.