

## **What is Open Space Technology?**

Open Space Technology was created in the mid-1980s by organizational consultant Harrison Owen when he discovered that people attending his conferences loved the coffee breaks better than the formal presentations and plenary sessions. Combining that insight with his experience of life in an African village, Owen created a totally new form of conferencing.

Open Space conferences have no keynote speakers, no pre-announced schedules of workshops, no panel discussions, no organizational booths. Instead, sitting in a large circle, participants learn in the first hour how they are going to create their own conference. Almost before they realize it, they become each other's teachers and leaders.

Anyone who wants to initiate a discussion or activity, writes it down on a large sheet of paper in big letters and then stands up and announces it to the group. After selecting one of the many pre-established times and places, they post their proposed workshop on a wall. When everyone who wants to has announced and posted their initial offerings, it is time for what Owen calls "the village marketplace": Participants mill around the wall, putting together their personal schedules for the remainder of the conference. The first meetings begin immediately.

Open Space Technology will not help you take or maintain control of people, pacify the masses with the illusions of participation, or work very well when you already know what needs to be done and how to do it.

If, however, you find yourself in a situation that is overwhelming (or nearly so) in its complexity of tasks, diversity of people and needs, importance and potential for conflict, and undeniable urgency, then it is likely the best possible way to bring people together, focus on what matters, make essential connections, and do what must be done.

### **Open Space Technology has been defined as:**

- a simple, powerful way to catalyze effective working conversations and truly inviting organizations -- to thrive in times of swirling change.
- a methodological tool that enables self-organizing groups of all sizes to deal with hugely complex issues in a very short period of time.
- a powerful group process that supports positive transformation in organizations, increases productivity, inspires creative solutions, improves communication and enhances collaboration.
- the most effective process for organizations and communities to identify critical issues, voice to their passions and concerns, learn from each other, and, when appropriate, take collective responsibility for finding solutions.

The goal of an Open Space Technology meeting is to create time and space for people to engage deeply and creatively around issues of concern to them. The agenda is set by people with the power and desire to see it through, and typically, Open Space meetings result in transformative experiences for the individuals and groups involved.

### **What is Open Space Technology best used for?**

Open Space Technology is useful in almost any context including strategic direction setting, envisioning the future, conflict resolution, morale building, consultation with stakeholders, community planning, collaboration and deep learning about issues and perspectives.

### **When is Open Space Technology the best meeting format to use?**

Any situation in which there is:

- A real issue of concern
- Diversity of players
- Complexity of elements
- Presence of passion (including conflict)
- A need for a quick decision

Open Space will work under all of these circumstances. It is only inappropriate when the outcome of the meeting is predetermined or if sponsors are not prepared to change as a result of the meeting.

### **What outcomes can I expect from an Open Space Technology Meeting?**

Open Space Technology meetings can produce the following deliverables:

- Every single issue that anybody cares about enough to raise will be "on the table".
- All issues will receive as much discussion as people care to give them.
- All discussion will be captured in a book, and made available to the participants.
- All issues will be prioritized.
- Related issues will be converged.
- Responsibility will be taken for next step actions.

In meetings of one and a half or two and a half days duration, all of these deliverables will be achieved with deep conversation and commitment to action. Meetings of a shorter duration will have many of these positive effects, but typically in meetings of a day or less, there is more emphasis on conversation and less on action.

## How does an Open Space Technology meeting work?

Open Space operates under four principles and one law. The four principles are:

- *Whoever comes are the right people*
- *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.*
- *When it starts is the right time*
- *When it's over it's over*

The Law is known as the Law of Two Feet:

- *If you find yourself in a situation where you are not contributing or learning, move somewhere where you can.*

## What does Open Space look like?

A meeting room prepared for Open Space has a circle of chairs in the middle, letters or numbers around the room to indicate meeting locations, a blank wall that will become the agenda and a news wall for recording and posting the results of the dialogue sessions.

Essentially an Open Space meeting proceeds along the following process:

- Group convenes in a circle and is welcomed by the sponsor. The facilitator provides an overview of the process and explains how it works.
- Facilitator invites people with issues of concern to come into the circle, write the issue on a piece of quarter size flip chart paper and announce it to the group. These people are "conveners."
- The convener places their paper on the wall and chooses a time and a place to meet. This process continues until there are no more agenda items.
- The group then breaks up and heads to the agenda wall, by now covered with a variety of sessions. Participants take note of the time and place for sessions they want to be involved in.
- Dialogue sessions convene for the balance of the meeting. Recorders determined by each group capture the important points and post the reports on the news wall. All of these reports will be rolled into one document by the end of the meeting.
- Following a closing or a break, the group might move into convergence, a process that takes the issues that have been discussed and attaches action plans to them to "get them out of the room."
- The group then finishes the meeting with a closing circle where people are invited to share comments, insights, and commitments arising from the process.

- ◆ *Whoever comes are the right people*
- ◆ *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have*
- ◆ *When it starts is the right time*
- ◆ *When it's over, it's over*

## More about the principles:

- *Whoever comes is the right person.*

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.*

Don't try to control the discussion - even if it goes off on a tangent -- that may be exactly the direction for the breakthrough of new ideas. Follow the energy of the group. By the way, the only time that Open Space does not work is when somebody in charge feels they must control the outcome of the discussion or the event.

- *Whenever it starts is the right time.*

Don't wait for some specific person to arrive; begin with whomever is drawn to the discussion. The balance to this is...

- *When it's over, it's over.*

You may settle the problems of the world in twenty minutes; on the other hand, you may wish to continue your discussion for longer than the allotted time. Creativity and intuitive thinking do not happen according to a schedule - take it where it wants to go. If you're done early you can join another group; if you take longer, just move your discussion elsewhere to make way for the next group scheduled.

There is only one law: **The Law of Two Feet** (which, because not everyone has two feet, can also be called the Law of Motion and Responsibility):

If you feel you are neither learning from nor contributing to a discussion, you are encouraged to get up and move to another discussion, without waiting for the group to complete its conversation. Your fresh insights and creative thoughts are needed elsewhere.

***The law of two feet***



***If you find yourself in a situation where you are not contributing or learning, move somewhere where you can***

The final guideline is to **Be Prepared to Be Surprised.**

If you carry your preconceived agenda into a conversation, you may never receive the greater results and more intuitive thinking that can come from a group of diverse and passionate people taking a conversation where it can go.

***Be Prepared  
to  
Be Surprised !***

## **Resources**

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

The unofficial home of the Open Space community worldwide

Websites of Open Space Practitioners -A characteristic of the Open Space community is a spirit of generosity. There are many valuable Open Space resources on these sites:

[www.chriscorrigan.com](http://www.chriscorrigan.com)

[www.openingspace.net](http://www.openingspace.net)

[www.michaelherman.com](http://www.michaelherman.com)

[www.opencirclecompany](http://www.opencirclecompany)