

Open Space Technology

Overview

"With Open Space, there are not ideas that remain hidden or unspoken. Everything emerges."
- An Open Space practitioner

Open Space Technology allows groups, large or small, to self-organise to effectively deal with complex issues in a very short time. Participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance. What Open Space presents to us is, at the very least, a new way to hold better meetings. It can however grow to become a new way of organising that infuses entire organisations or smaller communities.

Harrison Owen initiated Open Space Technology in the mid 1980's. He had had several experiences of good to great conferences where the real highlights were the conversations *outside* of the formal agenda. This led him to wonder whether a different way of organising might not be possible. His question moving forward became how to combine the level of synergy and excitement present in a good coffee break with the substantive activity and results characteristic of a good meeting.

In seeking for answers, he took some of his inspiration from witnessing a four-day long rite of passage for young men in a west African village in Liberia. Though there was seemingly no organising committee or formal structure, the four days ran smoothly with all 500 people managing themselves, the activities, events, food, music, and all the other aspects of the ceremonial process. From this experience, Owen took some of the fundamental principles that have come to shape Open Space today. In brief they are: the circle as a centre from which organising takes place; a breath, or rhythm, that people know and can organise around; the village market place where connections are made around different offerings; and the bulletin board, where information is posted and shared.

Open Space has since become the operating system beneath some of the largest self-organising meetings the world has seen. The benefit of Open Space is that people get involved in contributing, and working through, the areas that they are truly engaged in and committed to. The danger (to some) is that freedom is given to people to choose their response and involvement without being controlled by a planner or organiser.

How it works

An Open Space meeting can last from two hours to several days. When people gather they co-create the agenda of the meeting together, allowing it to be shaped by the passion and interest of the people.

Every Open Space meeting begins in a large circle. One facilitator is all that is needed. After an initial welcome, he or she will open the space, by introducing the theme, or burning question, which has brought people together. She explains that within the next hour, their agenda will be formed on the large seemingly very blank wall. She explains that all of the sessions will be posted and hosted by the participants themselves. People are invited to propose sessions and discussions on topics that they themselves are *passionate about and willing to take responsibility for*, in response to the theme or question at the centre. But before beginning the collective agenda-making, the facilitator still needs to explain the basic principles and one law of Open Space.

Four Principles

'Whoever comes are the right people'. This principle speaks to people to let go of their need to have certain specific people join their group. Perhaps they would like the people in established positions of power, or the experts in an area. With this principle people are invited

to acknowledge that those who care enough to freely choose to join a conversation are the best ones to do good work in that area.

'Whenever it starts is the right time'. This principle recognizes that while a session may begin at a certain hour, creativity and inspiration don't always work according to our desired timing. Things really get started when they are ready, not before, and not later.

'Whatever happens is the only thing that could have'. This invites people to let go of expectations for how things should go, or where they should lead to. We need to learn to let go of these expectations and instead be present and pay attention to what is actually happening and emerging between us.

'When it's over, it's over.' We don't know how long it takes to deal with an issue. In Open Space, the issue is more important than the schedule. If we finish before the allotted time is over, then move on to something else. We should not stay somewhere just because the schedule tells us to. It also works the other way. If we have not finished when our agenda slot is over, we can self-organise to extend it into another agenda slot, making sure we post it on the wall for others to know, and/or find ways to continue the work on the issue beyond the conference.

One Law

The "law of two feet" encourages people to take responsibility for their own learning, peace of mind, and contribution. If someone is in a place where they feel they are not learning, or able to contribute, the law of two feet encourages them to leave and move on to another group, where they think they might add more value, and feel more engaged. They may also choose to do something else altogether. Most importantly people shouldn't be somewhere where they feel they are wasting their time.

From this law follows that some participants will become "bumblebees", people who fly from one session to another, and just like bees, cross-pollinating what is going on between sessions, and/or "butterflies", who choose at times to skip formal sessions and listen to their own sense of what they need to do in a given moment. Sometimes two butterflies meet outside of the sessions in informal conversation, and a new topic might arise out of that conversation.

These principles and the law provide the *container* for the Open Space, enabling people to take full responsibility for their own learning and contribution. They create a context in which people can be focused and work hard, but remain flexible and open to surprise. "Be prepared to be surprised" is a typical reminder in an Open Space gathering.

With these basic instructions, the group is now ready to fill their empty wall:

	Main Room	Tea Room	Lounge	Library	Garden
8:30-9:30	Community Meeting				
9:30-11:00					
11:30-13:00					
13:00-14:00	Lunch				
14:00-15:30					
16:00-17:30					
17:30-18:00	Convergence				

The facilitator asks people to think about their idea or burning question in response to the theme. After a short period of silence she invites whoever is ready to come to the centre, grab a marker and piece of paper, and write down their idea or question, read it out loud, and post it on the wall – choosing one of several pre-arranged space/time choices. Sometimes there are a few moments of quiet, but invariably people jump up and begin to write and post sessions. Within a short period of time, the agenda for the day or for the week is laid out. People go up to the wall to read the different offerings, signing up for the groups they wish to join. Now the work can begin.

During a longer Open Space, the group will come back together as a whole for a brief meeting in the morning and evening, to report on main breakthroughs, to post new sessions as they occur to people, and to help maintain a sense of the whole.

The facilitator of each group needs to compile the report of their session. Typically the outputs are typed and compiled during the duration of a meeting for people to go home with the final report. Where decisions need to be made, time needs to be allowed for focusing and prioritizing the full output. This can be done in a matter of a few hours, even with larger groups.

“The 2 days of Open Space that followed were a success, a miracle in the words of the CEO and he added that 3 years ago they received a thick report from ____ (a famous international strategic company meeting in Israel) that cost \$1.5 million, and they could implement a little. Now we produced something much better in the cost of 1 page of their report, and it seems that we can implement it all.” – Avner Haramati

Application

Open Space is being used around the world – it has been used in townships in South Africa, in dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, in many corporations, in the NGO sector for planning and community involvement, and in the Public Sector with similar uses. It can be used for 5 people or 1000.

According to Harrison Owen, Open Space works best where conflict is present, things are complex, there is huge diversity of players and the answer was needed yesterday. The personal investment is critical coupled with a real sense of urgency among participants. The greater the diversity, the higher the potential for real breakthrough and innovative outcomes. It works particularly well in the move from planning to action, where real action is facilitated by people stepping in and taking responsibility where they care.

Case Examples – South Africa’s Transition and International Summer Villages

The first case is a description taken from an article by Harrison Owen on the beginning of Open Space Technology. In the early summer of 1992, OST was used in one of the South African townships to promote useful discussion among several political groups. The focus of conversation was on improving communications in the area. For a full day, representatives of the various political parties along with nearby industry (largely white) worked together. It would be a supreme overstatement to say that all issues were resolved, or that love and light broke out in full abundance. But the discussions were intense, productive, without rancor, and contrasted sharply with conditions in a neighboring township where conversations had ceased and bloodshed commenced. There was also a continuing benefit. Several days after this particular gathering, one of the participants called to say that for two years as president of a local school organisation, he had been attempting to get the people involved in creating their future. Nothing had worked. They sat like bumps on a log. Then he tried Open Space Technology, and his problem was reversed. The people became involved, and he had but one option. Get out of the way.

A second case shows an example of how Open Space together with an Appreciative Inquiry process helped an international organisation build a common platform and plan for the future.

Children's International Summer Villages (CISV) is a not-for-profit organisation, which develops cross-cultural understanding in children and youth from around the world through peace education. They have over 60 national offices. They wanted to develop a new strategic plan involving the grassroots of their organisation.

They decided to use an Appreciative Inquiry process with Open Space to combine the potential of Appreciative Inquiry to collect information, and build a shared foundation, direction and vision for the future with the potency of Open Space to mobilise people into action in areas they care deeply about.

Each country received a handbook explaining the Appreciative Inquiry process, and began a large-scale interview process to collect stories of personal experiences of inspiration and beauty that people carried with them from their time with the organisation. Several thousand interviews were synthesized into a storybook with a summary of core values and wishes for the future. The book became the foundation for a 2 1/2 day AI summit, in which people immersed themselves in the stories and data, building pride and clarity around what they do well and where they can naturally grow their strengths. From this, they developed tangible goals for the future (in the form of provocative propositions).

An overall umbrella theme for the future became the theme for a one day Open Space session, which included 150 people from across the world. The results were explosive. Lots of practical ideas, and plans, and focus areas emerged for CISV, which at the end were prioritized and voted on by the participants and several others who participated online. When reporting on outcomes from small groups, people related their reports to the overall goals, ensuring that everyone understood the implications of each report and how it tied to the overall vision before voting. Everyone, including online participants, voted on the top priorities for CISV. They also identified where they were willing to initiate moving the organisation forward.

What they accomplished with this process was a plan, which had become alive in people and had in a sense begun even before the action steps were executed. They used AI and Open Space to rekindle grassroots passion, engaging commitment to implement from the outset.

Commentary

Open Space works particularly well when the passion, engagement and burning questions are present. In such a situation, it truly helps a group move forward swiftly and clearly. On the other hand, it can fall flat when the engagement or interest is low. People need to be present because they want to be, not because they have been told they must be. For these reasons the intention is vital, as is expressing it clearly in the invitation to join an Open Space session, meeting or conference. With a clear intention and in the presence of a real need, Open Space is a beautiful testament to how little organising is required by an organiser when allowing people to self-organise their way forward. In fact, the art of the planner, with most potent Open Space sessions, is learning to truly get out of the way.

Open Space can be run on its own, but our feeling is that it works equally well and sometimes better when combined with other tools and processes, such as World Café, Appreciative Inquiry, Scenario Planning, and others. In this case, ending with Open Space is most typically the norm, allowing an initial process of clarifying ideas and views to be followed by stepping into taking responsibility for certain pieces.

One of the reasons why it's important to combine Open Space with other processes is that a key risk is that an Open Space conference ends without convergence happening between the different groups. A lot of great conversations may have happened in small groups, but they haven't been woven together adequately. Finding the ways to lay the groundwork for a productive Open Space session and to create this convergence and reconnection with the whole is an important challenge for facilitators and organisers using this process. Also, while Harrison Owen points out that Open Space is useful in situations of conflict, the risk is that

conflicting parties choose to just work with the people who agree with them. In that situation, combining it with processes that are more directly aimed at resolving conflict (rather than being productive in spite of conflict) can be useful.

Open Space is all about handing the responsibility back to people themselves. Two core questions characterizing Open Space are: “What do you really want to do,” and “why don’t you take care of it?” As with the World Café and many other forms, the real art form lies in identifying the right calling question that truly draws people out of themselves and into a shared arena of thinking and acting together.

“I can't imagine that there could be a better method for enabling a group to discover its potential.” - Open Space practitioner

Resources

Owen, Harrison. *Expanding our now. The story of Open Space Technology.*

Owen, Harrison. *Open Space Technology, A users guide.*

<http://www.openspaceworld.com>