

## Open Space Technology

**Background:** Open Space Technology was created in the 1985 by Harrison Owen a management consultant organizing the International Symposium on Organization Transformation, an annual conference. It was first used at the *Third Annual International Symposium*. The first two symposia were designed like most others with detailed agendas, speakers, handouts, etc. What they discovered at the conclusion of the second symposia was that despite the planning effort, the real value and excitement occurred during the coffee breaks, which, of course, were not planned at all.

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.

Open Space meetings, events and organizations, participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance, such as: What is the strategy, group, organization or community that all stakeholders can support and work together to create?

Opening Space, as a leadership practice can create inspired organizations, where ordinary people work together to create extraordinary results with regularity.

While Open Space is known for its apparent lack of structure and welcoming of surprises, it turns out that the Open Space meeting or organization is actually very structured -- but that structure is so perfectly fit to the people and the work at hand, that it goes unnoticed in its proper role of supporting (not blocking) best work.

Open Space is appropriate in situations where a major issue must be resolved, characterized by high levels of complexity, high levels of diversity (in terms of the people involved), the presence of

potential or actual conflict, and with a decision time of yesterday.

Open Space runs on two fundamentals: passion and responsibility. Passion engages the people in the room. Responsibility ensures things get done. A focusing theme or question provides the framework for the event. The art of the question lies in saying just enough to evoke attention, while leaving sufficient open space for the imagination to run wild.

Open Space is, as Owen likes to say, more highly organized than the best planning committee could possibly manage. It is also chaotic, productive and fun. No one is in control. A whirlwind of activity is guided from within by a handful of simple Open Space principles.

There are five key principles for Open Space events:

1. Everyone who comes to an Open Space conference must be passionate about the topic and willing to take some responsibility for creating things out of that passion.
2. Whoever comes is the right people.
3. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
4. Whenever it starts is the right time.
5. When it is over it is over.

Additionally, there is one overriding law: the Law of Two Feet: "If you find yourself in a situation where you aren't learning or contributing, change your situation." This Law has three implications. If you are not learning, contributing or engaged in a topic:

1. Get up and go somewhere where you will be, or
2. Change your level of engagement or contribution. This means moving yourself to another level of awareness and participation. This is sometimes called the Laws of the Bumblebees because people that move to other sessions cross-pollinate ideas to other groups, and

## Facilitator's body of Knowledge Research Project

3.) Create your own space to think through issues and ideas. This is sometimes called the Law of the Butterflies. In these spaces random and highly valuable conversations can spring up.

**Application:** Here is how to do an Open Space:

A. **Set - Up:** Put the seats in a large circle. This arrangement signifies that all are equal--both as givers and receivers.

- Set up one focal wall as the "Event Marketplace". Place the Theme of the event centrally in the Event Marketplace.

- Post the Five Principles and the Law of Two Feet.

- Prepare several flipchart pages with "Topic:" and "Convener"

- Set up the Breaking News Wall for posting results of discussions.

B. **Instructions:** At the start of an Open Space a group facilitator welcomes the group, states the Theme of the Event, and explains the concept of the Open Space. Participants sit in a circle of chairs all facing each other equally, with the opportunity to work together to discuss and resolve issues, if they so choose. Review the Walls, Principles, and Law.

**Determine the Topics:** Have the group identify some issue or opportunity related to the specific Event Theme for which they have a genuine passion and for which they will take real responsibility for discussing. Taking responsibility means the proposer will designate a time and space and then convene the session. Ask the participants with a topic of interest to give it a short descriptive topic name. Ask the person to address the group with: "I would like to address \_\_\_\_\_", or "I'd like to talk with people about \_\_\_\_\_". Then they should post the topic on the Market Place Wall.

C. **Set the Agenda:** Determine when and where the discussion will be held. Give people time to discuss together, negotiate, combine similar session topics, and move sessions around so that most people can attend the key sessions of their choice.

By the time the agenda is complete, the community should have specific discussion

groups determined, as well as the time and place for each group. A number of groups should run simultaneously.

D. **Record the Discussion:** The facilitator should get a volunteer to record critical and important ideas and points raised during the discussion.

E. **Timing:** Set up the sessions with the space available and within the constraints of the time available. Most discussions will take 20 to 45 minutes. You can also add time at the end for each group to present an overview of their topic to the rest of the community.

### References:

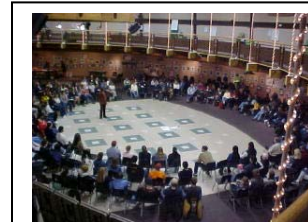


**Open Space Technology: A User's Guide** (2nd Ed.) Owen, Harrison, Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. San Francisco, CA. 1997 ISBN 1-57675-024--8

<http://www.openspaceworld.org/cgi/wiki.cgi?AboutOpenSpace>

<http://freechild.org/Firestarter/OpenSpace.htm>

<http://www.openspaceworld.com/>



Circle Seating



Market Place Wall



Select Topics to Attend



Breaking News Wall