

## **Open Space Technology Overview**

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

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, policy making, 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:

1. Whoever comes are the right people.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.
3. When it starts is the right time.
4. 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."*

The four principles and the law work to create a powerful event motivated by the passion and bounded by the responsibility of the participants.

### **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:

1. Group convenes in a circle and is welcomed by the sponsor. The facilitator provides an overview of the process and explains how it works.
2. 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”.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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”.
7. The group then finishes the meeting with a closing circle where people are invited to share comments, insights, and commitments arising from the process.

### **An Open Space Scenario**

Open Space is a powerful way to get people working FAST. In 2.5 days, this is what usually happens...

**Opening**...people sitting in a circle, many of whom who have never sat in a circle, so this is a little strange, but there is a sense of anticipation, and certainly as the sponsor begins to introduce things and the facilitator begins to walk around the inside of the circle people are challenged to make something new. The level of excitement rises.

**Agenda setting**...folks create an agenda that uses the whole facility as a meeting space, that centres on small invitations to convene intimate dialogue sessions, or that asks questions of the assembled masses, to attract expertise to a topic, to figure out how to move things forward.

**The Marketplace...**the agenda items are out, the invitations have been issued and one wall of our meeting room is covered with topics, arranged by time and place. We have an agenda.

People are invited to go to the wall, mill around, decide what to attend, which discussions to contribute to, which opportunities to learn from. It's chaotic and loud, but people are beginning to sink their teeth into what's on offer.

**Day One dialogue...**it starts slowly but warmly. Small groups gather. People meet each other, toss ideas out, poke around the edges of assumptions, find natural allies. Conversations convene and disperse, and notes are entered into laptops and collated into a real time book of proceedings. If we are posting online and there are people out in cyberspace, they will begin to pick up the thread of the conversations there, and extend them in asynchronous time.

**Day One Evening...**people are tired, but charged up. There is inspiration in the room and the dialogue is humming out on the Net. There is a sense of possibility that something really interesting might be happening. The anxiety from the morning is gone, replaced by curiosity and an emerging sense that things are changing. Evening news features some feedback but also dinner plans, hopes for the next day, thanks yous and challenges.

**Day Two...**a few more topics are proposed in the morning news session, some overnight dreams and insights are shared but then people quickly get down to work. Dialogue deepens quickly and people are surprised by how projects begin to take shape, how assumptions shift and new connections are made at deep and powerful levels.

**Day Two evening...**tired again and hopeful that something concrete can come of it all. Looking forward to bed. Net still humming with activity, book of proceedings is printed out, with discussion from online added to it, and copies are made for everyone.

**Day Three...**facilitator introduces this day as focusing on action planning. Thick books of proceedings are sitting in the middle of the circle. You have done this. You have produced these 150 pages of conversations, notes, sketches of the future. Today is the day to get it out of the room. To let passion guide your direction and use your responsibilities and abilities to attract the resources we need to make it happen.

People go away for an hour and read the book and consider their responses to it. What patterns do I see? Which projects beg to be undertaken? What can I do? What WILL I do? It's quiet and introspective. Small hushed conversations may begin but mostly people are really asking themselves what they are now capable of doing.

We open the space again and this time we invite action. We invite projects to come forward and we invite people to work on them and create the commitments that take them out of the conference setting and back to the real world. There is no more time to rehash the issues...the time to implement is now.

Action groups meet, convening around the tasks that people volunteer to champion. Conversations are recorded and the invitation is put back on the net to attract others to the projects. People come back into the closing circle to report on their work and are surprised and delighted at how deep and how easy it has been to initiate change. A closing circle ends the ritual and people say their farewells.

After the conference, the work BEGINS. Now we have to find ways to continue to connect people and support the projects that have started. We provide them with places and methods to communicate...blogs, wikis, conference calls, meeting spaces, follow ups in OpenSpace OnLine. People leave with a job to do, self-designed, self-assigned, supported by the sponsor of the meeting and assisted by workgroups both large and small.

#### **Further resources**

***Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*** by Harrison Owen. This is "the book" on how to conduct Open Space Technology meetings. It is available in large bookstores. If you can't find the book, you can download an older version of the guide for free from Harrison Owen's website at [http://www.openspaceworld.com/users\\_guide.htm](http://www.openspaceworld.com/users_guide.htm).

***Open Space Technology: A User's NON-Guide*** edited by Michael Herman and Chris Corrigan. This book is a deep dialogue between 37 leading practitioners of Open Space Technology on a wide range of underlying principles that inform Open Space Technology. You can download the book for free here:  
<http://www.globalchicago.net/wiki/wiki.cgi?OpenSpaceTech/UsersNonGuide>.

***Inviting Organization: evolution is now and open space*** by Michael Herman. This book forms the backbone of the material covered in the practice workshop. It is available for free at: <http://www.globalchicago.net/ost/invitingorg/index.html>.

***Tales From Open Space*** by Harrison Owen. This was first ever collection of Open Space Technology stories and case studies. The original book is out of print, but again, you can download it for free at <http://www.openspaceworld.com/tales.htm>.

***Open Space Technology Notes*** by Michael Lindfield. This is an extensive paper, written following a training Lindfield did with Harrison Owen in 1994. It works well as a compliment to the User's Guide and contains much practical information about facilitating Open Space Technology and working with the grief cycle.  
<http://www.openspaceworld.org/tmnfiles/lindfield.htm>

For further inquiry, reading lists relating to Open Space Technology can be found at the worldwide Open Space website at:

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

### **Ongoing Support**

If you choose to learn more about Open Space Technology, I invite you to become a member of the world wide community of Open Space practitioners. There are a number of websites, email lists and other resources out there for you. Here are some of the best:

***OSLIST*** is the international Open Space Technology practitioner email list. This is an incredibly supportive community of 350 or so practitioners from all over the world who are always eager to answer questions and play with ideas. You can subscribe to the list at: <http://listserv.boisestate.edu/archives/oslist.html>

***World Wide Open Space*** is the central online resource for Open Space Technology practitioners. It is located at <http://www.openspaceworld.org>

***Open Space World Network*** is a wiki web which you can use for free to host proceedings, make notes or use in support of Open Space Technology meetings you are facilitating. <http://www.openspaceworld.net>

***Michael Herman's Open Space Resources.*** Michael's own collection of resources can be found at <http://www.globalchicago.net/wiki/wiki.cgi?OpenSpaceTech>

***Chris Corrigan's Open Space pages.*** My own website has a number of resources and an Open Space weblog updated several times a week with articles, quotes and other online findings of interest to Open Space Technology practitioners. It's at <http://www.chriscorrigan.com/openspace>

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