

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY (a supporting tool for KM4Dev)

1. Overview

Open Space Technology is a meeting method that helps individuals and groups become more effective in work environments that are rapidly and constantly changing by developing their skills as collaborative problem solvers and lifelong learners. Open Space Technology captures the knowledge, experience and innovation in the organization not captured through conventional closed system processes.

It is a self-organizing practice guided by a mix of collective activity and personal commitment, releasing inherent creativity and leadership in participants. By inviting people to take responsibility for what they care about, Open Space establishes a marketplace of inquiry, reflection and learning, bringing out the best in the whole group, community or organization.

Because the nature of this process is open, risks are high; once the “door is opened” there is no turning back—committing the sponsor to support activities defined by the group.

2. What are some operational questions the tool can help answer?

- How can we cope with change as we move into an increasingly unclear future?
- How can we best utilize complex elements and diversity of players in X situation?
- How can we manage this conflict productively (at any organizational level or between the organization and the government)?
- How can we begin to tackle complex internal issues or issues with partnering organizations or governments that have strong emotional aspects or implications? (Issues in which passions run high?)
- How can we improve communications at all levels?

3. Considerations

- a. *Do you have a predetermined agenda or desired outcomes? If that is the case than Open Space is not a recommended approach. Only the topic is prechosen. The Open Space process allows the participants to create the outcomes. Open Space creates the “space”, the opportunity for those who are passionate about the topic to raise the issues and decide outcomes. In that way strong commitment is almost sure to follow.*
- b. *How open is the invitation list? The right people are those who care about the topic, who are already interested. Invitations should not be limited or determined by position or role, but by the interest the person shows in the topic. Passion is the key word. If the people are passionate about the topic, they are the right ones to invite. Passion and willingness to take responsibility should guide the invitation list. Open Space is about leveraging knowledge that people bring into the Open Space. There can be a limit, however, to how many people are invited.*
- c. *How focused is your issue. The broader the issue or topic, the more time it will take for common understandings to begin to take shape. Broad topics will attract a broad attendance; a more focused topic will likely attract a more specific group. The scope of the focus will influence how much time you allot for the Open Space meeting.*
- d. *Be sure you have the right audience for the topic. The topic and audience should be matched or tailored for each other—lack of energy means a bad match.*

- e. *Are stakeholder leaders prepared to lead differently, giving control of the agenda? Open Space depends on freedom for process and outcomes to unfold. Leaders can send signals seriously inhibiting or risking the success of an Open Space meeting. Stakeholder leaders must commit to the topic and to the openness of the process. It would be wise to hold a smaller Open Space if a larger Open Space is eventually in view. It is essential the stakeholder leaders understand and commit to Open Space processes and assumptions.*
- f. *Do you have enough "critical mass" for this issue to move forward? The connections and communications set up during the process are essential for further movement. Again, shared passion for the topic is essential.*
- g. *Boundaries are necessary even for such freewheeling process as Open Spaces. Limits often give freedom to act. Some starting boundaries might revolve around budgetary restraints, schedules, and project domain.*

Adapted from: <http://www.openspaceworld.org/tmnfiles/2pageos.htm>

What basic assumptions does the tool rely on?

- Groups will work well with democratic processes
- Groups will need little guidance

4. Facilitating the Process

The Group

Who will use the tool?

Staff, government partners, implementing organizations

When in development operations can the tool be used? Which sector(s) of operations is the tool suited for?

Evaluation and assessment, project inception, project design, program strategy formulation (organization planning), project implementation, problem solving

How long does it take?

One day of Open Space produces good conversation; Two days - common understanding; Three days -tangible results (resolution, leadership and plans).

Questions for Measuring Impact:

- Is a safe, inclusive environment where ideas can be freely exchanged emerging?
- Are people satisfied that issues have been fully explored?
- Were there significant knowledge gaps (missing people) from the process?
- Are plans ready for implementation or are parts still unclear?

5. Follow up Activities:

Project teams can self-select which emerging projects they will take part in according to those for which they have the most energy. Each team is encouraged to appoint a coordinator who is accountable to management for stewardship of resources. Each team decides the goal of the project and target completion date, team roles, identifies key challenges and essential resources needed and steps needed to achieve the goal.

In Open Space, even though the meeting ends, issues evolve. The on-going learning and discovery are important benefits that need to be nurtured. On-going, energized communication is essential. Create places where successes, new issues, and concerns can be shared. Key to eventual success is to keep the learning alive.

Case Box: The Rockport Company

On the morning of Thursday 21st October 1993, the Rockport Company, a subsidiary of Reebok International, closed for two days. No shoes were shipped. No orders were processed. Scheduled meetings were canceled. The head office was locked. Except for a skeleton crew left behind to answer the phones, all 350 members of Rockport's workforce, including John Thorbeck, the company's president, and his senior executives, gathered in a cavernous warehouse for a two-day meeting which had no agenda. Harrison Owen stepped into the center of the loosely formed circle of intrigued participants to make his opening introduction. Half an hour later his briefing was complete, and it was time for people to make their offerings. It took a little while for things to move, eventually one Rockport employee stepped forward, then another.

Within an hour an energized group had posted dozens of issues on the wall: distribution, on-time delivery, customer service, excess raw materials. Some topics had never before been recognized as issues of concern, such as women's opinions of the Rockport environment, eliminating political games, overcoming "we vs. they" thinking, getting rid of paperwork. By the end of day two, 66 different sessions had taken place, with the number of participants ranging from five to 150 or more on the hot topics

At one point during the event a security guard (who wasn't even a Rockport employee) happened to mention that he spent much time on his feet and would love to wear the kind of comfortable shoes that Rockport made. But his company would never buy them as they didn't go with the security company's uniform. Why couldn't Rockport redesign the uppers to match the uniform? And so a new product range was born. Even if it were nothing more than an average performer in the market, sales would be around \$20 million a year.

At the planning stage of the Open Space meeting, Anthony Tiberii, Rockport's senior vice president and chief financial officer, had been one of its most vocal opponents. He felt the company could not afford to lose two whole shipping days. After the gathering he changed his mind, and was easily able to justify the investment.

6. Further Resources

Case study links:

See page 125, this World Bank workshop used Open Space. Excellent overview of OST by Owen. <http://www.worldbank.org/participation/LearningFinal.pdf>

USAID Best practices box halfway down page. <http://www.usaid.gov/about/partdevel/docs/anthol5.html>

OSLIST Archive – discussions on the OSLIST have been archived since 1998. The archives are fully searchable and contain countless stories, discussions, and musings on OST. <http://listserve.boisestate.edu/archives/oslist.html>

Other links:

<http://www.husdyr.kvl.dk/htm/php/Tune02/Workshop02.htm>

http://www.interaction.org/alpi/enevs/enevs_jan03.html

<http://www.pdfforum.org/confreport02.html>

References

Owen, Harrison (1992). *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*. Potomac, Maryland, USA: Abbott Publishing.

Owen, Harrison (1995), *Tales from Open Space*. Maryland: Abbott Publishing.

DOING AN OPEN SPACE: A TWO PAGE PRIMER

WHAT IS OPEN SPACE?

It is a self-organizing practice of inner discipline and collective activity which releases the inherent creativity and leadership in people. By inviting people to take responsibility for what they care about, Open Space establishes a marketplace of inquiry, reflection and learning, bringing out the best in both individuals and the whole.

WHEN TO USE IT:

- ❖ Where conflict is holding back the ability to change
- ❖ Where the situation is complex
- ❖ Where there is a high degree of diversity
- ❖ Where there is an urgent need to make speedy decisions
- ❖ Where all stakeholders are needed for good decisions to be made
- ❖ Where you have no preconceived notion of what the outcomes should be

PROBABLE OUTCOMES:

- ❖ Builds energy, commitment and shared leadership
- ❖ Participants accept responsibility for what does or doesn't happen
- ❖ Action plans and recommendations emerge from discussions as appropriate
- ❖ You create a record of the entire proceedings as you go along

HOW IT WORKS:

The Law of Two Feet means you take responsibility for what you care about -- standing up for that and using your own two feet to move to whatever place you can best contribute and/or learn.

Four principles apply to how you navigate in open space:

Whoever comes is the right people

Whoever is attracted to the same conversation are the people who can contribute most to that conversation—because they care. So they are exactly the ones—for the whole group—who are capable of initiating action.

Whatever happens is the only thing that could've

We are all limited by our own pasts and expectations. This principle acknowledges we'll all do our best to focus on NOW-- the present time and place-- and not get bogged down in what could've or should've happened.

When it starts is the right time

The creative spirit has its own time, and our task is to make our best contribution and enter the flow of creativity when it starts.

When it's over, it's over

Creativity has its own rhythm. So do groups. Just a reminder to pay attention to the flow of creativity -- not the clock. When you think it is over, ask: *Is it over?* And if it is, go on to the next thing you have passion for. If it's not, make plans for continuing the conversation.

HOW OPEN SPACE WORKS WHEN THERE IS CONFLICT:

The Law of Two Feet gives participants freedom to move at any time to a discussion they care about. Caring creates common ground, and helps to remind participants of higher purpose.

GROUP SIZE:

To date, we know that Open Space accommodates groups from 5 to 1500 people. It can be run for a couple of hours to 3 or more days; consecutively or over time; at one site or at multiple sites connected by computer and/or phone and video. The longer the space is open, the more transformative the outcomes.

THE STEPS IN BRIEF:

1. Select a focusing statement or question for your gathering. It should frame the higher purpose and widest context for your discussion in a positive way.
2. Invite the circle of people: all stakeholders or all the people you'd like to have in the room. Include the theme, date, place and time of gathering in the invitation.
3. Create the circle: Set up chairs in a circle or in concentric circles, leaving space in the center. Choose a blank wall for the Agenda Wall and label it AGENDA: AM, PM across the top. Set up a table for computers near a wall you label NEWS. Put blank sheets of news print (about quarter size of a flip chart page) and colored felt pens in the center of the circle. Near the Agenda Wall and the News Wall put masking tape for people to post papers on the walls.
4. To begin the gathering: Facilitator explains: the theme, the simple process the group will follow to organize and create a record, where to put things up and find out what is happening, the Law of Two Feet, and the Principles of Open Space. Then, facilitator invites people to silently meditate on what has heart and meaning for each of them.
5. Opening the marketplace: the Facilitator invites anyone who cares about an issue to step into the middle of the circle and write the topic, their name, a time and place for meeting, announce it and post the offering on the Agenda Wall -- one sheet per topic—as many topics as he/she wants. They will be convenors who have responsibility for facilitating their session(s) and seeing to it that a report is made and shared on the News Wall.
6. When ALL offerings are concluded, the Facilitator invites people to sign up for what they are interested in and take responsibility for their schedules, using the Law of Two Feet.
7. People participate in discussions. The Facilitator takes care of the space. Reporters enter discussion reports in the computers and printouts are posted on the News Wall.
8. Closing Circle: all reconvene an hour before closing to share highlights, "ahas" and key learnings in a Dialogue format: simply listening to whatever people have to offer without discussion, or you can pass a "talking stick" for each person to hold as he/she is talking, or to pass along if the person doesn't want to contribute anything.
9. Mail out whatever record is created and an address list to all who came.
10. If it is a several day gathering, do steps 3 through 8 daily.

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