



**Center for Leadership & Educational Equity**

## Open Space Technology

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*Adapted from Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, Harrison Owen, Abbott Publishing, Potomac, Maryland, 1992.*

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

Open space technology (OST) is designed to deal with real “business” issues, no matter how the nature of the business may be defined. For OST to work, it must focus on real issues that are of passionate concern to those who will be involved. It is effective in situations where a diverse group of people must deal with complex and potentially conflicting material in innovative and productive ways. It is particularly powerful when nobody knows the answer, and the ongoing participation of a number of people is required to deal with the questions.

Open Space will not work, and therefore should not be used, in any situation where the answer is already known, or where somebody at a high level *thinks* they know the answer. OST will work superbly if people are quite willing to admit that they do not know all of the answers, but nevertheless believe that collectively they have a shot at creating viable solutions.

### **How does OST work?**

Simply. Open Space runs on two fundamentals, *passion* and *responsibility*. Without passion, nobody is interested. Without responsibility, nothing will get done. It is therefore important to declare, right up front, what the question, or theme, of the Open Space is. Our question will be: *Put in question here*.

Our Open Space session on *put in date here* will provide just what the words imply, time and space for *put in name of organization or who the participants will be here* to meet in whatever configurations seem appropriate in order to generate new knowledge about our question. Given the talent that will be at this meeting, the design of the day will not be to tell people what to do and when, but instead, to provide a supportive environment in which everyone will be able to do what needs to get done, with a minimum of hassle. At the end of the day, there will be a closing, nothing too formal, but a way to reflect on and share what we have learned together.

We will gather at *put in time here* to set up Open Space. When a participant decides that they want to pursue a particular topic related to our question, they will give it a short title and post it on the board. Then, any other participant who wants to join in that particular exploration will sign up. After a little negotiation, times and places will be arranged for all of the sessions throughout the day. After that, it will be up to all of us to make Open Space work.

As you think about preparing for Open Space, don't just consider good ideas that somebody else might do or be interested in. Think of powerful ideas that really grab you to the point that you will take personal responsibility to ensure that something gets done. Proposing an area of discussion and taking responsibility does not require that you be an expert or that a formal presentation be given. Either or both of these may be true. But it may be equally true that you don't know much about the subject you have proposed, and that you are looking for others with whom you can develop some knowledge. Taking responsibility means that you will simply designate a time and place and then convene the session. Hopefully, this is enough explanation to help you begin thinking now about our Open Space session. There are a few other, simple rules, which we will post and explain in more detail when we meet. See you there!



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## Notes on Open Space Technology

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*These notes are based on Harrison Owen's book, Open Space Technology: A User's Guide and were developed in the field by educators.*

Harrison Owen's book, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (second edition), has all of the information one would need to run an open space event. Several of the pages can be used to make overheads, which are useful when you are introducing open space to a group of people.

Read through the whole book to get a sense of the philosophy and approach of open space. In particular, read pages 72-78, and all of Chapter 7. The overheads to make are: the *theme* of the open space session (that is decided by the planners of the event), the *four principles*, the *law of two feet*, and one with a drawing of bumblebees and butterflies. When you review and/or explain the four principles, it is sometimes useful to read the quote in italics (*what if nobody comes?*) on page 96 after reading the first principle. When you talk about the law of two feet, make the statement that is in italics in the Law of Two Feet section on page 98. And when you talk about butterflies, paraphrase the last paragraph on page 100.

### **Here are some other useful quotes from the book:**

"In a curious way, the act of empowerment is best accomplished by saying little and doing less. In the traditional meeting environment, the role of the facilitator often turns into a mad frenzy of seeking to be all things to all people at every moment. Beyond the fact that the role is totally exhausting and ultimately impossible to maintain, it is the very antithesis of what an Open Space facilitator should be doing. In the Open Space environment, the facilitator must constantly turn freedom and responsibility back to the participants." (p 113)

"To the best of my knowledge, there is exactly one way to absolutely guarantee the failure of an Open Space event, and that is to try and control it." (p 63)

It can be important to plant seeds when you talk in advance with participants about the event ("that would be a great open space topic, why don't you think about convening a session?"), and to pay very close attention to the organization of the event. It is important to remember that open space is not a solution to lack of planning time, nor should people arrive at the event "cold."

### **Mistakes to avoid when organizing Open Space:**

1. Spending too much time trying to figure out the times of sessions so everyone can do everything they want to do (you can't do this with a group of 300, but you can get sucked into it with a smaller group of 25 or so!)—lesson learned: spend as little time as possible creating the sessions, signing up for them, and negotiating changes. You can do it with 300 people in 45 minutes (or less), and with 60 people in 20 minutes!
2. Don't call it Open Space if you are doing it for less than a day. Harrison Owen recommends one-three days.
3. Usually, you sit in a circle, and the person holds up his or her sheet with the title of the session on it, walking around the circle, showing it to everyone while describing what the title means. This is sort of PR for the session, and it gives people a chance to think about what is being offered.
4. Once the sessions begin, the planner(s) go to every room and put a sign on the door that has the time slots on it and the names of the sessions being convened in that room during each of the time slots. Leaving it up to the convenors to do that doesn't seem to work.

In sum, open space runs on passion bounded by responsibility (Owen says that "Open Space runs on two fundamentals, passion and responsibility. Without passion, nobody is interested. Without responsibility, nothing will get done."). State the theme, and then go over the four principles, the law of two feet, and the role of butterflies and bumblebees. Finally, describe how you will go about setting up the sessions (if you have a partner, she can actually walk through the process as you describe what to do), restate the theme, and then begin.

It is often helpful to end a long open space event (a day or more) with a "Talking Stick" ceremony. For some people, this is the most moving and most powerful part of the day. It is worth the investment of time to buy some interesting "talking sticks."



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## Logistics for Open Space Technology

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*Developed in the field by educators.*

Put up long strips of paper on a large wall, forming a large bulletin board of sorts. Then picture making a grid in your mind. Put the time blocks down the left and right hand sides of the wall (9-10:30, etc.). Put the various room names across the top of the paper.

Put a post-it with the appropriate time block (9-10:30) written on it in each of the boxes on the grid (formed by the times across and the room names down). For example, in the box made by 9-10:30 and a room called Peachtree Suite, put a post it with 9:00-10:30 on it. In the box under that in the Peachtree Suite column, put a post-it with 10:30-12:00 written on it, and so forth.

Then make an identical grid next to the one just described, but without any post-its in the boxes formed by the columns. When a person announces a session, they go to the first grid, chooses a room and a time, takes the appropriate post-it with the time written on it from the grid, puts the session name on the post-it, writes the session name in the place where the post-it was on the grid, and goes to the *second* grid and puts the post-it in the appropriate box. So, the second grid eventually looks like the first one did at the beginning, with all of the little boxes on the grid filled with post-its. Only now the post-its ALSO have the session names on them, in addition to the times.

You do it like this for a couple of reasons. In the end, you have two schedule boards...one with the post-its with the session names written on them in each box formed by the time slot/room name, and one with the session names written in the boxes. Also, taking the post-its from one grid and putting them to another makes it clear visually which rooms are still available during each of the time slots. You can also post the 8 1/2x11 pieces of papers (the ones people hold up over their heads when they announce their sessions) with the session name, name of the convenor, and a brief description of the session somewhere else in the room. People can sign up for their sessions on these sheets. Encourage people to sign up for more sessions than they can attend.