

An Abstract from Jeannine Yancey
on

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY: A USERS GUIDE

by
Harrison Owen

INTRODUCTION:

Open Space Technology emerged out of a conference that Harrison Owen organized in 1983. It was an international conference for 250 participants and took a full year to prepare. By the time he had finished with all the details, frustrations and egos that went with such an event, he resolved never to undertake such a painful task again. Feedback at the conclusion of the conference was that although the total event had been outstanding, the most useful part of the conference was the coffee breaks.

He connected that experience with an experience he had had as a photojournalist in a small West African village where he observed a celebration of 500 that lasted for 4 days without any visible planning committee or management activities. His observations of the 4 factors that led to the celebration's success have become the foundations of Open Space structure:

1. The village was laid out in a circle with an open space in the middle ("the circle providing the fundamental geometry of open human communication - there being no head or foot, higher or lower, simply people being with people - face to face")
2. **Breath** - the celebration occurred as an ordered progression from the periphery of the town to the center of the circle, and back again. "It was as if the village were breathing," and no planning committee was required.
3. A **bulletin board** provided a convenient, low-tech means for identifying what people were interested in.
4. The village **market place** provided the mechanism for bringing interests together in an orderly way.

Open Space has been tested for the past 8 years with the following results:

- It addresses the "undiscussables" since everybody has the right and responsibility to place items on the agenda
- It unites groups of enormous diversity in terms of education, ethnicity, economics, politics, culture, and social position.
- Conference pre-planning is limited to logistics
- It's been successful with from 5 to 420 participants

Harrison states that, "The technology is not magic, nor does it solve all problems. However, in those situations where highly complex and conflicted issues must be dealt with, and solved, by very diverse groups of people, Open Space can make a major contribution."

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PREPARATION:

Appropriateness - "Open Space Technology (OST) 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. It will not work in any situation where the answer is already known, where somebody at a high level thinks he or she knows the answer, or where that somebody is the sort that must know the answer, and always be in charge."

Focus and Intent - OST is designed to deal with real issues - business, world, or special interest, around which there holds a passion for the participants. Clear articulation of the direction and anticipated general outcome of the event is essential. A powerful theme is the central mechanism for focusing discussion and inspiring participation.

Participation is voluntary based on interest and passion for the issue. If those people who are truly essential to the task don't show, the task will not get done until they're ready. Harrison's experience is that what most often occurs is that the people that don't show up were "not nearly as essential as previously presumed".

The conference will **not** work with "drop - ins" so attendees need to commit to the whole time scheduled.

Space and Time - There is no perfect or ideal optimal space and time - it depends of the appropriateness to the people and the task. As a rule of thumb less than one full day is usually frustrating, longer than 3 days is too long.

- In one day the conversation will be stimulating and intense
- In two days that conversation may be recorded for posterity
- With three days, reflection is possible

"Never interrupt Open Space with something else. ...If you have a series of speakers you want the group to hear, or other program activities you want everybody to be a part of, do all of that before Open Space."

OST requires one room, large enough to allow all the participants to sit in a circle, or at the very least, two or three concentric circles, without crowding. A good rule of thumb is to divide the rated capacity by two (a 200 capacity room can accommodate 100 people). One wall must be clear in order to contain the community Bulletin Board, where people will be taping up notices indicating their areas of interest. Break-out spaces need to be available, preferably varied i.e. rooms, outdoor space, open, closed, shared etc..

Food - Buffet style works well to allow for the flow of sessions and discussion. Snacks and drinks may be available throughout the session.

Supplies Masking tape, markers, charts paper, 3x5 post-its

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CONSULTANT PREPARATION:

The unique and critical role of the facilitator in OST is to 1. **Create** space/time, and 2. To **hold** space/time. Ultimately the group will create and preserve its own sense of time and space, but the act of creation starts with the facilitator. "The job of the facilitator is not to keep things on time, but rather to enable the creation of safe time. It is up to the participants to make their peace with the time they create, and to render judgment on themselves regarding tardiness and punctuality." It's a matter of being rather than doing. "Unless the facilitator is truly and authentically present, nothing that is done, or not done, will make any difference. ...The job of the facilitator is to create time and space in which the group can realize its potential."

GETTING STARTED (CREATING SPACE/TIME)

"The preparations have been made and the people are assembled, everybody is sitting in a circle. One wall is completely blank except for three charts - one outlines the Four Principles; one outlines the entire session e.g. Theme, Process, Bulletin Board, the Market Place, Morning announcements and Evening news; and one has a few words about the Law of Two Feet. ...The purpose of the initial activities is to move the people as quickly as possible into active, synergistic, co-creation. This is not the time for speeches, lengthy explanations, or acknowledgments. What transpires is the absolute minimum necessary to get the show on the road."

State the Theme - Make clear the business of the meeting - why we're here, what do we propose to do. "OST runs on passion bounded by responsibility." The statement of the theme, purpose, objective should be done in such a way that the juices start to flow. This is also a good time to outline any specific expectations in terms of the end product of the event, the form of the product, or what will be done with it.

Describe the Process - Start by briefly describing the history of OST and citing the example of a conference Harrison facilitated where "225 people self-organized a 53 workshop conference in less than one hour, self-managing it over a two-day period, and walking out with 150 pages of proceedings in their hands 48 hours after they started".

The approach is fairly straightforward (using Harrison's suggested script). Describe the Bulletin Board , "You may be wondering how we are going to do all of this. Actually, it is quite simple. In just a little while, I am going to ask each one of you who cares to, and nobody has to --to identify some issue or opportunity related to our theme, for which you have genuine passion, and for which you will take real responsibility. 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 make sure that something gets done."

If nothing occurs to you, that is OK, and if you have more than one issue or opportunity, that is fine too. Once you have your issue or opportunity in mind, come out into the center of the circle, grab a piece of paper and a marker. Write down a short title and sign your name. Then stand in front of the group and say "My issue is _____ my name is _____." After you have announced your theme, take your piece of paper and tape it up on that blank wall." The walk into the circle and the announcement of issue and name is important. By being in front of everybody - a commitment has been made.

Point out that proposing an area of discussion, and taking responsibility for it, does not require that the proposer be an expert or that a formal presentation must be given. Either or both could be true, but it could be equally true that the proposer was virtually ignorant on a particular subject and was looking for some people with whom to share the ignorance and develop some knowledge. Taking responsibility means that the proposer will designate a time and place and then convene the session. ...Assure the assembled group that no area of interest will be denied, and urge everyone to put up as many announcements as they want."

For facilities that are limited to rooms only, you may want to develop a matrix chart displaying available times and dates for the breakout rooms - allocating 2 hours for a session (actual time may be negotiated for more or less). As the proposer announces their session, they post their session on the matrix with a post-it.

Describe the Market Place - The essential activity is for participants to sign up for as many groups as they have interest in. They may even sign up for more than they can attend or double up on sessions since it often turns out that groups are cancelled or combined or they may attend more than one during a single time slot by leaving early or coming late.

Harrison discourages the usual, "What questions might you have, anyone?". The OST mechanisms are so intuitive that there never has been any problem of understanding what needs to be done. "Once the action starts, any possible confusion is resolved simply by watching those who do understand." It's important to keep things moving. His experience is that questions are usually expressions of anxiety (work avoidance) and that "the only useful proof of success is the actual group performance. And the only way to get there is to keep moving."

THE FOUR PRINCIPLES AND THE LAW OF TWO FEET:

PRINCIPLES:

1. Whoever comes is the right people
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
3. Whenever it starts is the right time
4. When it is over it is over

1. Whoever comes is the right people refers to the quality of the interaction and conversation that make the difference. In organizing the event, every effort

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should be made to get invitations to critical people and to urge those peoples to attend. Once the event begins, the first principle goes into effect. Harrison offers this script in the unlikely event no one shows up to an individual session, "So what happens if nobody comes to your group? You could sit there and feel very hurt and angry. Or you might look at it this way. First, it is just possible that it wasn't a very good idea to begin with. Then again it may have been a great idea, but at the wrong time. In either case, you are getting some useful information. There is, however, another possibility. It was a great idea, at precisely the right time, and you are the only person competent to deal with it. There is nothing in the rule book that says a 'group' must be composed of more than one. By the way, when was the last time that you had a large piece of time free to work on a major idea, for which you had a passion?"

2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have - Reminds us that real learning and real progress takes place when we move beyond our original agendas and convention-bound expectations. "It is important to cherish such moments and realize that whatever happens is the only thing that could have."

3. Whenever it starts is the right time - "The real impact of this principle is to serve important notice about the nature of creativity and spirit. Both are essential and neither pay much attention to the clock. They appear (or not) in their own time, which by definition means it is the right time."

4. When it is over, it is over - If the business is done sooner, end. If the business takes longer, negotiate.

THE LAW OF TWO FEET: If a person finds themselves in a situation where they're neither learning nor contributing, they can use their two feet (or equivalent) and go to some more productive place (self-responsibility).

"Just about now in the process of describing the process, people will become a bit restless" and are ready for movement. The above has taken about 15 minutes to describe, 30 minutes is on the long side. The valuable time spent is in the sessions, not listening to the facilitator. "The important function of these moments has to do with the creation of a safe time and space for the group to work in."

TIME TO GO TO WORK:

THE BULLETIN BOARD: The change in pace and task may be introduced like this, "Open Space is rather like swimming. You can read all the books and talk until you are hoarse, but to do the job, you've just got to get in the water. So let's jump in! I now invite each and every one of you who so desires --identify some issue or opportunity related to our theme for which you have real passion. (You may want to re-state the theme in terms of a question e.g. 'What are the issues and opportunities for learning in our organization around - the theme - and how do we take advantage of them?') Think of a short title, and come here into the center of the circle. Take a piece of paper, inscribe the title, sign you

name, and announce your offering to the group; 'My issue is ____ My name is ____' and then go post it on the wall."

People have always started, some groups more slowly than others. If after a long moment no one has moved, you might say, "I suspect that more than a few of you are beginning to wonder how you ever got into all this, and more importantly, how you are going to get out. Well, I have a promise for you. I promise that within an hour you will be looking at the same wall and wondering how we are going to get it all done."

Observations based on Harrison's experience:

Bulletin Board:

- The usual experience is that you feel like you're "at the wrong end of a cattle stampede."
- Confusion adds to the excitement, but make sure all can hear the issues and names as they are spoken
- Rule of thumb - the number of issues relates directly to the number of people in the total group. Groups of 25 - 50 will have about 30 issues, groups of 100 - 200 will have about 75 issues.
- After sessions are posted, the schedule is built by placing the papers in time order e.g. morning sessions on the left side of the wall, those in the early afternoon in the center, those in the late afternoon to the right. In the case of multiple days, separate days with tape, posts, doors etc..
- The group may naturally tend to flow into the Market Place by rearranging sessions or signing up for sessions. So that everyone has an opportunity to post, hold them off (you can suggest that people sit down so that others can see, and that sign ups will be held as soon as everyone's offering has been posted).
- You'll know when it's time to move on. "By this point the level of excitement is markedly higher, as is the noise level. There is not too much you can do about either and you shouldn't even try. The one thing you can do is turn the folks loose and get out of the way."

THE MARKET PLACE: People are ready to move. There are a few last-minute ideas to get across. "Don't take long because you don't have long."

-Conflicts - "These occur when one individual wants to go to two sessions which are scheduled at the same time. The rules are simple. The conflicted person must find the two conveners, and convince them either to combine their sessions, sequence the sessions, or a choice must be made."

-Combining Sessions - People can do what they chose, however, it's better to have two small sessions with the same subject than one large one where folks will have less of a change to participate.

-Public Safety - Have people and "stuff" removed from the sign up wall area.

-Scheduling - Have the proposers go up to the wall and write down the time and place where their group will meet.

When the area is cleared you may say, "People, the Market Place is Open. Enjoy yourselves. As soon as you have your groups together, go to work. Don't forget you are in charge." See you at ___time for ___(lunch, evening news).

COMMUNITY ASSEMBLIES:

MORNING ANNOUNCEMENTS: A brief opportunity to announce changes in meetings (additions, cancellations, and mergers). Just the facts.

EVENING NEWS: A time for reflection and, occasionally, fun.

FACILITATOR'S ROLE:

"Taking all of this to the deeper level is the function of the facilitator, and is the essence of holding or honoring space and time." The major function of the leader is not to do but to sustain the atmosphere of Open Space.

The facilitator doesn't make choices for people, but gives them the opportunity to chose.

ENDINGS AND NEW BEGINNINGS:

"Whatever is done must be done in the same spirit as the rest of the event." The facilitator needs to create a space where each person can acknowledge what's occurred during the time spent together. "We end as we began, sitting in a circle. By the conclusion of the time spent together the dynamics of the circle change markedly. It is no longer a threatening place, but rather a place of safety. Words like creativity, energy, inspiration, openness, surprise, liberation, genuine community, and empowerment are often used to describe their feelings."

Harrison recommends the Native American Talking Stick Ceremony to be "a superbly effective grand finale".

Attached you'll find work that Harrison has done in integrating The Medicine Wheel with the process of an Open Space.