

BEST



PRACTICES

VOL. 9

ISSUE 2

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

“Why didn’t we think of this?” That was our reaction to Open Space Technology when we first tried it out.

Noted mediator Susan Carpenter introduced us to this new system for managing large group work when we were at a professional conference in California (where else?) in the early 1990s. Since that time, Open Space Technology — we just call it “open space” — holds a valued place in our repertoire of effective structures for large group work.

In spite of its new age, mysterious name, open space is a practical, common-sense structure that offers something terrific to people taking part in conferences, work sessions, task forces, and committees. We call that “something” *just in time agenda design*. Open space makes it possible for people to manage their own meetings from start to finish.

Open space works best when an issue or opportunity is somewhat complex and no one has “the answer.” It is a good system to use when lots of people who are different from each other need to share ideas or produce a joint product or decision. It can work well when people are in conflict. It can work within an organization, across supplier groups, among coalitions and their stakeholders, and for communities of all sorts.

Once you begin using open space, expect an increase in people’s energy, commitment, and follow-through.

No special certification is needed to produce open space events. With instructions from Harrison Owen’s “how-to guide” (see next page) and a little practice, anyone can become a pro at organizing and/or facilitating open space. This issue of *Best Practices* starts you on the path, and points you toward the resources you need to succeed.



“What this has done is bring out the people who come and usually don’t have much to say. They put their ideas up there and all of a sudden, we’re hearing from them instead of just the leaders who always do the talking.”

--Open space participant

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THE PROCESS



Open space is not for every situation. It will not work when:

- ▶ People need to be trained in new procedures or provided with new facts and information
- ▶ Decision makers do not want to hear new or opposing views
- ▶ Decisions have already been made and are non-negotiable



Best Practices
is a publication of

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Harrison Owen is an organization theorist and author from Maryland who is regarded as the “dean” of open space. He has done a great deal to further its use, including writing several terrific books about the process (see below).

As Harrison Owen and his colleagues report, open space meetings always succeed if they include people who have chosen to come together to address an issue because they care deeply about it, and if those people can do something about the issue.

How does an open space meeting work?

Once people arrive at an open space gathering, they quickly set about the business of forming their own agenda. This agenda largely consists of small group sessions on whatever topics interest the participants. The process of getting started and creating an agenda usually takes less than 1.5 hours and is guided by a skilled facilitator. Throughout the rest of the meeting, people direct their own small group work

sessions and manage their own time, including meals and breaks.

Anywhere from five to 1,500 people can take part in an open space meeting over one, two, or three days, depending on what you intend your event to accomplish. One day of open space meetings will provide participants with a useful discussion of the key topic. Two days allow for extensive discussion and the development of valuable, workable strategies to address the topic. Plan on three days if you want comprehensive results and an integrated plan of action.

Participants share the results of their small group sessions with each other by writing and publishing reports from each session. One person from each group takes responsibility for entering the results of each session, as well as contact information for those seeking further details, into computers provided on site. Organizers then compile the results into a

RESOURCES

Justice, Tom and David Jamieson. *The Complete Guide to Facilitation: Enabling Groups to Succeed*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 1998. pp. 547-555.

Owen, Harrison. *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*. Second Edition. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1997. (While Owen has authored other books about open space, this is by far the best how-to manual.)

open space home page: www.tmn.com/openspace

conference booklet, which they distribute to all participants at the end of the meeting.

What do you need to conduct an open space meeting?

- ◆ Five to 1,500 people eager to share ideas, plan something new, or make decisions around a common theme
- ◆ One large room (with a blank wall) that serves as a central meeting place
- ◆ One facilitator for the whole group
- ◆ An appropriate number of small meeting spaces (the number depends on the number of expected participants). These spaces should be accessible to all participants.
- ◆ Flip chart stands, paper, and markers for each small meeting space

- ◆ A group of computers, each equipped with the same word processing program, and a printer

- ◆ A large wall chart that displays the day, time, and place for each small group session (once determined by participants)

- ◆ Access to a high speed copier or arrangements with a local copy shop

- ◆ Good food for participants to munch on at their leisure

- ◆ A willingness to try something new!



GOOD USES OF OPEN SPACE

- ▶ When people in a network need new energy and ideas
- ▶ When a business or non-profit organization faces a special challenge
- ▶ When a diverse group of stakeholders needs to begin constructing a strategic plan
- ▶ When a coalition needs to clarify who is doing what
- ▶ When a community needs to move from vision to action
- ▶ When citizens have lots of good ideas on their own but lack connections to one another

“The thing I thought when I saw it was, “This is democracy in action.”
--Open space participant

“I tailor-made my own conference.”
-- Open space participant

“We had some of the best sessions this morning. There were ideas in there that books need to be written about. There are ideas that we didn’t know about, that haven’t come forward and been pulled together before.”
--Open space participant

Open Space Technology can be used successfully in all sectors: corporate, governmental, and non-profit. Here are some examples of RKI's work in the civic and not-for-profit sectors:



- ◆ The Kentucky Environmental Education Council conducted an open space meeting with key stakeholders. This served as the basis for Kentucky's first Master Plan for Environmental Education.
- ◆ In Peoria, Illinois, several groups, in partnership with local government, produced an open space meeting for 420 participants on the future of neighborhoods.
- ◆ The Lexington Citizen Summit, an annual event from 1995-1998, used Open Space Technology for a two-day meeting of interested citizens. One significant outcome from that event was the creation of The Humanitarium: A Center for Culture and Diversity. That organization has developed a 28-member Board of Directors and an Advisory Board and is working to find a permanent home.
- ◆ The National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministries recently conducted an open space meeting to explore the possibilities for ministry in the new millennium.
- ◆ The Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (a project of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence) held an open space meeting for parents who have been designated "Fellows" through their participation in intensive leadership training. The meeting centered around the theme of how parent power can improve Kentucky schools in the new millennium.



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