

Group and Organizational Learning Processes

Open Space Technology

Harrison Owen developed this unique and radical workshop methodology more than 20 years ago and it has been successfully applied by thousands of communities and non-profit organizations, as well as by private companies. It provides a framework of time and space in which people self-organize and work on issues they feel passionate about and are prepared to take responsibility for. The number of participants in such an interactive workshop usually ranges from 20 to 500 and a meeting can go on for one to three days. The Open Space approach is particularly effective when used to resolve complex or conflict-ridden issues in communities and organizations and when innovation and ownership are the desired outcomes. A prerequisite is that the focal issue or theme must be of genuine concern to all involved. All stakeholders are invited but participation is voluntary.

The central objective of any Open Space event is defined by a question which is to be discussed during a one to three day meeting. The question has to be selected carefully by the management and supported by the facilitator. It should address a burning issue and ensure diverse opinions are represented in the group. A one day event allows for a good exchange of ideas, two days allows for a good exchange of ideas and the elaboration of recommendations and three days allows for a good exchange of ideas, elaboration of recommendations and the prioritization of actions. An Open Space event has neither a fixed agenda nor invited speakers and the democratic structure of the process does not facilitate differences in organizational or community status (so no ranks and no titles).

The process at Open Space event is relatively straight-forward. The participants gather for the opening plenary and the facilitator states the question to be discussed, describes the principles that underpin Open Space Technology and introduces the process. The participants then spend one or two hours setting their own agenda for the event. Anyone who feels so inspired can offer one or more sessions (such as a presentation, workshop, discussion group or task force) by creating a simple poster showing the title of the session and his or her name, choosing a room and timeslot and making a brief announcement to the whole group. [Typically 30 focus groups might be set up in a conference of one hundred participants.] The posters are fixed to the walls and participants sign up for the sessions that they wish to attend. This often leads to a lot of negotiation as people offering sessions on similar topics may decide to join forces and sessions can be rescheduled to maximize participation. From this point onwards, participants self-organise and pursue what interests them but the large group reconvenes at certain points and at the end of the event to share what has emerged, to prioritise issues and to develop action plans in project teams. At the end of the event everyone receives a set of reports from all the sessions; which usually include agreed action plans.

The Open Space process is based on a set of four fundamental principles and one law. The first principle states that whoever comes are the right people - participation is voluntary. The second principle states that whenever it starts is the right time - be relaxed about time. The third principle is that whatever happens is the only thing that could happen – so let go of your expectations. The fourth principle states when it's over, it's over - if there's no more to say, move on. The **law of two feet** that guides Open Space requires that whenever a participant feels that he/she is neither contributing nor learning, he/she is encouraged to move on to another place of interest.

Open Space Technology can be applied for stakeholder consultation, finding solutions for corporate concerns, networking for institutions at local, regional and international levels, creating synergy between different pressure groups, mergers of companies, creativity, research and development, solving technical problems and vision sharing, project kick-off events, change processes in larger organizations, community planning and development and many other purposes.

For more information on this methodology get hold of the book; **Open Space Technology. A Users Guide** by Harrison Owen (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008) or go to www.openspaceworld.org.