

A Description of 'Open Space'

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What is Open Space?

Open Space is a way to format a group meeting, retreat or conference that generates communication, collaboration, innovation, and other solutions to issues, challenges, transitions and opportunities. Participants emerge from the process invigorated, refreshed, proud of their individual and collective accomplishments – and most importantly in action toward measurable results. It is a process in which every voice is heard and every issue is addressed and acted upon. It always works.

Committees, task forces and design teams can take weeks, months and even years to accomplish their goal - or in some cases simply to define their goal. Much of this same work can be accomplished by holding an Open Space – even in as little as a one-hour time frame. A half- or one-day Open Space can help people to quickly bring forth emerging issues and opportunities and to build mutual understandings and networking; a 2.5 day Open Space includes issues, opportunities and action planning, resulting in a complete written report of the proceedings for all participants plus identification and prioritization of next steps.

Open Space is an interactive process -- participants meet in concurrent and overlapping mini-discussions around a theme or an issue, across departmental, hierarchal or historically opposite lines. The cross-pollination of moving from group to group and topic to topic in a non-linear way allows participants to jump quickly from familiar ways of thinking into innovation and action.

The use of Open Space has been effective since the mid-1980's in a diversity of settings, cultures and countries. The method has been used by communities working towards peace, chemists designing new polymers, tribal and governmental leaders planning land use, community advocates and local government designing literacy programs, conference organizers holding conferences in this format, board members charting the future, architects designing pavilions for the Olympics, an entire town having a simultaneous discussion town meeting, and community workers helping communities rebuild and heal after times of war. This tool can be utilized by groups of 5 to over 2000 and the dynamics and the results are always the same: input from stakeholders at all levels, new ways of thinking and working, large amounts of work done rapidly, bringing perceived competitors together on issues and projects, organizational flexibility, interdepartmental or intercommunity teamwork, a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of passion and energy for the challenges ahead.

Guidelines for Open Space - The rules are simple, although setting up the parameters for a meeting or conference in Open Space is based on the theories of complexity, self-organization and open systems. Often in a conference or a meeting, the best ideas, networking, brainstorming and deal making happen during the coffee breaks. Open Space is designed to simulate that natural way people find each other and share ideas in all different cultures and countries. It is also based on the understanding that there is a great amount of wisdom and experience in any gathered group of people - that we are all 'experts' and can all contribute - a truly democratic process.

It all starts with a circle of chairs, without a pre-designed agenda. The group sets their

own agenda by identifying issues and topics that have heart and meaning for them; topics for which they have passion and interest and for which they are willing to host a discussion group. Small group discussions happen with participants moving from group to group whenever they feel that they can no longer learn or contribute to a discussion, or when they feel drawn to another topic. There are four simple guidelines:

1. - **Whoever comes are the right people.**

Rather than wait for the 'expert' on a given issue, realize that whoever is moved to come to your discussion group has been moved by their passion for the issue, not just their organizational role. The best and brightest are convening to discuss something they really care about - across departmental or hierarchal lines. And what if nobody comes to your session? It may be that either you are a visionary ahead of your time, or there are so many great topics to choose...either way you have the choice to either join in another discussion or spend the time writing your thoughts down to enter into the meeting proceedings.

2. - **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.**

Don't try to control the discussion - even if it goes off on a tangent -- that may be exactly the direction for the breakthrough of new ideas. Follow the energy of the group. By the way, the only time that Open Space does not work is when somebody in charge feels they must control the outcome of the discussion or the event.

3. - **Whenever it starts is the right time.**

Don't wait for some specific person to arrive; begin with whomever is drawn to the discussion. The balance to this is...

4. - **When it's over, it's over.**

You may settle the problems of the world in twenty minutes; on the other hand, you may wish to continue your discussion for longer than the allotted time. Creativity and intuitive thinking do not happen according to a schedule - take it where it wants to go. If you're done early you can join another group; if you take longer, just move your discussion elsewhere to make way for the next group scheduled.

There is only one law: **The Law of Two Feet** (which, because not everyone has two feet, can also be called the Law of Motion and Responsibility):

If an individual feels he or she is neither learning from nor contributing to a discussion, they move to another discussion, without waiting for the group to complete its conversation. Fresh insights and creative thoughts are needed elsewhere. The result is a room alive with movement and animated discussion as people travel from group to group to use their best energy and thinking where it is most needed.

The final guideline is to **Be Prepared to Be Surprised**.

Carrying a preconceived agenda into a conversation can result in never receiving the greater results and more intuitive thinking that can come from a group of diverse and passionate people taking a conversation where it can go.

Who is in control here?

How can Open Space be productive without a pre-designed agenda or outcome and little or no intervention by a facilitator? Won't that create chaos? Won't chaos lead to catastrophe? Where is the structure? Actually there is very specific structure to the OS process -- just not the structure people usually create in meetings. The result is a new way of working, thinking and communicating, and the results are innovative, concrete, positive, and substantial.

It works for corporations, boards, all levels of government, educational institutions, non-profit organizations – anyone – in more in over 70 countries, and counting. It always works – and participants overwhelmingly agree that it has been some of the most productive, most exciting, and most results-producing and action-enabling time they have ever spent.

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