

Open Space Meets Challenges of Government Downsizing and Merger in Bilingual Setting

by Diane Gibeault, Open Space practitioner

This story is about a client wanting training on team building for all of its thirty five staff as a means of bringing some team spirit into the work place following a merger of two government department sections. There was a new section with a new name but there were still two groups operating at a distance. The new section was composed of employees from different professions. A few months following the merger, there had still never been an all staff meeting. Communications were minimal and distrust was high.

As is often the case, the client saw training as the means of fixing staff problems. What was being envisaged by managers was an approach that would give staff "team skills" and an opportunity to get to know one another a little better. After getting a fairly good picture of the history of that group and having scratched the surface problems to get a sense of the deeper ones, it became obvious that what this group needed mostly was to have a real open talk. Now for many this can be threatening even in a group you know well and trust. Managers were not too keen about getting into anything that resembled "touchy-feely type exercises".

The client set some non-negotiable conditions. Staff could be freed for only two days, spread out into four half days. Because essential services were being offered by a skeleton staff - following deep cutbacks - they felt full days were impossible. Staff would be divided into two separate language groups, so that everyone could be at ease discussing issues in their first language. One group would meet in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Keeping the momentum, ensuring continuity and making links between the groups, was going to be a real challenge especially when the objective was to create one team with real team spirit.

As I described to my client managers how Open Space works and the kind of results that have been experienced, their faces began to light up. But this was still all new and a bit scary, so we agreed on a compromise. The first two half days would be for an Open Space on "How our team can be at its best". The last two half days would be for team skill development. I would adapt the exercises according to the needs that would surface in the first two days.

On the first day, after the usual hesitations in putting up issues on the wall, discussion groups quickly formed. As they walked to their discussion groups, some remarked: "You mean to say we can actually decide to go meet in the cafeteria instead of a meeting room? and we can leave in the middle of the meeting and go to another discussion group?" In no time the effect of autonomy and responsibility created by the Law of the Two Feet, the bumblebee and the butterfly melted the ice. Enthusiasm filled the air. The possibility of freely discussing issues of concern soon started to knit that web of ties which creates a team.



All levels of management participated. The morning group strongly recommended to senior managers that they also attend the afternoon group so that all staff had the opportunity to exchange views with them. Managers agreed, feeling relieved that staff would not see their presence as overbearing or intimidating.

The morning and afternoon groups were meeting in the same room so they could actually see on the walls, discussion topics and reports of both groups. On the second day, one of the groups suggested that the last day be changed from skill development to a joint Open Space meeting of the two groups. By this time, managers were just members of the group. The second group agreed readily. A few staff from the two groups volunteered to cover essential services with the understanding that, at future all-staff meetings, others would cover the office and ensure service delivery. Suddenly, management realized it was not impossible after all, to have an all-day, all-staff meeting. They were happy to have an added means of supporting the team spirit in the future. The solution had come from staff.

These two group decisions had a significant impact on creating a sense of empowerment among staff. People remarked openly on it. Trust towards management went up several notches.

On the third day, skill development exercises turned out to be more effective because openness and trust were established. In the exercises, participants could relate to their concrete group experience from the Open Space. For many, the team had been an abstract reality since they had not yet been directly involved together in work functions.

The fourth day brought the two groups together to now form a new larger group. A whole new dynamic developed and the process was adapted to facilitate this. The reports of the first days of Open Space from both groups were circulated and time was given for individual review.

Then another Open Space session opened with the two groups combined. New issues were put on the wall. During and after lunch, participants were invited to look at morning reports posted on the wall. The list of all issues discussed during the four days was posted on flip charts by topic so as to avoid duplication. Priorities were determined, action ideas listed and a task group was identified to ensure follow-up.

In closing the circle, the intensity of the experience came fully to light. One participant who was experienced in manual work and had little inclination to focus on "people sort of things" confessed to never having had such an enriching group experience in any of his many jobs with the public or private sector. Others spoke of their amazement on how the two groups were able to meld so naturally when they came together on the last day. Supervisors openly praised their staff as their turn came to speak. There was lots of laughter. The energy was high.



The magic had happened. The collective self-love that Harrison Owen describes (in his book *Spirit*, 1987) as the essential support for a group to move on to new grounds was developing. In my follow-up contacts, even a year later, the client was saying that this workshop created a feeling of unity which is still alive and well.

This brings me to one of the fundamental principles of the Open Space philosophy: once the spirit is created, people will identify what they really need to sustain it and to do the job that is before them. When managers and facilitators learn to let go, it can happen.

Despite a difficult merger situation combined with initial workshop format obstacles, members of this group, and the group as a whole, took responsibility, came up with creative solutions, improved communications, enhanced collaboration and found team spirit. That's what Open Space is all about.

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