

## **In the Beginning...**

by Harrison Owen, from the introduction to the first edition of Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, Copyright © 1992 by Harrison Owen.

On the 21st of April 1992, 225 people (or thereabouts) gathered for a two-day meeting to develop cooperative arrangements for the effective expenditure of one and one-half billion dollars designated for highway construction on tribal and public lands. Roughly one-third of these people were Native Americans, one-third federal bureaucrats, and one-third from state and local governments. On the face of it, the prospects for a peaceful, let alone productive, meeting seemed less than bright. The participants were all natural, if not historical, enemies. As a matter of fact, the results were rather surprising.

In the course of the two-day meeting, that diverse group created, and totally self-managed, an agenda built around some 52 different task groups. The agenda was created in less than one hour, and the various task groups produced about 150 pages of proceedings in 36 hours. Thanks to the wonders of modern computers coupled with overnight printing, copies of the final proceedings rolled hot off the press in time for the departure of all participants on the morning of the third day. During the concluding session, one of the Native Americans said that never before had he felt so listened to and so much a part of the discussions. The feeling was shared by all parties.

It is also noteworthy that the decision to hold the meeting was made in March in the same year. Thus, the whole idea went from conception to delivery in about six weeks. There was one facilitator for the total event.

Stated in bald terms, these claims for the April meeting may sound extreme, if not outrageous. For the conventional wisdom says, and everybody knows, that creating a meeting of such size, complexity, and potential for conflict takes months of preparation and an army of planners and facilitators. Furthermore, the notion that the proceedings not only could be completed but delivered to the participants prior to departure is going a little too far. Unfortunately for the conventional wisdom, the event took place exactly as described, and more than that, this was not the first such event. Over the past eight years dozens of gatherings have taken place with similar results. While the experience may not yet be commonplace, it is definitely not a fluke. It is repeatable. It is called Open Space Technology.

How Open Space Technology came to be was not a matter of careful planning and thoughtful design. It began out of frustration, almost as a joke.

### The Genesis of Open Space Technology

In 1983, I had occasion to organize an international conference for 250 participants. It took me a full year of labor. By the time I had finished with all the details, frustrations and egos (mine and others'), that go with such an event, I resolved never to do such a

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thing again. This resolution was confirmed at the conclusion of the conference, when it was agreed by one and all (including myself) that although the total event had been outstanding, the truly useful part had been the coffee breaks. So much for one year's effort arranging papers, participants, and presenters. The only thing that everybody liked was the one thing I had nothing to do with: the coffee breaks. There had to be a message here.

My question was a simple one. Was it possible to combine the level of synergy and excitement present in a good coffee break, with the substantive activity and results characteristic of a good meeting? And most of all, could the whole thing be done in less than a year? The line of inquiry I choose to follow took some interesting turns, but essentially it started with the notion that if I could identify certain basic mechanisms of meeting, or human gathering, it might be possible to build them into an approach that would be so simple that it could not fail and so elemental that it might possess the natural power of a good coffee break.

With these thoughts in mind, I recalled an occasion in the late '60s when I was working as a photojournalist in a small West African village by the name of Balamah located in the interior of Liberia. One of the high points of my visit was participation in the rites of passage for the boys. As you might imagine, this was a major celebration. It occurred every seven years, and was the moment when the village inducted its male youth as full fledged citizens. No longer children, they were expected to assume adult roles and responsibilities. The actual celebration continued for four days with all sorts of rituals and other activities. Through it all there was amazingly nothing, so far as I could tell, that looked or acted like a planning committee, not during the event or prior to its occurrence. Nevertheless 500 people managed to manage themselves for four days in a highly organized, satisfactory, and I have to say, enjoyable fashion. How could that be?

I do not claim to have the whole answer to the mystery of Balamah, but at least part of their secret lay in the fact that the village (like all West African villages) was laid out in a circle, with an open space in the middle. The chief's house, and the house of some of the important elders bordered what, in an American or European town, would have been the village square. But here it was a circle, and I think that difference is important.

My experience tells me that the circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication. There is no head or foot, higher or lower, simply people being with people face to face. After all, we do not have a square of friends and on a cold winter's night it is nice to be part of the family circle. Place people in rows (classroom or theater-style) and they all face the source of power and authority, and it is clear who will talk and who must listen. In squares and rectangles, there is separation which may be useful to keep combative parties apart as in negotiation, but genuine, open, free communication tends to be at a minimum. Circles create communication.

The celebration in Balamah occurred as an ordered progression from the periphery of the town to the center of the circle, and back again. Dancers, drummers, horn players,

religious and political leaders, all gathered in the outlying sections of the town, and then swirled to the center in kaleidoscope of color, rhythm and song. The circle came alive with ceremony, speeches and above all dance. Intensity rose to peak, and the peaked again, until at last it ebbed as villagers flowed outward to their homes. It was as if the village were breathing, and just as no planning committee is required for respiration, none was needed in Balamah either. It seemed to me that in the geometry of the circle and the rhythm of breath I had found two of my basic mechanisms of meeting.

If the circle and breath provide the fundamental shape and dynamics, then we need only some way of establishing content and determining periodicity (time table) in order to create our conference in the coffee-break mode. Effective meetings, after all, deal with some issues in a certain order. The alternative is noise and confusion.

Two additional mechanisms suggested themselves from the life of Balamah. The community bulletin board and the village market place. The bulletin board provides a convenient, low-tech means for identifying what people are interested in. The market place provides the mechanism for bringing interests together in an orderly way. Both mechanisms are so ancient and ingrained in the human experience that explaining the rules is quite unnecessary. And of course if the village market place has not been a part of your experience, a shopping mall will do.

In theory, given a circle, breath, the bulletin board, and the market place, we should have the effective ingredients for high levels of productive meeting, without the interminable planning sessions and an army of on-site facilitators, to say nothing of a resident meeting management team. The question remained: Would theory translate into reality?

#### Experience to Date

We have been testing the theory for the past [fifteen] years, and the experiment continues, but the answer to date has been a resounding yes. The folks in Balamah were correct. You could do incredible things without a planning committee, facilitators and conference management team.

A brief sampling of the experience to date with Open Space gatherings may make the point. For example, the National Education Association gathered 420 teachers, school board members, and administrators from all over the United States for one day around the theme, "Education for America." In that time they created, and self-managed, some 85 workshops. When they were through, they evaluated their effort on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being highly successful and 1 the opposite. The average score was 9.3. The total pre-conference planning time for agenda creation was zero.

At the other end of the size spectrum, groups of 5 have found the approach quite effective, and intact management teams of 12 to 20 have discovered that OST is an excellent way to build their teams and transact a great deal of business in a remarkably short time. The United States Forest Service's senior management team (known as

Chief and Staff), which consists of the 17 people who manage that organization of 35,000 people, have used OST to break out of the mold and consider issues they never could quite get on the agenda.

As in many senior management groups, the agenda for the weekly Chief and Staff meetings was guarded as closely as Fort Knox, all in the name of efficiency. The gain in efficiency, however, was often balanced by a loss in effectiveness, as only those things officially on the agenda could be discussed. The rest remained unspoken, and possibly unspeakable.

The Forest Service is by no means alone in this shortcoming, but when the "unspeakable" remains unspoken, important business may be neglected. Worse yet, everybody knows, but nobody can do anything, for the issues never come up officially. Open Space can change all that. Everybody has the right and responsibility to place items on the agenda, which allows the unspeakable to be spoken.

In South Africa, the 12 members of a totally new management group, which had been created when several corporations merged, used OST with great success to fashion a new organizational structure, reporting relationships and product management procedures, all in two days. More important than the completion of a number of essential organizational tasks was the fact that they had become a team.

A strong point of Open Space Technology is its ability to unite groups of enormous diversity in terms of education, ethnicity, economics, politics, culture, social position, or all of the above. In one meeting sponsored by the Together Foundation to promote global unity, 178 people from 28 countries speaking 17 languages addressed their task for five days. Participants ranged from presidents of countries to ordinary planetary citizens, and in just about one hour this group created 82 workshops which they self-managed for the duration of the conference. There was no simultaneous translation, one facilitator, and pre-conference planning was limited exclusively to logistical details.

Open Space Technology thrives in areas of conflict and confusion. In the early summer of 1992, OST was used in one of the South African townships to promote useful discussion among the several political groups. The focus of conversation was improving communications in the area. For a full day representatives of the various political parties along with nearby industry (largely white) worked together. It would be a supreme overstatement to say that all issues were resolved, or that love and light broke out in full abundance. But the discussions were intense, productive, without rancor, and contrasted sharply with conditions in a neighboring township where conversations had ceased and bloodshed commenced. There was also a continuing benefit. Several days after this particular gathering, one of the participants called to say that for two years as president of a local school organization, he had been attempting to get the people involved in creating their future. Nothing had worked. They sat like bumps on a log. Then he tried Open Space Technology, and his problem was reversed. The people became involved, and he had but one option. Get out of the way.

In Venezuela, the new cellular phone company, TELCEL, has been growing at a phenomenal rate in the midst of sometimes incredible confusion. Its American partner, Bell South, predicted that by the end of TELCEL's first year of operation, TELCEL might sell 15,000 units. The fact of the matter is that TELCEL sold 50,000 units in less than a year, to become the fastest growing cellular phone company in the world. That was the good news. But there was some bad news as well. The growth was so rapid that people scarcely had time to breathe, talk, or solve organizational problems. The whole venture was about to be overwhelmed by waves of confusion and fatigue. A major mid-course correction was required, without any reduction of speed, for slowing down, or stopping, would mean the loss of their major objective, market dominance.

On a Saturday, every employee of the corporation was invited to an Open Space event focused on the future of their company. No additional compensation was offered. People were going to do this on their own time or not at all. Of the 263 people then employed by TELCEL, 252 showed up. In less than an hour some 32 issues were identified, which then formed the basis of a similar number of task groups. For one full day, the discussion raged. Technical people talked to sales, who talked to marketing, who talked to finance, who talked to computernics, who talked to senior management. And around it went one more time. Interestingly enough, only one of the 32 working groups was led by a member of senior management. All the leadership came from the trenches.

When evening rolled around, and the final report-out had been completed, a most remarkable thing occurred. Somebody put a catchy dance tape on the sound system, and for the next three hours, the party rolled on, stopping only when the buses had to leave. And this was a corporation at the edge of destruction!

Six months later, virtually everybody in the corporation looked at the day in Open Space as the turnaround point. Obviously not all the issues were solved on that day, but the critical element necessary for their resolution was set in place: communication. People found they could talk and work together.

Open Space Technology has now successfully been utilized in India, South America, Africa, Europe, the United States, and Canada with groups of 5 to 500. The purposes have ranged from corporate redesign in the face of intense competition, to national redesign in the face of massive transformational forces as in South Africa. 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, OST can make a major contribution.

OST by design and intention is simple. It will work equally in third world village environments and sophisticated board rooms. As with most simple things, it is true that almost anybody can do it. It is also true that doing it well may require a lifetime of practice.