

OPEN SPACE...a Group Process

or a New Way of Thinking?

by Diane Gibeault, Open Space Facilitator and Trainer



Creating a strong group spirit and commitment is not always easy in today's challenged organizations. But there is one proven way now available to organizations called Open Space Technology, which can give back to individuals a real sense of responsibility and, in the end, help your organization's bottom line.

Open Space is recognized as an innovative approach to more dynamic and productive meetings. It is a simple and powerful way of organizing small or large group meetings, whether it's with 5 or more than 2000 people.

Open Space goes much deeper than most other group facilitation processes. It sparks life in individuals, the meeting and in organizations. It creates passion wrapped in responsibility and creativity grounded in realism.

The Open Space process was developed in the mid-eighties by Harrison Owen, author of several books on transformation in organizations. Owen has applied his innovative work with organizations, from major corporations to community groups, in every continent of the world. Open Space Technology is rapidly becoming known as a powerful group process that supports positive transformation in organizations, increases productivity, inspires creative solutions, improves communication and enhances collaboration.

Often in meetings, structure can get in the way of the really important matters. In fact, coffee breaks are often the place where real things get said and where the best moments are experienced. Open Space with its few simple but effective rules, or rather principles, creates something similar to the coffee break environment where the focus is open communication. The uncertainty created by the apparent chaos provides the freedom to create, and a state of openness, which allows us to better address issues. All these elements propel us to a clearer direction.

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How does Open Space work?

No Agenda or Tables

Participants are seated in a circle and all have the opportunity to post on the wall, issues they feel are important, related to a theme that is meaningful to participants. In Open Space initiative occurs spontaneously. With a clear purpose in mind, all participate within the first hour of the meeting, in creating an agenda and organizing self-managed groups. A common ground begins to emerge.

All Issues Are Addressed

Every single issue of concern to anybody is explored. What better way to move forward than to start from what you are passionate about? Those who share that passion, interest or concern, get together to work on it. The process allows solutions to unfold. The safe environment helps participants to communicate constructively. Team learning takes real meaning here. Collaboration becomes intensely appealing and the potential for commitment is increased because participants have taken ownership of issues and opportunities.

Other Outcomes

On the last day, participants receive a written report with a list of those who participated in each group. This information supports the development of rich and diverse networks. Priorities are set, an action plan is developed and action groups are identified. Participants leave with new insights, new energy and a sense of moving forward.

What Open Space Offers and Requires

Open Space is not a recipe for every situation. It is a great approach for example, to explore complex or simple issues, to organize quickly whatever needs to be done, to bring the whole system in the room to plan for the future, to build and strengthen teams, to deal with conflicts, to improve communication and to re-energize an organization. Don't use Open Space if you think you know the answer to the question you want people to address. As a leader, you are creating space for initiative, therefore, you must be ready for the unexpected and open to change. The intention must be transparent. The theme for the meeting must be clear and must represent a real issue of interest. Open Space may appear simple on the surface, but the essence is in understanding the philosophy behind the method and ensuring sound preparation with the organization.

Who Uses Open Space?

Small businesses, large corporations, community based groups and governments from all over the world have been using Open Space successfully. Several experiences are well documented (Tales from Open Space, Harrison Owen, 1995 or www.openspaceworld.org). Who are those organizations? It's organizations who truly believe that their most important resource is people and who trust their people.

Open Space is not business as usual

Open Space Technology is not just an event, it's a new way of working, of thinking, of meeting, of doing business and of being, that can continue long after the meeting. The most spirited and productive work and developments happen when we create a climate that favors initiative and learning.