

Performance with a Smile

Open Space Technology Offers Accelerated Change and Shared Commitment

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Today's organizations must be ready to adapt to an ever-changing environment. The more leaders encourage self-organization in the workplace, the greater flexibility the organization will have to evolve and flourish.

Open Space Technology is a way to bring agility to organizations.

Imagine if you could consult and engage everyone concerned with an issue without lengthy studies, analysis and polling. Imagine that within two days of meeting in a convivial atmosphere, you had high productivity, concrete results, improved communications, action plans and enthusiastic and committed players. All of this is attainable with a meeting format that is simple to organize and with a sole facilitator, for groups as small as five and as large as 2,000 or more.

Could this type of accelerated change with deep transformation respond to your needs? That is what organizations, businesses and governments from across the world have been experiencing with Open Space Technology, a concept made known in the late 80s by American author Harrison Owen. Owen's work has been replicated by hundreds of facilitators who recognize the exceptional potential of this democratic and participatory way of holding meetings.

Owen says part of his inspiration came from observing what people liked best at conferences: informal conversations at coffee breaks. The apparent chaos of Open Space Technology (OST), commonly referred to as "Open Space," is supported by a less visible structure with appropriate boundaries to create space and allow participants to reach astounding results.

An economic adviser from a national Canadian institution recently said: "We accomplished more on this issue in one day of Open Space than over the last two years of quarterly meetings." The 60 advisers participating wanted to improve the quality of services to clients. They were excited by the experiences and the outcomes, one of which was unexpected: they had fun. The creative and relaxed atmosphere of OST brings out the pleasure of working together. Add trust that develops with people connecting in a meaningful fashion and co-operation becomes a way of being.

How Open Space Works: No Agenda and No Tables

People are seated in a circle. This is a symbol that they are participating on an equal basis. The facilitator walks around inside the circle, explaining the process. All have the opportunity to post issues they feel are important in relation to the purpose of the meeting and, within an hour, the agenda is created. Every topic anyone wishes to discuss will be addressed. Participants choose their topics of interest for the day and they join self-managed discussion groups. Cross-pollination of ideas is encouraged and participants can move from one group to another and take informal breaks to reflect or hold impromptu conversations.

At the end of this exploration phase, people gather to share comments on the experience. Discussion reports prepared by participants are posted throughout the day to build a "wall of emerging learning." The next step, "convergence," is to set priorities and move forward with a collective focus and action plans for the organization or even with individual action planning.

The word “technology” in OST refers only to this simple method. The strength of OST for holding spirited meetings that develop leadership and trust is based on a few principles that guide the behaviour of participants. These principles favour open communication, respect, initiative, constructive thinking, choice and responsibility. The tandem “freedom and responsibility,” like yin and yang, allow this low structure process to support deep transformations accompanied by high commitment and energy. Thousands of events demonstrate that people take full advantage of the possibilities before them. They have no desire to waste the opportunity because the time and the agenda are theirs and they care about the theme.

Experts and Management

An expert may give a brief presentation the night before a meeting to stimulate thinking. OST then allows people of common interests to pool their skills and thoughts on what matters most to them about the theme of the meeting, and their experience and knowledge remain at the forefront.

Managers must be unattached to specific results and open to surprises. In my experience, by the end of the event, they are often ecstatic at the outcomes or at times, happy that they have heard an unknown truth, so that they can manage more effectively, knowing what’s “really going on.” They are reassured because they know they will participate in discussions, read the posted reports as the meeting evolves and have the opportunity to confirm on site, the priorities proposed by participants, before the action planning begins. The organization saves money since it will not need to “sell” the outcomes after the meeting. The people who collectively developed these results share the ownership and are now mutually accountable.

OST will work providing the group has a real reason for meeting and openness to outcome exists. It is a particularly useful method when dealing with complexity, conflict, diversity and urgency. People who experience OST are amazed with this new philosophy of collective interaction. It truly leads us off the beaten path, to a place where people can breathe more easily, work more effectively and contribute wholeheartedly.

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