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Open Space

What We've Found

The words "open space" most commonly refer to landscapes that are natural or free of human structures. So, too, is open space as a meeting technique: it is free from outsider intervention. Participants decide what to talk about, what decisions to make, and what actions to take. These reflect the community's priorities; they are not necessarily the same as what we would have chosen. It does create a certain level of chaos, but with that can come exciting, passionate, energy all focused on a resource or project.

Just the Facts

"Open Space Technology" was named and described by Harrison Owen, a corporate consultant and former Episcopal minister. He observed that the real, interactive energy among people in conference settings happened more during the coffee breaks than during the structured sessions. In collaboration with many people over a number of years, he designed Open Space Technology to capture that free and spontaneous interchange of ideas. He notes that many of the basic ideas come from a small West African village, the traditions of Native America, and the wisdom of the East, and calls Open Space Technology "a world product."

An Open Space meeting begins with people sitting in a circle, which promotes open human communication. Open space helps to create a self-organizing system. There are no agendas, no scheduled guest speakers, and no limitations on discussions. There is a general facilitator who calls the people to action, clearly describes what is to happen, is available to answer questions, and keeps watch on time. The technique can be used for groups ranging in size from 15 to 1500 people. The only requirements are that the meeting focus on a real issue of passionate concern to participants, and that attendees bring a complete willingness to participate.

By not having an agenda or a facilitator to direct every step, participants will naturally discuss, debate, choose, decide, and take action on those things that are most



Definition

A meeting technique that is participant-driven without an agenda.

Use It If...

- You want people to feel more comfortable with each other to share their dreams, visions, and ideas.
- You are looking for a way to enliven a longstanding, regularly scheduled group meeting, such as a task force, by doing something unexpected.
- You need for participants to drop pretenses and/or political agendas and to instead express what matters most to them.

Forget It If...

important to them. If the group is large, leaders will emerge to take on a specific topic, forming breakout groups to discuss different issues or ideas. Participants choose among the groups where to spend their time and contribute. Each of the groups may come to their own resolutions or decide upon actions to take preparing a summary of their findings and recommendations.

When running open space meetings, keep in mind:

Even though anything goes in regards to discussions, everyone needs to listen to and respect other's perspectives and opinions. Encourage people to freely move among breakout groups whenever they wish – cross-pollination is beneficial!

The focus should stay on one theme: a community, a resource, a project, etc. While conversations may get theoretical, be careful of being too vague or trying to take on issues that cannot possibly be solved by the group.

How To Do It

1. Take care of logistics

Select a date and time that is going to be convenient; it may be preferable to run the meetings over two or three days. Find a place that is large enough for the expected crowd including separate areas for breakout groups. Possibilities include houses of worship and other community centers, conference centers and hotels. Cost for room rental may be an issue. If this is not going to be with a pre-defined group such as task force, identify key individuals and organizations to invite. Invite them via phone, mail, or email giving the participants as much notice as possible. Decide how much to describe the meeting in advance: it could turn-off participants because they do not understand. Do provide an introduction to the topic and easy-to-read directions to the meeting place. Prepare any visual aids that will help discussions such as a slide show or an enlarged map of the area being discussed. Arrange for refreshments and food, if it will be served. This is a good area to get others involved in. Obtain supplies needed for information gathering and reporting such as easels, flipcharts, pens, colored dots, sticky pads, tape, audiovisual equipment, etc.

2. Create the scene

Set up the room by forming a large circle of chairs. Have flipcharts or paper, pens and tape in the center of the circle. Hang several sheets of paper on the wall and title them "Marketplace of Ideas." The paper should be divided into 60 or 90 minute time slots with breakout spaces such as separate rooms, corners within the meeting room, etc. (The total number of places and times should be roughly equal to the 25 percent of the total number of attendees.) The papers should look something like this:

- You have specific items that need to be addressed, decisions made, information to share, or a critical deadline.
- You find resistance among the group or participants detrimentally perceive it is a waste of their time.
- You are involved in a highly controversial project where the audience will be composed primarily of two opposing groups.

Timing is Everything

Use the open space technique in the beginning of a project to generate information, feedback and enthusiasm. Use it in the middle of a project as a re-energizer.

Marketplace of Ideas

Time	Place	Topic	Sign-ups
9:30-10:45	Patio		
9:30-10:45	Lunchroom		
9:30-10:45	Front left corner of main room		
9:30-10:45	Back right corner of main room		
11:00-12:15	Patio		
11:00-12:15	Lunchroom		
11:00-12:15	Front left corner of main room		
11:00-12:15	Back right corner of main room		

3. Open the floodgates

- When everyone is convened, describe what is to happen. Invite participants to reflect on issues and topics that they feel passionate about, passionate enough to lead a breakout discussion.
- As people come up with items, they step into the circle, write their topics on paper, and announce them to the whole group. Then the leader proceeds to the Marketplace and signs up for a time slot and place. When everyone who wants to post a topic has done so, the entire group is invited to sign up for sessions.
- People will choose, discuss, and rearrange times and places if necessary. When done, it should be time for the first groups to meet.
- New topics can be posted at any time, and everyone should be encouraged to change groups at any time. (This process is repeated each new day of the meeting.)

4. Prepare summaries

- The groups are asked to fill out one-page summaries of their breakout sessions including the topic covered, attendees, findings, and recommendations. At the end of the meeting, everyone reconvenes and the leaders from each subgroup offer a brief verbal report, which can range from very brief comments to 10 minutes for each person depending upon the number of breakout groups.
- If possible, have computers onsite for typing up breakout group summaries or make photocopies of printed summaries to that participants can take home a product from the gathering. Another alternative is to mail summaries afterwards and

include a note thanking the participants.

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