



DIALOGUE
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Bringing people together

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Open Space

Open Space is the right engagement process when there are multiple issues, or a single issue is multi-faceted and when there is short time frame or urgency for action or decision. It is applicable for small groups or groups of thousands of people. It is best on issues of controversy or passion, where people can have a direct and important influence on the issue under discussion. It can unite very diverse groups around a common issue.

There are five simple conditions for using Open Space:

1. There is a real issue to deal with
2. There is a great deal of complexity
3. There is lots of diversity in terms of people and points of view
4. There is real passion (people care!) and probably also conflict.
5. There is a urgency re: time and a need for decision or action



Source: <http://wordsandphotographs.com/tag/wide-open-spaces/>

In an Open Space Event there is a general flow. The facilitator **Opens** the session in a circle. She/He **Focuses the Group** on the Issues or Theme and **Describes the Process**. They explain how the **Agenda** gets created – the “Bulletin Board”, **Starts the Discussion**, and then essentially the facilitator **Gets out of the Way** so the group can start. Once discussions are over, there are **Reports, Action Plans, Priorities and Closing the Circle** with conversation, experiences, thanks and next steps.

You can incorporate technology – use wikis, blogs and/or computers for recording and ongoing discussion. What is most important is that people truly listen to people who are truly speaking

*"Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world.
It is the only thing that ever has."*

- Margaret Mead



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HOW TO DO OPEN SPACE

What is Open Space?

Open Space is a group engagement process that is effective where a diverse group of people come together to address a complex, multifaceted issue in a productive way. It is a participant governed process, with minimal facilitation and few rules that result in surprising, long-lasting, supportable outcomes. It is most

appropriate when no one knows the answer or answers, and the solution isn't obvious. Open Space has been used successfully tens of thousands of times in countries around the world, with countless people.

When do you Host an Open Space?

Open Space is the right engagement process when there are multiple issues, or a single issue is multi-faceted and when there is short time frame or urgency for action or decision. It is applicable for small groups or groups of thousands of people. It is best on issues of conflict, controversy or passion, where people can have a direct and important influence on the issue under discussion. It can unite very

diverse groups around a common issue. It will not work, and should not be used, when the answer is known or when one or more people feel like they already have the problem solved, or where the sponsor of the engagement needs to be "in control" of the event.

Five Conditions of Use

1. There is a real issue to deal with
2. There is a great deal of complexity
3. There is lots of diversity in terms of people and points of view
4. There is real passion (people care!) and probably also conflict.
5. There is a genuine urgency re: time and a need for decision or action

What is the Flow / Agenda of an Open Space Event?

You can invite 5 to 5,000 participants, as long as the five conditions of use are present, but you always start in a circle.

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As Harrison Owen says, "My experience tells me that the circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication. A circle has no head or foot, no high or low, no sides to take: in a circle, people can simply be with each other 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."

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Foundations, Principles and the Law of Open Space

Open Space is grounded in two foundations: Passion and Responsibility, and every participant bring their own passion and is responsible for their own participation and the outcome.

"Without passion, nobody is interested, without responsibility, nothing will get done." – Harrison Owen

Four Principles and One Law

- Whoever comes are the right people
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
- Whenever it starts is the right time
- When it's over, it's over
- The Law of Two Feet

What is the Role of the Facilitator?

An Open Space Facilitator essentially "creates and holds space and time" – creating an environment for the group to engage, and supporting the work they are doing. In a really great Open Space process, the facilitator should be totally present, and participants should not even notice them. An Open Space Facilitator has four essential things to focus on in an Open Space:

Show up – be calm and physically attend to the group

Be Present – Be entirely grounded, focused and rooted in the room, the people and the conversation

Tell the Truth – Know one's own strengths and weaknesses, and align word and action

Let it all Go – Have no attachment to outcomes, to time or process.

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How do You Prepare?

As noted above in the 5 conditions for use, you need a real issue that people are passionate about. You need to develop a brief, intriguing invitation and send it to everyone who might possibly care about the issue. You should identify the focus and intent of your Open Space, and frame it like a question.

You need to take care of the logistics – you need a large room and maybe break-out rooms or space for groups to discuss. You need wall space, large post it notes, flipcharts, markers, tape. You need food and beverage – in a way that people can help themselves, so as not to interrupt the flow of discussion. You need to post the Principles and Law on the Wall. Create a wall size bulletin Board with the Topic at the top, to be used as the group's agenda.

Complete your preparations, send your invitations – then “Just Do It!” and be prepared to be surprised.

Resources

Open Space was developed by Harrison Owen in the mid 1980's, and he has widely shared his thoughts and experience with the process, creating and contributing to a continually growing community of practice. Much of the material here can be attributed to him.

Harrison has written the following books that provide more information on Open Space:

- Open Space Technology – A User's Guide, Third Edition
- Tales from Open Space
- Wave Rider: Leadership for High Performance in a Self-Organizing World
- The Spirit of Leadership
- Tales from Open Space

Visit openspaceworld.org for more resources and information

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