OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

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Open Space Technology is a large scale intervention technique designed to mine the collective emotional intelligence of groups ranging from five to over a thousand in number. It was developed by the American academic Harrison Owen who drew inspiration from village communities in West Africa as well as research in to the self-organising nature of biological systems. Open Space has been used successfully in over a hundred countries and with thousands of groups.

The originator of Open Space Technology, Harrison Owen

There is a general assumption that no meeting can properly begin unless someone kicks it off assertively by getting everyone to agree what the outcome should be. Most meetings take place in order to gain the submission or cooperation of those present, to move a project forward according to predetermined goals or to rubber stamp a decision already taken. Most people believe that meetings of more than twenty people are unlikely to produce much of value.

10 STEPS TO GREAT MEETINGS	
1. Know where you're going. 2. Have a set agenda. 3. Limit attendance. 4. Stay focused on the subject at hand. 5. Be prompt!	6. Have a deadline. 7. Schedule intelligently. 8. Stand and deliver. 9. Heaven (and everything else) can wait! 10. Kill it.

Taken at random from the site of one of the many time management gurus, these ten steps for great meetings are typical of the corporate approach. The 'Great' here is clearly from the perspective of the person running the meeting, not its participants.

Look, no agenda!

If this reflects your general expectation of meetings then imagine a situation where a thousand people, say, arrive at a location for a two day conference. There is no agenda, there are no goals set and no one is in control. There's no podium and no projector for slides and certainly no introductory video. The only thing that is predetermined is an overall theme for the event which could be as non-directive as "Enhancing relationships with our customers" or "A leader for administrative excellence" or "The borderless organisation".

By the end of the two days, extraordinary and quite unpredictable things will have been achieved, everyone who wanted to express their opinions or discuss specific issues will have had had an opportunity to do so. Several hundred pages of documentation will have been produced and countless follow up activities inspired. Not least, everyone will come away feeling energised, motivated with a clear idea of what they need to do on Monday. That meeting took place in Open Space.

All in the round

Had you wandered into the room at the beginning of the meeting you would have seen the delegates seated in one large circle or a number of concentric circles. A facilitator would have opened proceedings and outlined the logistics for the day. For such a large group, the facilitator could have been a professional but certainly a person with no vested interest in the meeting's outcome.

In the central space, sheets of paper would be strewn across the floor or maybe stuck on a wall. Each would bear the name of one of the participants and a summary of his or her burning issue or big idea. Each would be read out to the whole group. After an hour or so, the group as a whole would survey these posters. Related topics would be gathered together and if there were too many to discuss in the time available, the group might vote on the ones it would like to focus on.

The Law of Two Feet…

A number of smaller groups are then formed around each topic and the detailed discussion of the day begins. These discussions last around 45-60 minutes and are held in designated places and during distinct time slots. People are free to move from group to group so if you get bored or are interested in a number of topics, you simply move on. This is encouraged by the so called ‘Law of Two Feet’ which states simply, if at any time you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing - use you two feet and move to some place more to your liking. People will do this mentally during a meeting in any event; the Law allows them to do it physically without causing offense.

…and Four Principles

In addition to the single law, four principals help to guide behaviour in Open Space meetings:

1) Whoever comes is the right people. The fundamental requirement is people who care to do something. And by showing up, that essential care is demonstrated.

2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened. This keeps people focused on the here and now, and eliminates all of the could-have-beens, should-have-beens or might-have-beens.

3) Whenever it starts is the right time. This alerts people to the fact that inspired performance and genuine creativity rarely, if ever, pay attention to the clock.

4) When it's over it's over. In a word, don't waste time. Do what you have to do, and when it’s done, move on to something more useful.

Wrapping up

At the concluding session, all participants are invited to make remarks about the experience of the meeting. Because everyone has had the opportunity to spend the time discussing ideas that are important to them, themes will emerge and related issues will converge. These concluding remarks are often insightful, creative, energetic and lead to action for change. The person responsible for setting up the session makes sure that all the conclusions are recorded and made available for later consideration.

Out of Africa

Open Space Technology was developed by the American academic Harrison Owen. Owen’s academic background and training centred on the nature and function of myth, ritual, and culture. In the mid-1960s, he left academe to work with a variety of NGOs and a number of small West African villages. It was while in Africa that Harrison observed the way village elders always organised important meetings with everyone seated in a circle. Harrison ascribes particular significance to the organising role of the circle in human affairs, "*There is power in the circle to the point that within a very short time (typically 15 minutes) the group is enabled to move from chaotic disparity to focused and productive activity. Advance work on the agenda and structure of meeting is zero, and facilitation is minimal to non-existent. Truly a simpler way.*"

Self organising systems

Harrison believes that effectiveness of Open Space Technology may even be related to the very nature of matter, based on research into Complex Adaptive Systems by the biologist Stuart Kaufmann at the Santa Fe Institute. Kaufmann discovered the principles that can explain how random collections of molecules could organise themselves into living systems. Perhaps the unstructured nature of Open Space creates a primordial soup of ideas that can intermingle to form something that is greater than the sum of its constituent thoughts.

What's the best use of Open Space?

The more complex the challenge, the more appropriate it is to the use of Open Space. As explained Harrison Owen explains, *"Open Space Technology is effective in situations where a diverse group of people must deal with complex and potentially conflicting material in innovative and productive ways. It is particularly powerful when nobody knows the answer and the ongoing participation of a number of people is required to deal with the questions. Conversely, Open Space Technology will not work in any situation where the answer is already known, where someone at a high level thinks he or she knows the answer..."*

Leadership by indirection

Harrison Owen makes an interesting comparison between today's current obsession with leadership and the development of leadership skills, with the success of more apparently chaotic and non-directive methods of aligning people behind an idea such as Open Space Technology. Perhaps the elusive quality leadership is not that of the general leading his troops into battle but of the village elder who gathers his community into a circle and enables discussion and agreement. And because any solution reached is of their creation, there's no need for leadership in the command sense to implement it. It takes real leadership to trust your people's judgement and encourage something as random as an open space meeting, believing that its conclusions can be trusted implicitly. As many companies, have found Open Space is not just a good way to generate fresh thinking or improved processes, when faced with a crisis, it may well be the best strategy for survival.

References

Owen, Harrison, Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, Barrett Koehler Publishers Inc., San Francisco, 1997

http://openspaceworld.com/ Web site of Harrison Owen

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Do you have a message to articulate, a business to develop, people to train? Do your marketing communications reflect your true value? If not, it may be time to get creative with your communication.

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