



# unConference

## Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology (OST) is an innovative approach for facilitation of meetings, seminars, workshops, conferences, and other gatherings. OST has proven effective in dealing with complex issues and decisions among groups with high levels of diversity and potential conflict.

The Open Space approach assumes that great things happen when people who genuinely care about a particular issue are provided opportunities to take responsibility for the issue. Originated 20+ years ago by Harrison Owen, OST has been used by corporations, nonprofit and community organizations, and in religious groups and communities in more than 139 countries involving millions of people. OST events can be just a few hours or as long as 3 days, and can work effectively with only 5 persons or more than 2000. The size of the gathering is limited only by logistical concerns, such as space and the availability of a supportive leadership team.

Open Space events place a great importance on the participation of stakeholders in their own affairs. The approach cannot be applied if someone in leadership has all the answers and a master plan in mind. Instead, all participants are given opportunity to shape the group's direction by investing energy in accord with their passions and convictions. The work of the OST consultant/facilitator usually starts long before the actual event, as she/he works with leadership to help prepare the conditions for productive dialogue and engagement. A planning group is formed to determine the event's intentions, theme, invitations, and other logistics.

In recent years, this approach has been very effectively adapted to the online environment. Look for a post in the near future describing the ways in which this can be done. While zoom, whiteboarding and online note taking can be cobbled together using individual platforms, we prefer to use a platform called Quigo Chat, which has a highly integrated ecosystem of tools built into the platform

## Unique and Powerful Elements of Open Space

### Live Agenda Creation

Open Space opens up the agenda creation process so that all those gathered can put propose sessions. This 'day-of' agenda creation ensures that there is direct relevance to those gathered for the conference. This is an important feature in fast moving technical environments because the pace of innovation is so rapid for technical communities it is virtually impossible to figure out the topics that will be hot and need face time six months, three months or even one month prior to an event. Live agenda creation helps them make effective use of face-time during the day of conferences instead of around the edges of events programmed many months ahead of time.

The planning committee of 1 or 3 or 10 can't 'know' all of what 50-300 people coming to an event around a topic need to talk about ahead of time. One way to address the putting forward of what might be talked about is to post it on a website so that people can get a sense of the topics that are of interest to the group before coming.

### The Agenda Wall

The facilitators make a grid of times and spaces that gets filled during the agenda creation process. It is typical to have 5 or 6 one hour sessions in a day and a one hour lunch. It is good to have time/space slots for 1/3 the number of participants.

### Making the Agenda

The facilitator invites those who have something they want talk about related to the overall theme to come to the front and write on an 8x11 sheet of paper the title of the topic and their name. They announce this to the room and then they place it in a slot on the Agenda Wall. This goes on for about 15-30 min and voila now you have a full schedule.

## **Navigating the Space**

Those gathered then break up and go to the sessions they want to attend throughout the day, the entire group gathers again at the end of the day.

There are a few principles and one 'law' that are outlined at the beginning of the Open Space that help govern how people navigate the shared space throughout the course of the day.

## **The Four Principles of Open Space**

**Whoever comes are the right people.** OST is based on passion and responsibility. The people who show up in a particular working group are those who are most interested in the topic. We assume such gatherings will have more energy, creativity, and commitment than traditional meetings where people work on something that has been imposed on them. Working groups can range from a single person to several hundred, but usually consist of three to fifteen people.

**Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.** Giving way to self-organization acknowledges that predetermined agendas have limited value and that potential for creativity and engagement is increased when participants are responsible for their own experience. In OST events people are ready to take responsibility and this is why the outcome and follow-up of an OST event regularly has a higher impact on the intended change/or issue of focus than traditional approaches.

**Whenever is starts is the right time.** Although the Agenda Wall/Bulletin Board indicates time slots for working groups, this doesn't mean they start on time. They may start earlier because people can't wait to begin addressing the issues they see as critical. They may start late as a result of other more important things happening. The creative process seldom adheres to clock time.

**When it's over it's over.** Though the time slots indicate set session times participants are encouraged to 1) conclude their discussion and adjourn early if everything significant has been said, or 2) continue their discussion beyond the specified time slot if more needs to be said. In the latter case, the group needs to decide if they will continue right away or schedule a new meeting for further elaboration of their topic.

## **The Law of Two Feet/Mobility**

The Law of Two Feet states that if you find yourself not learning or contributing at any time it is your responsibility to respectfully use your two feet to take you somewhere you are learning or contributing.

## **The Engines of Open Space**

**Passion** – Open Space assumes if people are encouraged to work on what they are genuinely interested in, their passion and creativity will unfold. No passion, no issue.

**Responsibility** – Those who convene a session in an OST event take responsibility for 1) assigning the time and space and 2) taking care of the documentation (notes) of the working group's discussion, agreements, results and any further steps.

## **End of the Day - Beginning of the Next**

At the end of the day everyone gathers in one place to share highlights of the day. This is also a time that can be used to evaluate the progress of a group towards goals and to set goals for the forthcoming day. Then the next morning everyone gathers and participates in adding to the agenda for the day with new ideas they have for sessions. Then the day proceeds as before, those gathered go and do the sessions that interest them...documenting them and cycling back at the end of the day.

At the end of the event or soon after, all participants should receive full documentation of the gathering including all notes submitted and contact information for all persons present, called the *Book of Proceedings*.

## **Planning Convergence and Follow Up**

These principles outline the essentials of Open Space. Everything else done before and afterward depends on the circumstances of the client. Open Space events can stand alone or can function as part of a larger process or event. Often, Open Space events conclude with a convergence phase in which participants reflect upon and analyze all that has been

discussed in order to identify priorities and or next steps. Typically, the *OST* planning team convenes one to three months after the event to consider what was learned and accomplished and what needs additional attention.

### **Space Needed for Open Space**

Ideally an Open Space unConference is held in a large room where you have all sessions going on around the edges. You can also have breakout rooms where different meetings happen but it is helpful if the breakout spaces are as close together as possible. You can also do a mixture of a large room and breakouts.

### **Open Space +**

There are several interesting effective large group processes that can complement Open Space for various purposes. These include Speed Geeking, Fishbowls, Spectrograms, and Appreciative Inquiry.

## **Documentation**

Benefits of Documenting Session Notes and Creating a Book of Proceedings

### **Details of a News Room/Documentation Center**

An Open Space unConference invites participants to create the agenda live the day it happens. Each time slot has 3-15 sessions happening simultaneously. The Documentation Centre is the collection hub of all the notes taken during the sessions and is located in the same room as the main event. These notes are then compiled into a Book of Proceedings (BOP) that can be distributed to all those who attended the conference and a wider community interested in the topic that was not able to attend.

Each breakout space has note taking sheets (for hand written notes) along with a sheet to collect the names of all the participants. Depending on the event, breakout spaces may also include flipchart paper with colored markers, white boards or other means of creatively collecting the data that is generated from the discussions. If Wi-Fi is available note takers have the option of typing up their notes live and e-mailing them in. Those who hand write their notes will be able to transcribe them at the computers available at the documentation center. Non computer generated diagrams, images and charts etc... can be photographed or scanned and be included in the BOP as well.

### **The Book of Proceedings can be used for a great variety of things including:**

- To help leverage momentum after the event
- Attendees can read about what others spoke of in conversations that were running concurrently to the one they were in
- As a reminder about conversations that occurred and as a reference piece for future work
- As new initiatives get formed the book of proceedings provides the way for others not attending the event to identify and join in as it moves forward
- A way to share resources on a diversity of topic areas with everyone/anyone who has interest
- The board, management or sponsors of the event can look back over the 'hot items' that were revealed and identify action ideas to move on/champion
- Insure that attendees have each others' contact and networking information. This information can also be used by those who did not attend the event but receive the BOP and want to connect with those who led or participated in certain conversations
- Can be shared with your funders or investors (if they weren't participating already) or can be used for your own fundraising, collaborative efforts, or advisory teams keeping it a 'live' document
- To lift un-attributable quotes from for promotional materials, internal communication, to support future use of Open Space

Other creative uses and applications for the Book of Proceedings may be discovered through pre-event discussions with the sponsor about the intention of the event and during the event itself.

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