

## **“Open Space Technology”**

*A Process That Achieves Results and fosters an Interconnected Learning Organization*

"Open Space Technology" is the name given to a meeting without a predetermined agenda. Developed in the late eighties by Harrison Owen of Maryland, U.S.A., this meeting methodology is now used around the world as an effective process for facilitating change in both organizational and community settings.

Open Space Technology meetings are simple to organize, require very little lead time, are effective for any sized group from five to six hundred, are effective for established groups such as corporations, private sector and public sector organizations, government and non-government organizations, coalitions, teams or communities. They enable the building of energy and participation in ways that few other processes do. Open Space Technology meetings create the conditions for interactive processes that allow leadership to surface naturally.

Open Space Technology is best used when there is an important issue to be addressed; there is a diversity of people involved; there is complexity; and when decisions need to be made quickly.

Open Space Technology operates on four principles and one law:

Those principles are:

1. *Whoever comes are the right people.* This reinforces that the wisdom to achieve solutions is present in the room and the group is not to worry about who is not present nor to panic about who is.
2. *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.* This keeps the attention on the best possible effort in the present, not worrying about “what we should have done”.
3. *Whenever it starts is the right time.* This reminds people that creativity cannot be controlled.
4. *When it’s over, its over.* This encourages people to continue their discussion so long as there is energy for it. Some sessions will finish well within the anticipated time. Others will run longer than the time allotted.

The one law or rule is called *The Law of Mobility*, also known as *The Law of Two Feet*. This indicates that people can enter or leave an open space session as they choose. If the session you are in is not meeting your needs for either contributing or learning, go to another one.

So how does it work?

An Open Space meeting is announced. Duration is most commonly between one and three days, though they can be shorter.

The venue is a large conference room with lots of "break-out" or session rooms or areas adjacent. When people arrive for the Open Space Technology meeting, they initially come to the plenary room and find a venue in which there is an empty room, except for a large circle of chairs. The circle is an invitation to communication with no barriers.

The workshop begins with a welcome by the sponsor that is brief, highlighting the theme and the “givens” and then a facilitator who explains how the Open Space Technology workshop will operate. The broad

purpose of the workshop is stated again, as are the “givens” or constraints. An example of a broader theme might be "Issues and Opportunities for the Future of the Organization". Sometimes the broad purpose is quite focused such as "Issues and Opportunities for reworking the assembly line". In the middle of the circle is a collection of newsprint paper, masking tape, and felt pens. Participants are then invited to create the agenda for the workshop. It works like this.

- (i) Anyone who has any ideas at all that relate to this broad topic are invited to take a sheet of butcher's paper and along the top write their topic of interest or passion. People are asked for ideas for which they have passion and for which they are prepared to take the responsibility of leading a discussion group on that idea (they do not need to have had previous experience in leading a discussion group but simply to get their topic started and to be sure that everyone who comes to their discussion has a chance to speak), and to make sure a record of the discussion is recorded (report forms are provided). The sheets announcing each of the ideas, along with the name of the person who put up the idea and a note of when the topic will be addressed and which breakout area it will be in) are affixed to a blank wall. Participants can put up ideas for which they have a lot of information including having handouts that they have brought to the meeting for the purpose of sharing the information, or they might know nothing more about the idea than to have a question.
  - (ii) The next step involves a "market-place". All workshop participants go to the market wall to look at the ideas outlined on each sheet. When they find the topic of most interest to them, they sign up, by writing their name on the sheet beneath the topic.
  - (iii) The next step involves participants going to the break out spaces to participate in the topics of their choice. As far as possible, each session is defined by a circle of chairs and no other furniture, though it may have flip charts, post-its, felt pens, etc. The person who posted the idea is responsible for leading the session in whatever way s/he chooses. The facilitator has no involvement whatsoever. The only requirement is that, at the end of the session, the session leader brings back to a central point a summary of session ideas, and who has agreed to do what. This is to be provided in a somewhat standardized format, usually noted on a pro-forma given to the session leader at the start of their session. It is important to record the highlights of the discussion in such a way that they can be understood by people who were not part of the discussion.
  - (iv) A bank of computers is available and session leaders or a representative from the group enters the report into a computer. As soon as a report is entered, the facilitator prints a copy of it for a news wall and posts it so that all participants of the broader meeting can read about what has happened in each session. As well, a copy of the report is made to be entered into a “book of proceedings”, a book that is comprised of all of the reports and contact information of the participants so that they can reach each other for further networking. This book is available to each participant of the meeting. In a multi-day meeting, the “book of proceedings” is handed to each person prior to a time of converging the various topics and getting further input from the collective about next step actions. In a meeting that is one day or less, the “book of proceedings” is available to participant within the week, either through a pick up or mailing. Often, the “book of proceedings” is available electronically as well on a website or by e-mail.
  - (v) In meetings where the intention is to move topics to action steps, the facilitator conducts a summarising session for convergence, prioritizing and action planning, including seeking input on next steps and follow-up. This is a feature of Open Space Technology meetings that are longer than one day.
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Open Space Technology has one outstanding characteristic - the generation of energy and commitment. It also has one outstanding enemy - control. It will not work where the energy and commitment generated are not permitted to bear fruit. This is not to suggest that OST is an invitation to anarchy. Far from it. Provided the constraints -economic, political, legislative - are recognized and spelt out very clearly at the start, and the areas where discretion and freedom to be creative ('defining the space") are also made clear, Open Space Technology is proving itself to be a powerful tool for harnessing commitment and responsibility. Several organization-wide Open Space Technology meetings within a short time frame will start to shift an organizational culture from something that might be de-energized into a more vibrant organic networked community that is effectively producing results.

### **Description of Whole Person Process Facilitation**

When we use Whole Person Process Facilitation as a means of conducting meetings, we tap into the knowledge of the group that is of the conscious mind as well as the knowledge that is beyond the knowledge of the conscious mind and bring this to the awareness of the person, to their conscious mind.

Whole Person Process Facilitation is framed by conducting all meetings by attending to basics in facilitating the process of learning in adults. There are many things to pay attention to in facilitating a meeting with a group, in ensuring good Whole Person Process Facilitation. There are many theories and frameworks covering each of the components. Birgitt Williams has chosen theories and frameworks that she has found to work in enabling learning in adults consistently and what many who work with me say is like "magic". What is offered here is not the "only way". Its usefulness is that it works, it has a good track record, is transferable to any situation, is duplicable and is simple. In using Whole Person Process Facilitation, the components that are attended to in designing the meeting include:

- Creating an accepting rather than defensive climate. Placement of chairs, role of food, other décor, attitude and responses. Being conscious of the implications of actions and behaviors of the facilitator.
  - Introductions. The difference between authenticity and icebreakers.
  - Hopes and fears as a way of identifying objectives.
  - Right placement of your statement of objectives for your meeting/teaching session.
  - Adult learning styles using the Learning Style Inventory.
  - Right brain + Left Brain + easily connecting integrated use of the two = whole brain learning and problem solving.
  - Intuition.
  - Transfer in and bridging exercises.
  - Varying the levels the facilitator works on-in front of group, with group, apart from group.
  - Maximizing energy of the group by doing activities singularly, in pairs, triads, fours, whole group. How and when to use each of these and how to use them to work with each other to keep the energy high.
  - Timing.
  - Attending to energy of the facilitator. Taking care of the facilitator.
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- Feedback tied into hopes and fears. Evaluation that is useful and also part of the ongoing learning experience.

Guiding questions facilitators ask when designing and conducting a process facilitated meeting include:

- Do I have a way of introductions that already taps into whole brain thinking so that I can get the "whole person" into the room quickly?
- Have I given people a chance to express hopes and fears?
- Food!
- Environment!
- Am I attending to creating an accepting rather than defensive climates - my inner work on myself in "parking my baggage at the door" and my attention to what takes place in our session?
- Preparation is more than content. It is self. Have I prepared both myself and the content?
- Have I created opportunities for all learning styles to benefit?
- Have I kept things simple in structure to allow for maximum learning?
- Are my transfer in and bridging exercises good ones for what I am intending to achieve?
- Have I paid attention to the different levels that I work on to facilitate learning - with the group, apart from the group, in front of the group?
- Level of consciousness
- Paying attention to my behaviours and actions
- Staggering learning - pacing as an attunement to energy-attention to when work is to be singular, in pairs, triads, fours, and whole group. Is the timing for each component thought out?
- How have I attended to right brain/left brain learning throughout?
- How have I attended to intuition?

In Whole Person Process Facilitation we stay with a basic design, but make adjustments as we go to meet the needs of the group and to ensure that the group works towards the outcomes it has stated as its objectives for meeting.

## **Cross Cultural Conflict Resolution**

The one constant in life is change. And hand in hand with change is the assuredness of conflict. This training program focuses on readiness of the facilitator to work with situations of conflict with groups. Facilitating conflict resolution meetings is an essential skill and is used when neither Open Space Technology nor Process Facilitation is appropriate because the conflict needs to be dealt with separately. This training session works with the facilitator in personal preparation for working with situations of conflict. It provides the facilitator with skills and a framework for conflict resolution in groups based on universal cross-cultural practices for conflict resolution. This training prepares facilitators to work with groups wanting to resolve their conflict.

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This training program is based on the work of Angeles Arrien in Cross Cultural Conflict resolution and the work of Harrison Owen in Open Space Technology, using the four principles of Open Space Technology as helpful tools. The program is also based in knowledge of the ICHING, the Chinese Book of Change. The program covers work with three life forces, three energies (dynamic, magnetic and integrated); using the four principles of Open Space Technology in the art of detachment; 6 stages of creative problem solving; 3 personal processes; and 21 universal archetypes.

The program examines integrity and trust as well as examining the primary causes of misunderstanding. This learning intensive was developed to assist facilitators to facilitate this resolution for people, of all cultures, and cross culturally. People engaged in conflict are usually fixed in one perspective. They rarely ask each other genuine questions. They also tend to lose contact with their own whole self, rendering voiceless a part of themselves and are unable to participate fully and effectively in efforts to resolve the conflict. Our process works with enabling the person to look again, to make genuine contact again.

Our processes are universal, effective with all human beings. Participants who go through Conflict Resolution Processes with us are shifted beyond going back to the re-enactment of their old fruitless conversations and their fixation on their previous perspective. Even in situations where there is not resolution to the conflict.

For more information about the Genuine Contact™ Program please go to [www.genuinecontact.com](http://www.genuinecontact.com).

For additional information Open Space Technology only please go to [www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org).

## **Now You Can Have Open Space Technology meetings Online!**

We are pleased to announce that a colleague, Gabriella Ender and her team at *OpenSpace-Online GmbH* in Germany have launched OpenSpace-Online® in May 2002. Gabriella and her team have done an amazing job of maintaining the key ingredients of Open Space Technology within the limits of virtual conferencing. A brief description is provided below.

We invite you to go to their website [www.OpenSpace-Online.com](http://www.OpenSpace-Online.com).

### **What is OpenSpace-Online®?**

It is an Internet conference method, which takes place in successive phases, in which between 5 and 75 persons can simultaneously work on a major subject that is current and important to them. The participants work together in a goal and solution-oriented manner for 2 to about 8 hours. No external online moderator is needed. A virtual facilitator guides all participants simply through the process of the conference. The participants themselves are the experts. They meet because of a shared interest in a major theme and together develop new ideas and solutions with their knowledge, their questions, their suggestions, and their dedication. At the end of every OpenSpace-Online® conference each participant receives extensive documentation about the conference in the convenient HTML-format at the press of a button. The documentation provides an ideal basis for further work, as it contains all contents, results, and arrangements made during the conference and can be immediately used in either digital or printed form. The complete and fully developed conference system is available in German and in English.

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