

# *The Change Handbook*

**GROUP METHODS FOR SHAPING THE FUTURE**

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**COMPARATIVE  
MATRIX  
INSIDE**

## Open Space Technology

*The times, they are a-changin'.*

—Bob Dylan

### Open Space at Work

AT&T had an interesting problem. The design team it had assembled to create its pavilion for the 1996 Olympics had lived up to all expectations. The design, in fact, was so good that AT&T was invited to move its pavilion from the edge of the Olympic Village to dead center. Since exposure was the name of the game, and \$200 million was riding on the project, making the move was an easy decision. There was, however, one small problem. At the edge of the Global Village, 5,000 visitors per day could be expected. At the center that number moved up dramatically: 75,000 people at the gate. Talk about exposure—but clearly a structure designed for 5,000 would not accommodate 75,000. To make matters worse, the original design had taken ten months to complete, and it was now December with the Olympics a bare six months away.

The 23 members of the design team were a dispirited group when they assembled to meet the challenge. They knew they were good, and given the time they could easily rise to the occasion. But the time was not there. As they sat in a circle, preparing to engage in what they perceived to be a very doubtful enterprise called Open Space Technology, one of their number was heard to comment, “I think we are about ready to turn a disaster into a catastrophe.”

Two days later, the atmosphere was rather different. A totally new design had been created down to the level of working drawings, and everybody agreed



organizational change; indeed, that change may already have occurred. By the end, groups face an interesting choice. They can do it again, they can do it better, or they can go back to their prior mode of behavior.

#### WHEN IS IT USED?

Open Space is appropriate in situations where a major issue must be resolved, characterized by high levels of complexity, high levels of diversity (in terms of the people involved), the presence of potential or actual conflict, and with a decision time of yesterday.

#### WHAT ARE THE PROBABLE OUTCOMES?

Depending on the length of time involved (one to three days), the following are essentially guaranteed: Every issue of concern to anybody in the group will be on the table. All issues will have been discussed to the extent that the interested parties choose to do so. A full record of the proceedings from the discussions will be in the hands of the participants upon departure. Priorities will have been identified, related issues converged, and initial action steps identified. And the people in the organization will have experienced a very different and self-empowering way of working that they can take back with them. Substantive outcomes have ranged from organization redesign to strategic plan development to product design, to name a few.

#### HOW DOES IT WORK?

Open Space runs on two fundamentals: passion and responsibility. Passion engages the people in the room. Responsibility ensures that tasks get done. A focusing theme or question provides the framework for the event. The art of framing the question lies in saying just enough to evoke attention, while leaving sufficient open space for the imagination to run wild.

All participants are seated in a circle (or concentric circles if the group is large). I have found that the circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication; have you ever heard of a *square* of friends? The four principles and the one law that guide life in Open Space are introduced. The participants are invited to identify any issue for which they have some genuine passion and are prepared to take personal responsibility. With the issue(s) in mind they come to the center of the circle, write their issue on a piece of paper, announce it to the group, and post the paper on the wall. When all the issues that anybody cares to identify have surfaced, the group is invited to go to the wall, sign up for the issues they care

to deal with, and get to work. No matter what the group size, all this takes somewhat more than an hour. From that point on, the group is self-managing. As the groups meet, reports of their activities are generated (typically on computers), and at the conclusion (in a three-day event) all issues are prioritized. The "hot" issues are developed in further detail with concrete action as the goal.

#### THE PRINCIPLES OF OPEN SPACE

*Whoever comes is the right people.* This reminds people that it is not how many people or the position they hold that counts, rather it is their passion for the subject that is important. So what happens if nobody comes to your group? Well, when was the last time you had the time to work on an idea you really cared about? Even a group of one works.

*Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.* This is a reminder to let go of what might have been, should have been, or could have been. It is in moments of surprise, large and small, that real learning and growth occur.

*When it starts is the right time.* Creativity and spirit don't happen according to the clock; they appear in their own time. Open Space merely reminds us that clocks are human-made constructs and have very little to do with the right time for things.

*When it's over, it's over.* This offers a marvelous way to save time and aggravation. If you get together and it takes ten minutes to do what you wanted, congratulations! Move on and do something else. If, on the other hand, you find yourself deeply engaged in what you are doing, keep doing it until you are finished.

These principles are simple statements of the way the world works. While they may appear counterintuitive to some, they are my observations of what always happens when people interact.

*The Law of Two Feet* (sometimes called the Law of Personal Initiative) says to stand up for what you believe, and if you feel you are neither contributing nor learning where you are, use your two feet and go somewhere else. The law is fundamentally about personal responsibility. It makes it clear that the only person responsible for your experience is you.

The actual Open Space event lasts from one to three days, depending on desired outcomes. One day allows for the raising and discussion of pertinent issues. In two days a useful set of proceedings can be generated. With an additional half day, all issues may be prioritized, converged, and brought to a point of action. Shorter times are possible but with a genuine loss of depth.

### LIFE AFTER OPEN SPACE

To the best of my knowledge, no organization comes away unaffected by Open Space. In addition to whatever substantive outcomes may have emerged from the gathering, the subtle effects may have even more impact. At the very least, the organization has a new performance benchmark, for all participants now know that endless preparation is not required for useful engagement. Distributed leadership, personal empowerment, appreciation of diversity, even self-managed work groups are all a matter of experience. Of course the group may choose never to experience this again, but there is no denying that all of the above took place.

### COST JUSTIFICATION

Since there is virtually no up-front planning or training required (except for theme identification and logistics) and only one facilitator necessary regardless of the group size, costs can range from essentially nothing to whatever the group is prepared to spend for accommodations, travel, and the like. Run these costs against the benefit of doing in two days what had previously taken ten months on a \$200 million project, and the justification is pretty clear. Needless to say, not every instance of Open Space produces those sorts of results, but they are not uncommon.

### Getting Started

When contemplating fundamental change, my first advice is "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." In short, make sure you really want to take this trip before you start. With specific reference to Open Space, the advice is "If you can find any other way to do what you want to do, do it." The reason is simple. With Open Space, the good news and the bad news are identical: it works. In Open Space, every group I have worked with becomes excited, innovative, creative, and ready to assume responsibility for what the members care about. This all sounds wonderful, but for some people sometimes, it also sounds like a prescription for going out of control. And they are right. If maintaining control is your fundamental intent, for goodness' sake don't even think about Open Space. On the other hand, if you are prepared to believe in people, trust them, and acknowledge that in all probability they are the true experts about what needs to be done, then Open Space will deliver. And you can be sure that fundamental change is a likely consequence.



## Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationships

### SPONSORSHIP REQUIREMENTS

The sponsors must be prepared to honor and respect all the participants. This does not mean that every crazy idea generated in the course of the gathering must be implemented, and there will be some crazy ideas. But it does mean that the space created must be safe for people to be fully creative and fully themselves. As a matter of fact, groups I have worked with are rather conservative, whether they be corporations, communities, religious orders, or major political jurisdictions, and collectively they prove to be excellent judges regarding the insanity or applicability of an idea.



	Before	During	After
<b>Sponsor(s)/ Convenor(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Express the need</li> <li>• Commit to letting go of control</li> <li>• Commit the resources</li> <li>• Identify whom to invite</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be fully present</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the outcomes</li> <li>• Stay open to where the experience takes the organization</li> </ul>
<b>Designer/ Facilitator</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the convenors in expressing the theme</li> <li>• Do due diligence in making the sponsor aware that once the organization has been "opened," it doesn't go back</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a safe space</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coach the sponsor(s) on staying open to what emerges from the organization—sometimes it can be very unfamiliar and uncomfortable</li> </ul>
<b>Participants</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be fully present</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow through on commitments</li> <li>• Bring the four principles and the law back with you</li> </ul>

Table 1. Roles and Responsibilities

### ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

The job of the facilitator is to create a safe space in which people can work and then to get out of the way. Observably, the facilitator has a maximum of 20 minutes "up front" and from that point on apparently does nothing. He or she will not intervene in any of the groups, or with the group as a whole, unless a Space Invader presents himself or herself. Space Invaders may be just overly

enthusiastic participants or (in the worst case) the chairman of the board, who is concerned that things are out of control. Space Invaders take it upon themselves to corral everybody into a single course of action of their design. Open Space is the quintessential “trust the group—trust the process” sort of thing, and *nobody* has the right to control specific outcomes, so long as he or she chooses to be in Open Space.

#### PARTICIPANTS' ROLE

The simple answer to who participates in Open Space is whoever cares. In practice, the invitation goes to everyone who might care about the answers to the theme or framing question, whether from within the organization or from outside. Where the logistics are a challenge, there are a variety of ways to handle the situation, such as limiting attendance to first come, first served, or to a certain number from each community affected.

The job of the participants is to be fully themselves. If they are scared, trustless, frustrated, so be it. And if they are enthusiastic, creative, and ready for innovation, that is good, too. They are the way they are, and that is precisely the way they should be. Expectations of the participants (and that means everybody, including the planning committee, executive staff, and chairman of the board) are that they will come, be fully present, and be open to outcomes—and then take personal responsibility for ensuring that good and useful activities occur. All of this is not the sort of thing that a rousing speech on values and responsibilities is likely to engender. But it seems to take place, almost as a matter of course, in situations where genuine respect is present.

For those who are not able to participate, the proceedings and the people who were there provide the connection to the experience. What happens after that is guided by the passion and responsibility of those who participated and what they bring back with them.

#### A WORD ON PLANNING COMMITTEES

Open Space presents a problem to planning committees. There is very little to be done in advance. As a matter of fact, my major effort with such committees is to help them understand that after the theme has been determined and the guests have been invited, all the rest is quite simple and straightforward logistics. Rent the hall, arrange for meals, and let it happen. Self-organization does have its advantages.

## Impact on Power and Authority

Open Space can be very problematical for positional power and authority, particularly if those who hold that power and authority are in any substantial way insecure. For “control freaks,” Open Space is an anathema and should never be used. However, when power and authority are rooted in competence, respect, accountability, and trust, Open Space becomes a very natural way of doing business. There was a time, not long ago, when executives at all levels were expected to be in control and know all the answers. I suspect that time has passed. For those in executive positions who share my suspicion, Open Space can be a very useful method to use.



## Conditions for Success

*When to Use It:* Use Open Space whenever the answer is basically unknown and the only possible hope is that the group members, consisting of all those who care, can from their collective wisdom arrive at solutions that no individual or small group can hope to devise.

*Why It Works:* Open Space is an evolving mystery. By all rights it should not work. But it does. The answers to the question of why it works will come from what we know, and are finding out, about self-organizing systems.

*When Not to Use This Method:* Do not use this method if you wish to remain in total control, at least as we used to understand *total* and *control*. Control and accountability are still very much present in Open Space, but the locus of both shifts from one, wise, all-powerful executive to the participants themselves.

*Common Mistakes:* Open Space is remarkably forgiving. Indeed, the only way I know to totally undermine the process is to think that you are in charge of it (see above).



## Theoretical Basis

Open Space Technology was not the product of careful design. It occurred simply because I was tired of organizing meetings only to discover that the best-loved part was the coffee breaks, the only part I had nothing to do with. The immediate inspiration was social organization in tribal West Africa, where I discovered that everything of importance and utility occurred in a circle. Every indigenous population of which I am aware made the same discovery a long time before I did.



Retrospectively, as we try to figure out why Open Space works, the answers generally come from research dealing with self-organization, complex adaptive systems, “dissipative structures,” and the like. The associated names are not generally found in the literature of management or even behavioral science and include the likes of Stuart Kaufmann (biologist), Ilya Prigogine (chemist), and Murray Gel-Mann (physicist), to name a few. At the level of popularization we should also include Meg Wheatley and her work presented under the titles *Leadership and the New Science* and, more recently, *A Simpler Way* (Berrett-Koehler).



### **Sustaining Results**

So you had a great gathering. What do you do next? The answer is quite simple but perhaps not totally satisfactory: Go with the flow. Concretely, this means that in an Open Space gathering the emergent structure, purpose, and power of an organization will not only reveal themselves but will be mapped out in terms of the proceedings and what follows. The smart money will support the energy. Where it is strong (coherent and useful) it will provide resources and break down barriers (as in bureaucratic constraints), and where it is weak, don't proceed.

The choice of an immediate next step is usually pretty clear and typically is one of three possibilities:

- the actions to be taken are so clear it only remains to do them;
- the actions to be taken are pretty clear, but more information or consultation is required, in which case it is important to set a time by which these tasks will be completed;
- the issue remains clear as mud, in which case a reasonable next step would be to hold another Open Space event, this time devoted exclusively to that issue.

There is also a major opportunity to anchor the new organizational behaviors experienced in Open Space. As mentioned, self-managed work groups, distributed leadership, appreciation of diversity, and self-empowerment, among others, appear as natural by-products of the Open Space environment. Typically, however, these behaviors manifest so quickly and easily that many of the participants will have missed their arrival. For an intact work group it is very useful to reflect upon the new arrivals. Such reflection should not be confused with standard training programs that previously had sought to engender these behaviors. When a group is already functioning as a self-managed work group (for example) it makes little sense to go back to the beginning with fundamental concepts

and practices. In this case we are dealing with a matter of experience that may be acknowledged and built upon.

## Final Comments

A number of people, when they first hear about Open Space, come away with the opinion that there is no structure and less control. This opinion is totally wrong. What is true is that there is no *preimposed* structure and control. Such structure and control as is present (and it turns out to be a lot) is all emergent from the people involved, the tasks they perform, and the environment in which they are operating. In short, it is *appropriate* structure and control—appropriate to the people, task, and environment.

In most cases, people who view Open Space as being out of control with no structure have not actually been in Open Space. Had they been there, they would know what 500 representatives knew after they had gathered to rethink the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In the process the Presbyterians created 164 task groups, which were self-managed over a 48-hour period, ending with a book of proceedings (350 pages long) in their hands. All of this was not done by levitation. In short, the level of emergent structure and control is generally of a sort that no planning committee would dare imagine, let alone seek to implement. But it happens and it works. Such is the nature of self-organizing systems.

There also seems to be a notion that Open Space is good only for establishing useful conversation, with substantive contribution not a goal of the method. One author even described it as having the sole use as a forum for airing employee grievances. Doubtless, good conversations do take place; and grievances get aired—but substantive output, as in the case of AT&T, is no stranger.

## About the Author

*Harrison Owen* is president of H. H. Owen and Company. His academic background and training centered on the nature and function of myth, ritual, and culture. In the middle 1960s, he left academe to work with a variety of organizations including small West African villages, urban (American and African) community organizations, the Peace Corps, Regional Medical Programs, The National Institutes of Health, and the Veterans Administration. Along the way he discovered that his study of myth, ritual, and culture had direct application to these social systems. In 1977 he created H. H. Owen and Company in order to explore the culture of organizations in transformation as a theorist and prac-



ticing consultant. Harrison convened the First International Symposium on Organization Transformation and is the originator of Open Space Technology. He is the author of *Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations*, *Leadership Is, Riding the Tiger*, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (second edition, Berrett-Koehler), *The Millennium Organization*, *Tales from Open Space* (editor), and *Expanding Our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology*.

When once asked what he did, Harrison responded that he honestly didn't know, but his intent was to make human life human. He has worked in a variety of areas, from the African jungle to the halls of Congress—with large corporations in between. He believes that he has always been doing the same thing, and as he said above, Open Space seems to be more of the same.

*Anne Stadler* is a former television producer and community organizer who now opens space in organizations for the evolution of self-organizing learning communities. She is consulting faculty for the Antioch/Seattle Graduate Management Programs. Her consulting practice includes work in India and the United States with organizations as diverse as scientific research centers, schools, community arts centers, and businesses. She produced the video *Learning in Open Space*, in which Harrison Owen explains the philosophy and use of Open Space Technology.