



Genuine Contact™

...providing a holistic approach to organizational success

What is Open Space Technology?

It is a Meeting Process that Achieves Results and Fosters an Interconnected Learning Organization—the Genuine Contact Organization

"Open Space Technology" is the name given to a meeting without a predetermined agenda. Developed in the late 1980's 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 seven to one thousand people, 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 or 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, it's 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 newswall 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. 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.

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. To complete the shift in organizational culture and to sustain the new paradigm requires additional attention, see our materials about the Genuine Contact Organization, which can be found at http://www.genuinecontact.net/pgm_open_space.html.

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