

An Introduction to Open Space

by Jack Martin Leith

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Terminology

The terms Open Space meeting, Open Space conference, Open Space meeting and Open Space gathering are synonymous. At various times during the past 30 years I have experimented with using each of these terms, and discovered that each has its virtues and drawbacks. In this document I use the term Open Space event, while remaining fully aware of its shortcomings.

What is an Open Space event?

An Open Space event is a participant-led gathering in which 10, 50, 100, 500 or more people discuss issues of heartfelt concern, share ideas, pool their knowledge, reach agreement on the best way forward, and develop plans for collaborative action.

Participants create their own programme of self-managed sessions (e.g. discussion groups, experiential workshops, ideas sessions and planning meetings) related to a central theme, such as: *The future of the XYZ Corporation: What are the issues and opportunities?*

The participant group can be of any size, from twelve people to a thousand or more, and the meeting is usually held over one day or multiple days.

There are no invited speakers, and just one facilitator to explain the procedure and facilitate the plenary sessions.

Open Space events are typically held to create a new vision, consider how to implement a strategy, plan a significant change, solve a complex or persistent problem, invent a new product, or prepare for community action. They are also increasingly used by companies and membership organizations as an alternative or adjunct to their annual conference.

The Open Space approach is particularly effective when complex or conflict-ridden issues must be resolved quickly, and when participation, collaboration, alignment and ownership are desired outcomes.

Since the inception of Open Space in 1985, Open Space events have been used throughout the world by a wide range of organizations including Bosch, Cabinet Office, Diageo, European Commission, GlaxoSmithKline, Home Office, McCain Foods, NHS, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Royal Dutch Shell.

“At the very least, Open Space is a fast, cheap, and simple way to better, more productive meetings. At a deeper level, it enables people to experience a very different quality of organization in which self-managed work groups are the norm, leadership is a constantly shared phenomenon, diversity becomes a resource to be used instead of a problem to be overcome, and personal empowerment is a shared experience. It is also fun. In a word, conditions are set for fundamental organizational change.”

Harrison Owen, originator of Open Space Technology

Open Space events are convened for three main purposes:

Learn and Connect Enabling those with common goals and concerns to connect with each other, share information, hatch new ideas, begin new relationships, strengthen existing ones, and establish a sense of solidarity and community.

Ideas and Insights Consulting employees, customers, members of the public and other constituencies in order to surface ideas and gain new insights.

Explore and Co-create Providing a setting in which employees and external stakeholders come together to explore an issue of mutual concern and formulate plans for sustained collaborative action.

When and when not to use Open Space

Use Open Space when:

- You are facing a real business issue of great concern.
- The situation is complex.
- There is lack of clarity about the nature of the issue and the best way of tackling it.
- There is a high degree of diversity with regard to people's perspectives, interests and agendas.
- There is an urgent need to make speedy decisions.
- Multifarious stakeholders must come together for good decisions to be made.
- Conflict is preventing the desired state of affairs from coming into being.
- Sustained collaborative action must be set in motion.

Do not use Open Space when:

- The topic is too broad or too specific.
- The Open Space event is viewed as a one-off event rather than part of a wider programme of work.
- The plans have already been formulated.
- There is a desire to control the process.
- The achievement of a specific outcome is essential.
- The sponsor has a hidden agenda.
- There is little or no commitment from management to support any projects that may emerge.

Question the use of Open Space when:

- Full attendance is a prerequisite. (Participation in an Open Space event is normally voluntary.)
- Time is tight.
- The desired outcome is a set of recommendations rather than a portfolio of self-managed projects.
- The venue is unsuitable or a venue inspection is not an option.
- One or more members of the leadership team will not be present.

Five ways of accomplishing a result

A manager has six main ways of accomplishing a result: telling, selling, testing, consulting, and co-creating. Each approach can be effective when deployed in the right circumstances.

As a rule of thumb, telling results in little ownership of the task and a low level of commitment to seeing things through to successful completion, while co-creating generates a high level of ownership and commitment.

	Tell	Sell	Test	Consult	Co-create
What leaders do	Give an instruction	Seek buy-in	Invite response	Request assistance	Work together from the outset
	Solicit engagement				
Increasing ownership and commitment →					

Original model by [Bryan Smith](#), inspired by [Tannenbaum and Schmidt](#). This version by Jack Martin Leith.

Co-creation is a collaborative way of working in which members of all relevant stakeholder groups work together on an equal footing to bring forth a mutually beneficial result.

The end result could be a new product, service or facility, a new vision, business model or strategy, a new way of working, a solution to a complex or persistent problem, or just about anything.

“Co-creation is not about ‘build it and they will come.’ Rather, it is about ‘bring them together and build it with them.’ Co-creation harnesses human potential to mutually expand value. It not only views individuals as having creative capacities to forge mutually valuable outcomes together, but also that they attach meaning to their experiences of these outcomes and their very acts of creative interactions with the environments around them.

Thinking of co-creation in this way takes us well beyond crowdsourcing and open innovation. It can include any of the value chain activities of any business, civic, or social enterprise—activities that can be opened up to more inclusive, creative, and meaningful engagement with stakeholders.”

Source: The World Bank

During the early years, most Open Space events were consultative, and outputs took the form of recommendations to management. Today, this way of using the Open Space still has a place, but it is more commonly employed to foster collaboration and co-creation.

Some typical results from an Open Space event

- Participants' genuine concerns are identified and discussed.
- Hearts and minds are fully engaged.
- Productive working relationships are created.
- Cross-functional communication links are established.
- New behavioural norms emerge.
- A strong sense of community arises.
- Creative and relevant ideas are developed.
- People formulate concrete plans for sustained collaborative action, and they are committed to bringing these plans to fruition.

An Open Space event often spawns a set of written reports that are distributed to participants and other interested parties.

An action planning process can be run before the close of the Open Space event to create a prioritised list of tasks and projects, and to initiate self-managing project teams.

Structure of an Open Space event



Participant briefing

Participants gather for the opening session. They sit in a circle, to create a sense of community and to indicate that everyone is equal. The facilitator welcomes everyone, states the purpose of the Open Space event, describes the principles that underpin Open Space ⁽¹⁾, and explains how the day's agenda will be created and managed.

Note 1: In my experience, the principles are only relevant when Open Space is used as an alternative conference format rather than a setting in which real organizational or community work gets work done.

Open Space Technology principles and law

Wherever it happens is the right place.

Whoever comes are the right people.

Whenever it starts is the right time.

Wherever it happens is the right place.

Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen.

When it's over, it's over.

Use the **Law of Two Feet** (a.k.a. The Law of Mobility). If you are not learning or contributing, it is your responsibility to go where you are able to do so.

Agenda creation

Anyone who feels so inspired can offer one or more sessions (such as a presentation, experiential workshop, discussion group or task force) by creating a simple poster showing the title of the session and his or her name, making a brief announcement to the whole group, choosing a room and a timeslot, and placing the corresponding Post-it Note (see graphic below) on the poster.



Session sign-up

The posters are fixed to the wall and participants sign up for the sessions that they wish to attend. Much negotiating usually occurs at this point: people offering sessions on similar topics may decide to join forces, and people may ask for sessions to be re-timed to make their participation possible.

The *only* purpose of the sign-up process is to give hosts an indication of how many people might take part in their session. So in most cases, sign-up can be replaced by a show of hands. With people still in their seats, the facilitator reads out each session title in turn and says: "Please raise your hand if you think you might take part in this session." If no one raises their hand, the host has three options: (1) withdraw his or her session, (2) conduct a solo session, or (3) trust that some people will turn up anyway.

Open Space sessions

Participants then self-organize and pursue what interests them, attending sessions, or being a bumblebee (moving from session to session) or a butterfly (sitting on the sidelines and having ad-hoc conversations with whoever shows up).

Session reports

Someone at each session volunteers to make notes and prepare a handwritten or computer-generated report, which is displayed under a sign saying 'Session Reports'. When an Open Space event extends beyond a single day, a plenary session is held at the start and end of each day for announcements and information sharing.

Action planning

An Open Space event often includes an action planning session. During this session the participants prioritise action points and form self-managing teams to implement high priority projects. Projects emerging from the Open Space event are monitored and co-ordinated by the project co-ordination team, which is composed of the co-ordinator of each project team plus a member of the formal leadership team. The purpose of this team is to keep all interested parties updated on the progress of the projects, to create a direct link between the project teams and the organization's resource allocation process, and to ensure that the projects receive ongoing management attention.

Reflection

An Open Space event usually concludes with a plenary session in which people reflect on the proceedings.

Some common uses of Open Space

- Accelerated innovation
- Complex problem solving
- Strategy implementation
- Project planning and initiation
- Market and social research
- Process improvement
- Cross-functional collaboration
- Knowledge sharing
- Culture change
- Participant-led conferences (a.k.a. unconferences)
- Stakeholder consultation

Who has used Open Space, and for what purposes?

Open Space events have been used by organizations and communities throughout the world for a wide range of purposes. Here are some examples.

ABN AMRO Bank

Launch of the wholesale bank's global high potentials programme.

Age Concern England (now Age UK)

I coached the facilitator of three Open Space events in which members of Heyday, the now-defunct membership organization of Age Concern England, explored the theme: "How can we be heard?"

Arts Factory

Open Space events convened to create a vision, define objectives and make plans for concerted action.

Business Improvement Network

Three Open Space events in which participants explored how they might get more value from ISO 9000 and ISO 9004.

Cabinet Office

A large-scale Open Space event in which public sector HR managers explored the theme of leadership. Part of the UK government's 'modernising government' initiative.

Emerge

An Open Space event to launch a visual arts initiative for emerging artists based in the London Boroughs of Barnet, Brent, Enfield, Haringey and Harrow.

Energis (now Cable & Wireless)

An Open Space event in which participants considered how they might create an organizational culture that fosters innovation.

European Commission

An Open Space event convened to identify emerging technologies.

Food & Drink Innovation Network

Open Space forming part of an innovation conference.

Open Space is the only way I know of having delegates decide what it is that they want to talk about, as opposed to having an organiser decide in advance what's going to happen.

Jeffrey Hyman, founder of Food & Drink Innovation Network

GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare

An Open Space event in which the staff of two research and development laboratories, one located near London and one in the Forest of Dean, discussed ways of implementing the new R&D strategy.

Guinness Ireland Group (now Diageo Ireland)

An Open Space event in which GIG managers and young beer drinkers took part in conversations linked to the theme: *What makes a great beer?*

“Open Space enabled a large cross-functional group from Guinness Ireland (now Diageo Ireland) connect with Dublin beer drinkers and uncover new insights about what makes a great beer and great brands. Its strength is that people spend time working on the things that matter to them, rather than the organisers.”

Peter Nash, former Head of Development - External Affairs, Diageo Ireland

Health Service Executive (Ireland)

An Open Space event in which 200 healthcare managers explored the topic of internal communication and formed project teams to address the main issues they identified.

McCain Foods

An accelerated innovation project involving 100 consumers and 25 people from different parts of the McCain organization.

The project spearheaded the development and introduction of a new potato-based product.

“Thank you ... for your effort, organization and inspiration ... the Open Space exercise has been a great success in both generating ideas and starting to shift the company culture and perception of idea/product development. Many thanks for your valuable input. I look forward to working on ideas together in the future.”

Jo Warnock-Horn, former Marketing Manager, McCain Foods (GB)

NHS

A public Open Space event in which participants explored the implications of integrating the services provided by two hospital trusts located in Sussex, UK.

Petroleum Development Oman

An Open Space event in which scientists and engineers worked together to solve a highly complex technical problem.

Prudential UK

An Open Space event convened to develop a community of practice for the company's management development professionals.

Royal Dutch Shell

Open Space events convened to develop a joint research programme with a Dutch university, and to create a new strategy for Shell Learning Centre.

“As part of our plans to determine a new direction to meet the changing needs of a major multinational company, we made it a priority to engage everyone in developing a five year strategy and building support for a major relocation. Open Space played a vital part in this engagement process and provided an opportunity for managers and staff to voice their concerns, helping me to understand the needs of the organization and enabling staff to express their needs and contribute their ideas.”

Adam Lomas, former Head of Global Learning, Shell International; now Partner, Castor & Partners

University of Brighton – Community University Partnership Programme

An Open Space event in which the university and its external stakeholders initiated collaborative projects.

Case study: Rockport Company

On the morning of Thursday 21st October 1993, the Rockport Company, a subsidiary of Reebok International, closed for two days. No orders were processed, no shoes were shipped, scheduled meetings were cancelled. The head office was locked. Except for a skeleton crew left behind to answer the phones, all 350 members of Rockport's workforce, including John Thorbeck, the company's president, and his senior executives, gathered in a cavernous warehouse for a two day meeting which had no agenda.

Harrison Owen stepped into the centre of the loosely-formed circle of intrigued participants to make his opening introduction. Half an hour later his briefing was complete, and it was time for people to make their offerings. It took a little while for things to get moving, but eventually one Rockport employee stepped forward, then another.

Within an hour, an energised group had posted dozens of issues on the wall: distribution, on-time delivery, customer service, excess raw materials. Some topics had never before been acknowledged as issues of concern, such as women's perceptions of the Rockport environment, eliminating political games, overcoming “we vs they” thinking, and getting rid of paperwork.

By the end of day two, 66 different sessions had taken place, with the number of participants ranging from five to 150 or more on the hot topics.

At one point during the meeting a security guard (who wasn't even a Rockport employee) happened to mention that he spent a lot of time on his feet and would love to wear the kind of comfortable shoes that Rockport made. But his company would never buy them as they didn't go with the security company's uniform. Why couldn't Rockport redesign the uppers to match the uniform? And so a new product range was born. Even if it were nothing more than an average performer in the market, sales would be around \$20 million per year.

At the planning stage of the Open Space event, Anthony Tiberii, then Rockport's senior vice president and chief financial officer, had been one of its most vocal opponents. He felt that the company could not afford to lose two whole shipping days.

After the meeting he changed his mind, and was easily able to justify the investment.

Addressing people's concerns about Open Space

Here are the most frequently-voiced questions and concerns about Open Space, together with a brief response.

Open Space may have worked elsewhere, but we're different because we're [fill in the blank: accountants, Chinese, marketing managers, blind, whatever]

Most of the organizations I have worked with have said something along those lines when the use of Open Space was first suggested, and in every case the Open Space event was a success.

The only time Open Space doesn't work is when the topic is too broad or too specific, when the plans have already been formulated, when there is desire to control the process, when the achievement of a specific outcome is essential, when the sponsor has a hidden agenda, or when there is no commitment from management to support the projects that emerge.

And Open Space has even been known to work when some of those conditions have been present.

How can I make sure that certain topics get discussed?

The only way to do this is to get someone to agree to propose the topic beforehand.

There are two dangers here.

First, the person may decide to propose a different topic, or may prefer to take part in the sessions that other people have offered.

And second, the person may propose the topic, only to find that no one signs up for it.

So you really only have two options: either let go of your expectations or don't hold an Open Space event.

Many of the participants will have no experience of facilitating groups. Will this be a problem?

It is rarely a make-or-break issue. Session hosts will almost always rise to the challenge and do a good job, regardless of their level of facilitation experience.

What if no one steps forward to offer a session?

In the entire history of Open Space this has never happened, and there's little likelihood of it ever occurring in the future.

What if people propose sessions that are unrelated to the theme?

Trust the process. People will only attend any session if they think it is a worthwhile use of their time.

What if someone proposes a session that's outrageous or taboo?

Most organizations have issues that are undiscussable. Open Space provides a setting in which these can be brought into the open and discussed in a mature way.

How can we ensure that the ideas are implemented and projects are brought to fruition?

I have some answers this question, but they are beyond the scope of this short introduction. Please contact me if you would like to know more.

Open Space resources

Websites

Harrison Owen

<http://ho-image.com> | www.openspaceworld.com

Open Space general information

www.openspaceworld.org

CATS3000 Open Space Realm

A collection of outstanding web articles written by Paul Levy

<https://rationalmadness.wordpress.com/treasures/open-space-realm>

Chris Corrigan

Excellent resources for Open Space practitioners

www.chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/open-space-resources

Videos

A short video of an Open Space event, from opening to completion

by Jean-Philippe Poupard

Runtime: 1:57

www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTE09CQe7Mw

Chris Corrigan — Open Space introduction

Runtime: 17:40

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/158422674>

Open Space email list

OSLIST is a useful and very active email list with an extensive archive. To subscribe by email, send a message to oslist-join@openspacetech.org. The subject and content of your email will be ignored. You will get a confirmation email almost immediately. Just reply to that and your subscription is activated.

Books

Expanding Our Now – the story of Open Space Technology

Author: Harrison H Owen. (1997 – San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.)

Large Group Interventions – Engaging the Whole System for Rapid Change.

Authors: Barbara Benedict Bunker and Billie T Alban. (1997 – Jossey Bass.) Alban and Bunker have been studying the field of large group intervention methods since the early 1990s and have compressed a large chunk of their knowledge into this excellent book.

The Handbook of Large Group Methods: Creating Systemic Change in Organizations and Communities.

Authors: Barbara Benedict Bunker and Billie T Alban. (Jossey-Bass Business & Management)

Open Space Technology – a User's Guide

Author: Harrison H Owen. (1997 – San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.) Detailed instructions for organising and facilitating an Open Space event.

The Power of Spirit

Author: Harrison H Owen. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.)

The Spirit of Leadership

Author: Harrison H Owen. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.)

Related and derivative methods

[OpenSpace Agility](#) (Daniel Mezick)

[BarCamp](#)

[Hack Day](#)

[Peer Conferences](#) (Adrian Segar)

[Unconferences](#)

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