



Leith's Guide to Open Space

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An Open Space event is a participant-led gathering in which 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.

What is an Open Space event?

An Open Space event enables participants to create their own programme of self-managed sessions (such as discussion groups, experiential workshops, ideas sessions and planning meetings) related to a central theme, such as: *What are the issues and opportunities facing the XYZ Corporation?*

Open Space allows diverse and often very large groups of people to get together, discuss issues of heartfelt concern, pool their knowledge, reach agreement on the best way forward, and develop plans for collaborative action.

The participant group can be of any size, from twelve people to a thousand or more, and the meeting is usually held over one, two or three 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, figure out how to implement a strategy, plan a significant change, solve a complex or intractable problem, invent a new product, or prepare for community action. They are also increasingly used by organisations as an alternative or adjunct to their annual conference.

Since 1985, Open Space events have been used in different parts of the world by a wide range of companies and non-profit organisations including Cabinet Office, Diageo, Home Office, ICI, McCain Foods, National Health Service, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Robert Bosch, and Royal Dutch Shell.

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.

Harrison Owen, the originator of Open Space, says: *“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 organisation 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 organisational change.”*

Co-creation

In *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Bryan Smith describes five different ways to create a vision: Tell, Sell, Test, Consult and Co-create.

(These are also ways to develop a strategy for realising the vision, and ways to create an implementation plan.)

Here is a brief description of each of the five ways.

Tell

What the leaders do: *Demand compliance*

“This is the plan; everyone has got to adhere to it without deviation, or there will be trouble”

Telling is generally the least effective approach.

Sell

What the leaders do: *Seek buy-in*

“This is the plan, the benefits of which are as follows ...”

Test

What the leaders do: *Invite response*

“This is the plan ... tell us what you think about it and we will consider incorporating your ideas”

Consult

What the leaders do: *Request input*

“We are developing a plan and would like to solicit your ideas and opinions before putting pen to paper”

Co-create

What the leaders do: *Invite join-in*

“We’ve got a blank sheet of paper ... let’s sit down and create the plan together”

Co-creation brings together an organisation’s internal and external stakeholders to jointly solve a complex problem, accomplish systemic change, unlock potential, or bring forth the new.

This approach is generally the most effective when you want to create visions, strategies and implementation plans that lead to breakthrough results and sustainable change, or when you want to create new products and services in concert with customers and other stakeholders.

Open Space is a powerful tool for co-creating a rapid shift from the current state of affairs to the desired state of affairs, regardless of whether the project is framed as one of problem solving, development, innovation, change, or something else.

What an Open Space event is not

An Open Space event is not:

- a brainstorming meeting (people discuss their *heartfelt* concerns)
- a complaints session (the emphasis is on taking personal responsibility)
- a 'jolly' (an Open Space event involves high play, but also high learning)
- total anarchy (there is *just enough* structure and control to enable participants to do productive work)

What an Open Space event typically delivers

These are some of the results that are often produced by an Open Space event:

- People's deeply-felt concerns are known.
- 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.
- Participants' genuine concerns are identified and discussed.
- Creative and relevant ideas are developed.
- People create concrete plans for collaborative action that they are committed to bringing to fruition.
- Self-managed project teams are in place.

The most tangible output from an Open Space event is set of written reports, one for each session, usually with action points.

An action planning process can be run after the Open Space event to create a prioritised list of actions and projects and to establish self-managing teams to undertake these projects.

Do not use Open Space events 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 larger set of value-creating activities taking place over time
- 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 the projects that emerge

Question the use Open Space events 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

Structure of an Open Space event

- Briefing** Participants gather for the opening session. They sit in a circle, to indicate that everyone is equal. The facilitator states the theme of the meeting, describes the principles that underpin Open Space and explains how the day's agenda will be created and managed.

The five principles and one law of Open Space Technology

1. Whoever comes are the right people

(Those whose participation is needed will show up at the meeting or session)

2. Whenever it starts is the right time

(Inspiration doesn't know about timetables)

3. Wherever it happens is the right place

4. Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen

(Let go of your expectations and embrace what's happening right now)

5. When it's over, it's over

(If there's no more to say, move on)

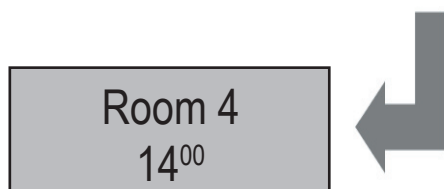
Use the Law of Two Feet

Also known as The Law of Mobility

(If you are not learning or contributing where you are, you must go somewhere else)

- Creating the agenda** Anyone who feels so inspired can offer one or more sessions (such as a presentation, 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.

	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4	Room 5	Room 6
10 ⁰⁰						
11 ³⁰						
14 ⁰⁰						



- 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.
- Sessions** Participants then self-organise 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 casual conversations).
- 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'. The large group reconvenes at certain points and at the end of the forum to make announcements and share information.
- Action planning** The 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 organisation's resource allocation process, and to ensure that the projects receive ongoing management attention.
- Reflection** The meeting ends with a plenary session in which people reflect on the meeting. Each participant leaves with a complete set of session reports.

Common uses of Open Space events

- Employee/brand engagement
- Stakeholder consultation
- Accelerated innovation
- Complex problem solving
- Strategy implementation
- Project planning and start-up
- “Quantiquial” (quantitative/qualitative) market and social research
- Performance improvement
- Rapid process redesign
- Cross-functional collaboration
- Knowledge sharing
- Participative conferences

Who has used Open Space, and for what purposes?

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

ABN Amro Bank

Launch of programme for developing the company’s top tier of talent

Age Concern England (now Age UK)

Three collaborative events in which members of Heyday, the now-defunct membership organisation of Age Concern England, explored the theme: “How can we be heard?”

Arts Factory

Big collaborative meetings that were convened to create a vision, define objectives and make plans for concerted action

Business Improvement Network

Three big collaborative events in which participants explored how they might get more value from ISO 9000 and ISO 9004

Cabinet Office

Meeting on the theme of leadership; part of UK government’s “modernising government” initiative

Emerge

Big collaborative 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)

Big collaborative event in which participants

considered how they might create an organisation that fosters innovation

European Commission

Research event to identify emerging technologies

Guinness Ireland Group

(now Diageo Ireland)

Market research – part of Connect programme

Health Service Executive (Ireland)

Big collaborative 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

Consumer-inspired new product development

National Health Service

Big collaborative event to explore the implications of integrating the services provided by two Sussex hospitals

Petroleum Development Oman

Big collaborative meeting in which scientists and engineers worked together to solve a highly complex technical problem

Prudential UK

Meeting to develop a community of management development professionals

Royal Dutch Shell

Big collaborative events convened to:

- Develop a joint research programme with a Dutch university
- Create a new strategy for Shell Learning Centre

University of Brighton – Community University Partnership Programme

Big collaborative event in which the university and its external stakeholders initiated joint projects

Testimonials

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*

Thank you ... for your effort, organisation 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)*

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 organisation and enabling staff to express their needs and contribute their ideas.

*Adam Lomas, former Head of Global
Learning, Shell International*

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, Chairman, Food & Drink
Innovation Network*

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 event 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 events

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 people, whatever]

Most of the organisations 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, 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, or 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 organisations have issues that are undiscussable. Open Space provides a safe space where these can be brought into the open and discussed in a mature way.

How will we ensure that the ideas are implemented?

This is one of the main challenges when using any large group intervention method.

I have designed a project planning process that works in the following manner.

Following the final round of Open Space sessions the large group meets to summarise and prioritisation action points.

Participants then organise themselves into project teams and hold their first project planning meeting.

During this meeting each project team appoints a co-ordinator who is accountable to the sponsor (e.g. chief executive) for good stewardship of the resources that are made available.

All project team co-ordinators become members of the project coordination team which keeps track of developments and makes regular reports to all project team members, the sponsor and any other interested parties.

One of the co-ordinators is appointed 'co-ordinator of the co-ordinators', who provides the sponsor with a single point of contact.

If possible a member of the management team joins the project coordination team – not as its leader but as an equal member.

This is done to facilitate communication between the project teams, and between the teams and senior management, and to ensure that the projects receive the necessary levels of resources and management attention.

Open Space resources

Websites

Harrison Owen

<http://ho-image.com>

www.openspaceworld.com

Open Space general information

www.openspaceworld.org

Open Space Technology World Community

<http://openspaceworld.ning.com>

Open Space email list

There is a very active and extremely useful email list that you can subscribe to by following the instructions shown here: <http://bit.ly/bCSYIV>

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

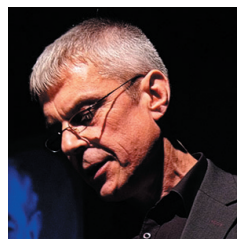
Author: Harrison H Owen. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.)

Related methods

- Unconferences (BarCamp, Hack Day)
- Gurteen Knowledge Cafés
- The World Café

Jack Martin Leith

Consultant in innovation, change and ecosystem value creation



Jack helps organisations and communities birth new creations that generate maximum ecosystem value.

New creations include ventures, products, services, experiences, visions, business models, strategies, work practices, organisational cultures and community facilities.

He is the founder of Open Space Advisor, which provides strategic and organisational advice to planners, organisers and facilitators of events incorporating Open Space Technology.

Jack's holistic approach to innovation and organisational change is the product of a lifetime of study, experimentation and on-the-job application.

During the past 20 years, Jack's services have been employed by big corporates, government bodies, third sector organisations, NGOs, social enterprises, start-ups, marketing agencies and management consulting firms.

Former clients include ABN Amro, Department of Health, Diageo, European Commission, GlaxoSmithKline, A T Kearney, and McCain Foods. He was involved in Shell's acclaimed GameChanger programme during its formative years.

From his base in Bristol, United Kingdom, Jack works throughout Europe and beyond.

"I have worked with Jack Martin Leith for 20 years. He has one of the most brilliant, penetrating, erudite, and practical minds I know. With his exceptional experience of innovation, large group work and organisation development, he is a terrific partner for clients and consultancies with major projects."

Angus Jenkinson
Director, The Centre for Integrated Marketing
Chief Executive, Stepping Stones Consultancy

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