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Dear Reader,

Can you imagine a daylong meeting, with a large group, without any motivational speaker not even a facilitator, without a set agenda, where everyone is only working on what he/she has a passion for, where there are no obligations for anyone, where the atmosphere is like a huge coffee break, and where people discuss and share ideas under no pressure?

Would you believe it, if you heard that the productivity reached unexpected levels and performance of the participants was at its peak?

In this issue we are sharing with you the Open Space Technology, inviting you to read - believe - try it out.

Enjoy the reading!
Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor



Issue 44

The LIM Newsletter

April 2004

Open Space

By Isabel Rimanoczy

The Origin

Open Space is a high productivity meeting design that was created by Harrison Owen, an attribution he though rejects. In his mind, Open Space has always existed, and he was just fortunate to stumble upon it. As he describes the origin himself :

"In 1983, I had occasion to organize an international conference for 250 participants. It took me a full year of labor. By the time I had finished with all the details, frustrations and egos (mine and others'), that go with such an event, I resolved never to do such a thing again. This resolution was confirmed at the conclusion of the conference, when it was agreed by one and all (including myself) that although the total event had been outstanding, the truly useful part had been.... the coffee breaks! So much for one year's effort arranging papers, participants, and presenters. The only

thing that everybody liked was the ONE thing I had nothing to do with: the coffee breaks. There had to be a message here.

My question was a simple one. Was it possible to combine the level of synergy and excitement present in a good coffee break, with the substantive activity and results characteristic of a good meeting? And most of all, could the whole thing be done in less than a year?

The line of inquiry I choose to follow took some interesting turns, but essentially it started with the notion that if I could identify certain basic mechanisms of meeting, or human gathering, it might be possible to build them into an approach that would be so simple that it could not fail and so elemental that it might possess the natural power of a good coffee break." (1)

Why and when does it work?

Open Space design is based on the idea that people are more productive when they have a genuine interest in what they are doing, since the passion they have for it translates into the energy that results in heightened productivity..

Open Space creates a scenario where people express what question they would like to explore. Those who are interested in the topic can freely join the discussion of the question chosen, and remain in the group as long as they wish. The result is that those who are in a group share a common passion and have high energy to make progress in answering the question and in coming to conclusions.

Open Space is a design recommended **for groups who have a large agenda, multiple stakes** and interests **and a limited time** to address all the issues. It is particularly powerful when **nobody knows the answer**. As Harrison Owen indicates, ..."Open Space Technology should not be used in any situation where the answer is already known, when somebody at a high level thinks he or she knows the answer, or "must" know the answer."

"In a typical Open Space, self-managed work groups are the general mode of operation, distributed leadership the norm, and diversity is perceived as a rich resource to be cherished, as opposed to a problem to be managed. It is also usually noted that participants treat each other with respect, that conflict inevitably seems to yield deeper outcomes, and high energy --often experienced as playful, is the marked characteristic of the occasion."(2)

How does it work?

The Open Space should **always have a title** focusing on a general subject or question.

Examples:

- How can we make our University more competitive?
- What are the challenges of the coming 5 years for our organization and how will we address them?

STEP ONE

The facilitator introduces the process and asks people to do a Stop/Reflect and write a question they would like to work on with others. Not everybody has to write a question; this is voluntary.

STEP TWO

The facilitator invites all those who have a question to form a line in the center of the room. Then beginning at one end each participant reads his/her question out loud. If another participant standing in the line with a question feels that his/her question is similar to one already read then s/he is invited to stand behind the participant whose question is similar. This way, all participants take responsibility for their own self-grouping. It may be useful to have the question on a sign big enough to be read by the audience.

STEP THREE

Then those sitting on the outside are invited to join one of the question owners.

STEP FOUR

The "owners" of the questions take their group to a corner or breakout room where they will work on the question. The "owner" is responsible for staying until the question is solved or the group dissolved, and to present a written and oral summary of what was discussed.

What is the secret?

Surprised by the success of the approach, H. Owens reflects on what it is that brings these amazing results. "Some have suggested that the **Four Principles and One Law** which guide behavior in Open Space provide the clues. The principles are:

1. **Whoever attends are the right people**, which reminds people in the small groups that getting something done is not a matter of having 100,000 people and the chairman of the board. The fundamental requirement is people who care to do something. And by showing up, that essential care is demonstrated.
2. **Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen**, keeps people focused on the here and now, and eliminates all of the could-have-beens, should-have-beens or might-have-beens. What is, is the only thing there is at the moment.
3. **Whenever it starts is the right time** alerts people to the fact that inspired performance and genuine creativity rarely, if ever, pay attention to the clock. It happens (or not) when it happens.
4. **When it's over it's over**. In a word, don't waste time. Do what you have to do, and when it's done, move on to something more useful.

The Law is the so called **Law of Two Feet**, which states simply, if at any time you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing - use your two feet and move to some place more to your liking. Such a place might be another group, or even outside into the sunshine. No matter what, don't sit there feeling miserable. The law, as stated, may sound like rank hedonism, but even hedonism has its place, reminding us that unhappy people are unlikely to be productive people.

Actually the Law of Two Feet goes rather beyond hedonistic pandering to personal desires. One of the most profound impacts of the law is to make it exquisitely clear precisely **who is responsible for the quality of a participant's learning**. If any situation is not learning rich, it is incumbent upon the individual participant to make it so. There is no point in blaming the conference committee, for none exists. Responsibility resides with the individual." (2)

However, the rules seem to simply acknowledge what people are going to do anyway. "If there is any substantive contribution derived from either principles or law, it is merely to eliminate all the guilt. After all, people are going to exercise the law of two feet, mentally if not physically, but now they do not have to feel badly about it." (2)

What will happen?

Michael Herman, an OS practitioner observes that while it is impossible to anticipate what will happen in a regular meeting, "we can guarantee the following results when any group gets into Open Space:

1. All of the issues that are MOST important to the participants will be raised.
2. All of the issues raised will be addressed by those participants most qualified and capable of getting something done on each of them.
3. In a time as short as one or two days, all of the most important ideas, discussion, data, recommendations, conclusions, questions for further study, and plans for immediate action will be documented in one comprehensive report -- finished, printed and in the hands of participants when they leave.
4. When appropriate and time is allowed for it, the total contents of this report document can be focused and prioritized in a matter of a few hours, even with very large groups (100's).
5. After an event, all of these results can be made available to an entire organization or community within days of the event, so the conversation can invite every stakeholder into implementation -- right now.
6. AND... results like these can be planned and implemented faster than any other kind of so-called "large-group intervention." It is literally possible to accomplish in days and weeks what some other approaches take months and years to do." (3)

Open Space has been used now for over 20 years, with groups of 5 to 1000 -- working in half or one-day workshops, three-day conferences, or the regular weekly staff meeting . It has been used by major government agencies, large international corporations, small community groups, mainline religious bodies in every continent, with the exception of Antarctica. The common result is a powerful, effective connecting and strengthening of what's already happening in the organization: planning and action, learning and doing, passion and responsibility, participation and performance.

(1) H.Owen, Open Space Technology, A User's Guide, Abbott Publishing, Potomac Maryland 1992

(2) H.Owen, Emerging Order in Open Space, 1998, Article on

<http://www.openspaceworld.org/english/orderforfree.html>

(3) Michael Herman, article on <http://www.openspaceworld.org/english/openspace.html>



LEADERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT

LIM News is published by LIM, Leadership in International Management - 1580
Sawgrass Corporate Pkwy, Sunrise, FL 33323- USA - Ph.: (954) 315-4583 - Fax:
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