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## Open Space Technology

In my experience open space is based on the belief that we humans are intelligent, creative, adaptive, meaning- and *fun*-seeking. It sets the context for such creatures to come together knowing they are going to treat each other well. When this happens there is no limit to what can unfold.

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personal communication

Open Space Technology was created in the mid-1980s by organizational consultant Harrison Owen when he discovered that people attending his conferences loved the coffee breaks better than the formal presentations and plenary sessions. Combining that insight with his experience of life in an African village, Owen created a totally new form of conferencing.

Open Space conferences have no keynote speakers, no pre-announced schedules of workshops, no panel discussions, no organizational booths. Instead, sitting in a large circle, participants learn in the first hour how they are going to create their own conference. Almost before they realize it, they become each other's teachers and leaders.

Anyone who wants to initiate a discussion or activity, writes it down on a large sheet of paper in big letters and then stands up and announces it to the group. After selecting one of the many pre-established times and places, they post their proposed workshop on a wall. When everyone who wants to has announced and posted their initial offerings, it is time for what Owen calls "the village marketplace": Participants mill around the wall, putting together their personal schedules for the remainder of the conference. The first meetings begin immediately.

Open Space is, as Owen likes to say, more highly organized than the best planning committee could possibly manage. It is also chaotic, productive and fun. No one is in control. A whirlwind of activity is guided from within by a handful of simple Open Space principles.

The most basic principle is that everyone who comes to an Open Space conference must be passionate about the topic and willing to take some responsibility for creating things out of that passion.

Four other key principles are:

- 1) Whoever comes is the right people.
- 2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
- 3) Whenever it starts is the right time.

#### 4) When it is over it is over.

My favorite Open Space principle is The Law of Two Feet: "If you find yourself in a situation where you aren't learning or contributing, go somewhere else." (To me, this includes the possibility of moving to another level of awareness and participation, as well as the more obvious one of moving to another activity.) This law causes some participants to flit from activity to activity. Owen rejoices in such people, calling them bumblebees because they cross-pollinate all the workshops. He also celebrates participants who use The Law of Two Feet to go off and sit by themselves. He dubs them butterflies, because they create quiet centers of non-action for stillness, beauty, novelty or random conversations to be born.

Open space conferences can be done in one day, but the most powerful go on for two or three days, or longer. Participants gather together briefly in the morning and the evening to share experiences and announce any new workshops they have concocted. The rest of the day is spent in intense conversation. Even meals are come-when-you-can affairs that go on for hours, filled with bustling [dialogue](#). After a few days of this, an intense spirit of community usually develops that is all the more remarkable considering that participants are all doing exactly what they want.

Open Space conferences are particularly effective when a large, complex operation needs to be thoroughly reconceptualized and reorganized -- when the task is just too big and complicated to be sorted out "from the top." On the assumption that such a system contains within it the seeds of everything that needs to happen with it, Open Space provides it with an opportunity to self-organize into its new configuration. For this to work, however, the system's leaders must let go of control so that true self-organization can take place.

Open Space Technology is also a delightful, useful tool for any group of people who are really interested in exploring something that they all care deeply about. I look forward to its broad use in organizing communities and exploring public issues.

Open Space is one of the simplest, most brilliant combinations of order and chaos that I have yet found. It has been applied in thousands of meetings around the world with between five and one thousand participants. It can be effectively used by virtually anybody. Owen has provided excellent instructions in his books, below.

(For a story of Open Space, see [You'll Never Know Who will Bring In Your Next \\$20,000,000.](#))

## Resources

### Books

Harrison Owen, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (Berrett-Koehler, 1997)

Harrison Owen, *Expanding Our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology* (Berrett-Koehler, 1997)

Harrison Owen, *The Millenium Organization* (available for \$20 ppd. from H.H. Owen, below)

## **Organization**

H. H. Owen and Co., 7808 River Falls Dr., Potomac, MD 20854, (301) 469-9269, fax (301) 983-9314. Print and video resources, training and consultation.

## **Websites**

<http://www.openspaceworld.org>

[http://www.openingspace.net/openSpaceTechnology\\_method.shtml](http://www.openingspace.net/openSpaceTechnology_method.shtml)