

Why Open Space?

By Karen Sella

Open Space Technology (OS or OST) is an efficient, effective method for groups of willing, able people dealing with complex, urgent issues to take responsibility for what matters—engaging the most important questions, challenges, and opportunities to produce truly extraordinary results.

Since Harrison Owen first conceived of Open Space Technology in 1985, OST has been successfully used by individuals, organizations and communities worldwide over 60,000 times in 108 different countries. From strategic initiatives to social ventures to conflict resolution to crisis management and beyond, Open Space is an inspiring method of self-organization bridging reflection and action, passion and commitment, agency and collaboration, being and doing, innovation and results.

How does it work?

By invitation only...

Open Space Technology is based on self-organization through invitation. One or more members of your group, community, or organization works with one of our Open Space practitioners to craft a compelling invitation to an Open Space meeting, workshop, or event focused on a vital goal or theme—a strategic question, issue or opportunity that you wish to engage. Depending on your needs, your Open Space may be integrated into an existing meeting, workshop, or event, or you may choose to host an entirely separate Open Space event.

Through passion and responsibility...

By inviting people to attend (rather than mandating, demanding, obliging, etc.), you attract the people who have the passion and responsibility needed to get anything significant done and eliminate much of the wasteful, unnecessary, and let's face it, often unpleasant dysfunction that occurs when people are formally drafted and/or informally expected to participate in things that they don't really want to do. It's not the number of people who attend but the inspired commitment of those who do that matters.

Perspectives...



“Open Space runs on two fundamentals: passion and responsibility. Passion engages the people in the room.

Responsibility ensures things get done.

A focusing theme or question provides the framework for the event. The art of the question lies in saying just enough to evoke attention, while leaving sufficient open space for the imagination to run wild.”

Harrison Owen,
Founder of Open Space Technology

The trick, of course, is to really accept the fact that everyone in your particular group, community, or company may not attend, and that's ok. That ensures that everyone who does attend is there because they really want to be there and when everyone's there because they really want to be there, it creates the space for amazing, refreshing things to happen.

Through practiced self-organization...

*“In Open Space meetings, events and organizations, participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance, such as: *What is the strategy, group, organization or community that all stakeholders can support and work together to create?*”*

Michael Herman, Executive Facilitator

During your Open Space meeting or event, your group is invited to self-organize your participation—from agenda to action steps—using a few simple and significant guidelines that create a highly flexible and functional structure for how you all will interact together for the duration of your event. Using these guidelines, you and other participants create and manage your own agenda, breaking out into small group sessions and regrouping in the large group as needed to accomplish what needs to



happen. The role of your Open Space facilitator is to share and support these guidelines before, during, and after your event as needed, effectively *opening the space* for you to self-organize around what matters and generate the most meaningful results.

Just in time without wasting time...

Open Space works in situations where there is a high level of complexity, uncertainty, and urgency—when there's a compelling need to get a lot done in a short amount of time, but no one is quite sure how best to go about getting things done. A group of talented, passionate, and committed people focusing on a problem or opportunity using a few simple, self-organizing guidelines can get a lot done with surprising ease—combining often hidden knowledge, resources, and capacities with real-time planning, problem-solving, and innovating to produce unparalleled (and yet, often replicable) results. Simply stated, Open Space is a great method for real people with real issues to create real results in real-time.

Face to face in circles within circles within circles...

“...circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication. There is no head or foot, higher or lower, simply people being with people face to face. After all, we do not have a square of friends and on a cold winter's night it is nice to be part of the family circle. Place people in rows (classroom or theater-style) and they all face the source of power and authority, and it is clear who will talk and who must listen. In squares and rectangles, there is separation which may be useful to keep combative parties apart as in negotiation, but genuine, open, free communication tends to be at a minimum. Circles create communication.”

Harrison Owen

Location, location, location...

Open Space requires open space—meeting space large enough for the size of your group (5 – 500+), break-out space for small-group sessions, wall space for posting agenda topics, group announcements, and anything else that may be generated and posted during the event.

That said, with a little creativity, Open Space can be done just about anywhere and everywhere.

“Yesterday’s Open Space event was a momentous occasion in the history of our community. It really felt like a complete shift in the foundation of how we can work and live together...”

Judith Weinstock,
Founder, Wise Acres

More thoughts? Connect.

What have you learned along the way that about open space? We would love to learn from you—and of course, if we can be of assistance in designing, hosting or facilitating your next event, please get in touch.