



OPEN SPACE

Level of Difficulty: **Challenging**

Estimated Time: A minimum of 5 hrs. and up to 3 days

Synopsis:

Open Space was developed by Harrison Owen in 1982. It has been used successfully throughout the world with small groups and with large groups of over 150 people. It can be used in planning processes, organizational redesign, product design, and conferencing. We have found that Open Space is one of the most innovative, interesting, and collaborative processes around. What makes it special is its ability to adapt to any organization's needs. What makes it work is that it creates the opportunity for people to organize their discussions around what they have real interest and passion for.

Open Space was the product of Harrison Owen's frustration with organizing and coordinating an international symposium. Although by traditional standards this symposium was deemed successful, attendees reported that it was the informal meeting times (coffee breaks, early morning and late evening, during mealtimes) that were most beneficial. The reason for this was that it was during these informal times that participants talked about what most interested them. Owen wanted to create an environment where the stimulation and interest shown during the coffee breaks could be extended throughout a conference.

The bottom line is that for Open Space to be effective it must deal with real business issues that are of passionate concern to those who will be involved. Open Space runs on two fundamentals: passion, without which nobody will be interested; and responsibility, without which nothing will get done. Owen recommends that only volunteers participate in an Open Space meeting.

The requirements of Open Space are few. There must be:

- 1) A clear and compelling theme
- 2) An interested and committed group
- 3) A time and place
- 4) A leader

Open Space Technology, A User's Guide, is an outstanding reference for interested parties. Before conducting an Open Space meeting, this book should be required reading.



Goals:

1. To create a powerful meeting agenda
2. To provide the opportunity for participants to talk with each other about what deeply interests them
3. To fully involve all participants

Logistics:

- **Materials:** Flip charts, Markers, Post-its®
- **Space needs:** Comfortable room where participants can move about freely with comfortable chairs
- **Participants:** 20-200

The Activity:

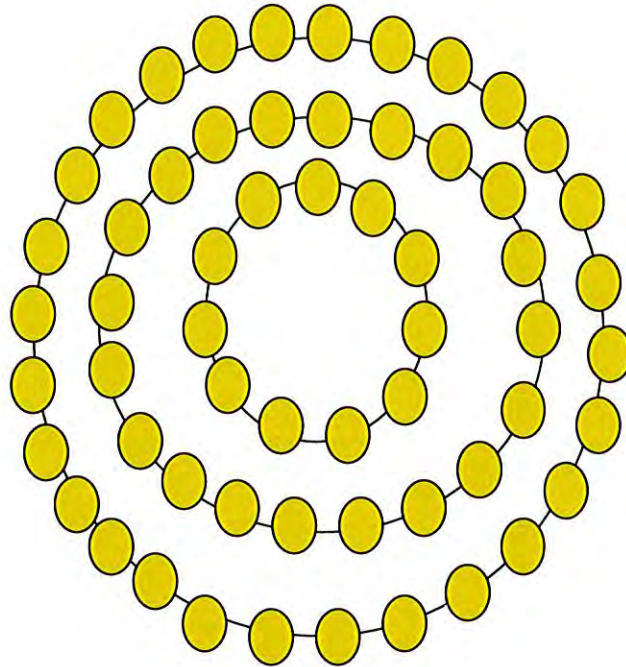
Harrison Owen suggests that five hours is the minimal amount of time for an Open Space meeting, and he usually has two and a half to three day meetings. There are four basic stages to an Open Space meeting:

1. Opening

This should be informal in nature and be conducted by the leader. The leader's role in an Open Space meeting is to help facilitate the meeting's process. The leader cannot have a personal agenda during an Open Space meeting. The leader must have the trust of the group and they must give up their need for control.

The leader conducts the following activities during the opening: state the theme for the conference; review logistics; and, if participants don't know each other, have them introduce themselves and possibly share something personal with the group.

Make sure participants sit in a circle as you conduct the opening. With a large group, you might have to have several concentric circles to accommodate the group.



The leader then communicates the four *principles* and the one *law* for an Open Space meeting.

- 1) **Whoever comes is the right person.** Worrying about who didn't come is distracting.
- 2) **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.** Focus on here and now so you can recognize opportunities that arise.
- 3) **Whenever the meeting starts is the right time.** It will operate according to the rhythm of its participants. Buyers buy when they are ready. The creative process does not worry about the clock.
- 4) **When it's over, it's over.** Selling to disinterested buyers is a waste of time and energy. When buyers stop buying, it's time to move on.

The one *law* of Open Space is **the Law of Two Feet:**

Each participant can and must make a difference in this conference or meeting. If that is not possible in a given situation, then you must use your two feet and move to a new place where you believe you can make a difference. (Owen notes that many people will become "bumblebees", going from meeting to meeting and contributing and learning as they see fit. This is encouraged.)



2. Creating the Agenda

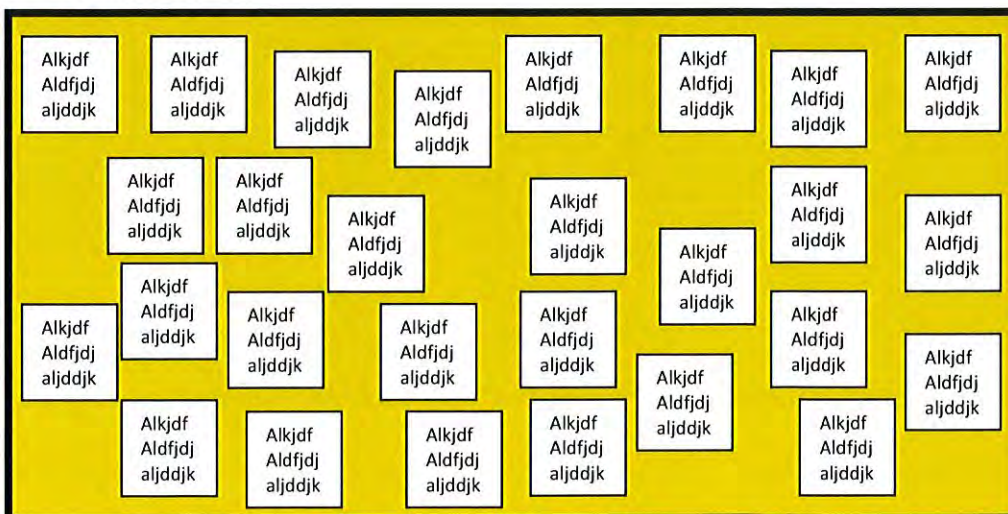
The leader restates the theme of the conference or meeting and then asks participants, "What are the issues and opportunities for learning that we can talk about today?" At this point, the leader indicates one wall in the room as the Agenda Wall. It is important to remember that the Open Space meeting is designed around people's personal interests and passions. Therefore, the participants create their own agenda. The leader then gives the following instructions:

Think about a subject, topic, or idea that you have some real interest in exploring, something that you have a real passion about regarding the conference's theme.

If you choose to, propose or announce a subject for discussion to the entire group, along with your name. An example would be: "My name is Patrick Sanaghan and I would like to talk today about our organizational culture."

After you announce your subject for discussion, you become the convener of that discussion. Go to the middle of the room and put a subject title on a sheet of paper and post it on the designated agenda wall. (When people use one wall to post their subjects, it becomes the agenda wall)

Agenda Wall





Participants may sign up for the topics they would like to attend. They may sign up for as many as they like.

After you have all had an opportunity to propose a subject for discussion and signed up for the topics you would like to attend, the conveners will move their subject sheets to the Schedule Area (another wall) that indicates places and time slots.

After the conveners have organized the schedule, the Open Space meeting will begin.

Schedule Area

Breakout Rooms	10:00-12:00	12:00-2:00	2:00-4:00	4:00-6:00
	Discussion topic	Discussion topic	Discussion topic	Discussion topic
Room 121	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk
Room 125	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk
Room 127	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk
Room 134	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk
Room 134	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk
Room 140	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk
Room 144	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk	Alkjdf Aldfjdj aljddjk



3. The Open Space Meeting

The leader then indicates when the schedule is complete and that participants now have the opportunity to go to the breakout rooms and attend the discussions in which they have the most interest.

Instruct participants that if there are any announcements to be made or changes in the schedule (extensions, different place, topic, combining groups, etc.) they should put the changes on the flip chart at the easel designated Announcements so that everyone is informed. ***There are no official announcements made during an Open Space meeting.***



In a longer Open Space meeting of two to three days, you will have several added elements.

- Establish an announcement time that will be a short period every morning for the group to catch up on what it is doing, where, when, and how. This should be short and sweet. The purpose is to keep people informed, not to hold a discussion.
- Establish “Evening News” as a time for reflection and occasionally fun, but not a formal, report session.
- Schedule a celebration, an opportunity for participants to celebrate that the conference is over. Basic things like food and beverages can be provided, but do not have to be overly organized. People will do what they’re inclined



to do so don't plan this in advance. Just let people know when the time for the celebration will be.

DAY I	DAY II	DAY III
Opening	Announcements	Announcements
Agenda Setting	Open Space	Open Space
Open Space		Closing
Evening News	Evening News	Celebration

4. Closing

Keep the closing simple and serious. This is the opportunity to announce commitments, next steps, and observations about what the event has meant to people. Go back to the original circle or circles and, starting anywhere, allow participants who want it the opportunity to say what was important to them about the conference and possibly what they would like to do in the future. (We have used, "What did you learn?" and, "What did it mean to you?" as closing circle stimulus questions). It is important to make clear that no one has to say anything.

If the conference requires a formal report, then the leader should request ahead of time that the conveners of the discussions take responsibility for producing a brief record of what was learned in the discussions. This does not mean that the convener has to write the record, only make sure that someone in the discussion provides a written summary.

It should be noted that there is no official mealtime during the conference, whether it be five hours or three days. Owen suggests having buffets available so that people can eat when they want. Once again, people are allowed to do what best meets their needs.



Facilitator Tip:

This is a very fluid, democratic, and open process. You must feel comfortable with these elements because participants will sense it if you are not. At times, it will appear chaotic with people moving about, small and large groups constantly forming, and some people just wandering around by them. The key thing to remember is that people will have the opportunity to talk about what most interests them. This is a rare experience for most participants. We have used this type of meeting many times. If the theme is important to people and they really want to be present, it will never fail to be highly engaging and beneficial.