



Open Space Technology

PURPOSE Open Space Technology is a conversational process that generates new ideas to resolve complex, important questions or problems within a short timeframe.

DESCRIPTION Open Space Technology supports simultaneous, self-managed conversations around urgent and important issues. Participant-led conversations enable stakeholders holding multiple and potentially conflicting perspectives to explore possible solutions to issues of importance to them. Through the process, participants are invited to identify any issue for which they have genuine passion and are willing to take personal responsibility for hosting a conversation around their issue with whoever in the group chooses to join the conversation

Four principles guide Open Space conversations: (1) whoever comes are the right people; (2) whatever happens is the only thing that could have; (3) whenever it starts is the right time; and (4) when it's over, it's over. A single law, "the rule of two feet," also guides conversations: if you are not contributing or satisfied with the conversation you are in, use your two feet and join another conversation.

Open Space conversations involve as few as a dozen or many more participants. Following a brief overview of the issue or question and explanation of the Open Space process, participants volunteer to host and choose to participate in simultaneous conversations over the course of several hours or a day (if conducted live) or over a specified span of time (if conducted virtually).

PREPARATION The Open Space process requires little yet careful preparation. Before facilitating an Open Space process, make sure you have carefully considered the following questions:

- Is the problem or question meaningful and important to participants?
- How can the problem or question be presented in such a way that it evokes attention yet leaves sufficient open space for diverse and imaginative solutions?
- Do participants represent the diversity of people, perspectives and roles of the organization?
- Have you considered how ideas emanating from the conversations will be shared with participants and others with a stake in resolving the problem or question?

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INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Organize participants and explain the Open Space process

Participants sit in a circle or concentric circles if the group is large. The facilitator introduces the question or problem and explains how the Open Space will be conducted according to the four principles and one law. The facilitator does not intervene in group conversations; the groups self-organize and self-manage.

Step 2. Call forward passion and responsibility

Invite participants to identify any issue they think is important and for which they will take responsibility for hosting a conversation. Invite these participants to write their issue on a piece of paper, come to come forward and announce their issue and post the paper on the wall.

Step 3. Invite participants into conversations

When all of the issues are surfaced and posted, the remaining participants are invited to sign up for the issues they choose to discuss. For issues that attract

large numbers, participants can choose to break up into small discussion groups, providing that someone volunteers to host each group, or the group may decide to hold a conversation in the large group.

Step 4. Let conversations happen

Participants share their ideas about the issue—what it means for them, possible actions for resolution, pros and cons of past or proposed actions. All contributions are welcomed and recorded. Participants stay in the conversation as long as it holds their interest. Participants are free to leave a conversation at any time and join another.

Step 5. Share ideas with all participants

Post the ideas generated from each of the conversations and invite all participants to read the records of all the conversations.

Step 6. Make meaning of the results

Look for and capture patterns and themes in the ideas that were generated. Look also for novel ideas that may lie outside of the mainstream conversation.

APPLICATIONS

We have used open space processes to help groups explore instructional practices in greater depth by having, for example, conversations around different aspects of a balanced literacy program. We have also used open space technology to get input and feedback from a large, diverse stakeholder group in a strategic planning process by having, for example, conversations about actions that may be needed to support the various strategies in the plan.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Internet

For more information about Open Space Technology and its many applications, visit www.openspaceworld.org

References

Owen, H. "Open Space Technology" in *The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems* by Holman, P. et al.eds. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2007.

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