

Open Space Technology

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One White Horse Standing

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"Open space technology is, at the very least, a new way to hold better meetings. The normative experience is that groups, large and small (from five to one thousand members), self-organize to effectively deal with hugely complex issues in a very short period of time. Overt facilitation is minimal to nonexistent, and preplanning, so far as the agenda is concerned, never happens." (Owen, 1997a, p. 1)

Conditions for Open Space Technology

"Four factors create the appropriate conditions for Open Space. They do not all have to be present, but the more factors in evidence the better the results. The factors are:

- high levels of complexity, in terms of issues to be dealt with;
- high levels of diversity, in terms of the folks who have to work the issues'
- high levels of conflict (actual or potential);
- a decision needed yesterday." (Owen, 1997a, p. 39).

Guiding Principles

The four guiding principles of open space technology are as follows:

- whoever comes is the right people
- whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened
- whenever it starts is the right time
- when it's over, it's over (Owen, 1997b, p. 72)

The essence of these principles is to suspend the typical preconceived notions of meetings and focus on "what is" in the room at this moment and at this time. In other words, open space technology is a present-centered approach to holding meetings, here, now.

Law of Mobility

The integrity of the process is held together by one law—the law of two feet (or the law of mobility). This law states that each person is responsible for their personal experience. As noted by Owen, "[i]f at any time during the time together, anyone that finds that they are neither contributing nor learning, they should use their two feet and move. Individuals alone are responsible for the quality of their experience and the giving of their gifts." (Owen, 1997a, p. 11).

Four Truths

Open space technology implies that everyone has an additional responsibility to “tell the truth” or “to be honest” (1997a, p. 13). Angeles Arrien expands this concept cross-culturally as the four truths underlying a life of fullness. These laws are:

- *Show up and be present without preconceived notions.* (Arrien, 1993, pp. 15-45) This means that we need to be present with ourselves and with others. Being present means being aware of how our life experiences have created different beliefs that may not be enabling us to effectively listen and to converse with others. Rather, we may be spewing our beliefs onto others without allowing others to express themselves without judgment.
- *Say what is so, when it is so, without blame or judgment.*¹ (Arrien, 1993, pp. (79- 105) This means that unless we are truthful with ourselves and with others, we can never come to real understanding and agreement. Further, unless we let go of the need to blame or judge ourselves or others, we will not be able to trust one another to do the right things.
- *Pay attention to what has heart and meaning.* (Arrien, 1993, pp. (49- 76) This means it is easy to move through the day mindlessly, not attempting to make meaning of the days events or if the events have impacted you within your deepest self. When we live each day this way, we can fall into blaming and judging others for not making the day more satisfying.
- *Be open to outcome not attached to outcome.* (Arrien, 1993, pp. (109-128) Similar to Owen’s principle that “whatever happens is the only thing that could have” happened, this means that we invite newness into the situation or conversation instead of diligently projecting what we think the person is saying or doing or what we think must be the final result.

Bumblebees and Butterflies

Bumblebees are extension of the law of two feet. The law of two feet provides a means for people to move from group to group as their interest wanes and curious waxes. The metaphor of the bumblebee is used to encourage movement, which in effect cross pollinates groups. Ideas are carried from one group to the next to create new ideas

Butterflies, also, are an extension of the law of two feet. Where bumblebees cross-pollinate, butterflies bring the power of observation and silence and new ideas to the group. Not everyone joins the groups in open space technology. Some form a group of one, where the person contemplates the ideas created on the bulletin board and adds his or her thoughts to the pool of developing ideas. Moreover, leading and/or contributing is not defined as talking within the realm of open space technology. (Owen, 1997a)

¹ The original truth as published in the Four-Fold Way was “Tell the truth without blame or judgement. However, later on, Angeles Arrien shared her evolving thoughts at workshops, which led to the phrase “say what’s so when it is so without blame or judgment”.

Two Engines--Driving Forces

Open space technology is driven by two engines: passion and responsibility "The presumption is that commitment, performance, and excellence only emerge when the heart is engaged meaningfully, and that is called passion....But passion alone is not enough. There must also be responsibility, which will insure that passionate concerns will lead to action....When passion and responsibility are linked, an opening is created for innovation and something gets done." (Owen, 1997a, pp. 27-28).

The Four Mechanisms

The four elements (26) or mechanisms (41) of Open Space are the circle, breath, a bulletin board, and a marketplace. "The circle creates the conditions of meeting.... People will get together and communicate, person to person, face to face." (Owen, 1997a, p. 26) Like the metaphor the breath of life, open space requires that people breathe and bring the breath (or breadth) of life to the meeting. The bulletin board typically is newsprint, but can be any means by which to announce the issues that are being . The marketplace is the "environment of human interchange, [that] magically appears whenever folks have something of importance to trade" (Owen, 1997a, p. 26). In this instance, the marketplace will involve the exchange of ideas.

The Four Laws of Change

In the native American oral tradition, the Shawnee nation enhance the use and understanding of the power of open space technology through the four laws of change.²

- *Change comes from within.* This means that change will always come from within the individual, from within the group, and/or from within the organization. Ideally, the change will be like a pebble through into a lake where the change ripple from within all of these configurations.
- *Permanent change requires a vision.* This means that unless we hold a clear and/or compelling picture of what is the change that needs to occur, the initial insight or energy or reason for changing will fade into the background until triggered by the next difficult reminder and/or painful event.
- *A great learning must occur.* This means that change is accompanied by a personal insight or a group awareness that is shared with the larger community. Hence, for an individual, it could be an insight that they are actually creating most of their problems by how they behave towards other. So as to make it a permanent change, the person needs to share it with others, who in turn will support them in the change.

For an organization, it could be a shared awareness that each person within the organization is responsible for how the organization functions. What grounds the change is that the insight or shared awareness becomes the responsibility of the group to sustain the changes.

² The four laws of change have been passed from Vick Ordaz, Shawnee elder, to me. I have been granted permission to use these laws to support others to make positive changes in the world.

- *A healing forest must be present.* This means that any change to be permanent must have the support of the larger community. For an individual, it could mean that the insight or vision is shared with family and friends. For a group, it could be that the change is shared with people outside the group who can support the changes versus unknowingly undermining it by not knowing that change has occurred.

Sources

Angeles Arrien. *The Four-Fold Way*, 1993. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Owen, Harrison. *Expanding Our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology*, 1997a. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Owen, Harrison. *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, 1997b. 2nd Ed. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Open Space Technology Set-up

On newsprint/poster paper

- (1) Describe the theme of the session. For example,
 - What is undermining our organization's effectiveness
 - What do we need to do to become an effective organization
 - How can we become a functional organization

- (2) Describe the desired "take homes" from the session

- (3) List the four principles in large letters.
 - whoever comes is the right people
 - whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened
 - whenever it starts is the right time
 - when it's over, it's over

- (4) List the four great truths
 - Show up and be present without preconceived notions.
 - Say what is so, when it is so, without blame or judgment.
 - Pay attention to what has heart and meaning.
 - Be open to outcome not attached to outcome.

- (5) List "The Law of Two Feet"
If you are neither learning nor contributing, walk to another exchange place.

- (6) List "The Four Laws of Change"
 - Change comes from within.
 - Permanent change requires a vision.

- For change to be permanent, a great learning must occur.
- For change to be permanent, a healing forest must be present.

(7) List "The Law of Surprise"

Be Prepared to be Surprised

Post these newsprint/posters on the walls as a constant reminder of the Open Space Technology process.