

Open Space Technology

Be prepared to be surprised!¹

Open Space Technology offers a new paradigm – regarding theory, practice, terminology and approach – for conflict resolution, organizational development, organizational transformation and facilitation. Emerging in the late 1980s, Open Space manifested the revolutionary shift from organizational development to organizational transformation as a result of the analysis by just a handful of consultants and facilitators.

Based on Chaos Theory, the Theory of the Self-Organizing System and the Concept of Complex Adaptive Systems, Open Space Technology stands out from and surpasses all other approaches in the realm of transformation. It is particularly characterized by the “invisibility” of the facilitator, the absence of a prefixed agenda, its apparent lack of structure and control, its welcoming of both conflict and surprise and its reliance on the individual’s responsibility and participation based on passion. In fact, Open Space Technology meetings turn out to be very structured and controlled – by the people involved. In this way they meet the needs of the participants infinitely better than any pre-planning could ever achieve. Open Space unleashes all the potential of groups and systems.

1. What is Open Space Technology?

In conferences, important things happen during the coffee breaks. Participants discuss what really matters to them in small groups. They exchange ideas, make contacts, network and plan projects. This is the phenomenon that Open Space Technology is based on. In other words, Open Space captures the spirit of one big break – with all its characteristics: energetic, self-organized, adapted by participants to their needs, unpredictable, chaotic, spontaneous and very productive.

"Open Space Technology (OST) is (...) a deceptively simple approach to better, more productive meetings in which groups of from five to one thousand [recent event: 2108 participants²] people quickly self-organize to deal effectively with complex issues in a very short time."³

Open Space events last from several hours to several days, depending on the circumstances and the pursued goals. People might gather for a one-day workshop, a three-day conference or a weekly staff meeting. The optimum length and design of an event requires 16 hours spread over a three day period, preceded by a half day preparation meeting and followed by a half day next meeting.⁴

2. How did it all start?

In 1983, Harrison Owen organized a conference resulting in a consensus: The most important part of this conference were the coffee breaks.⁵ Harrison asked himself, how to link the informality and vividness / aliveness of a coffee break with the commitment / seriousness and result orientation of a work meeting. This led him to the prototype of human communication:

¹ Compiled by Juliane Ade, boscop eg (*berlin open space cooperative*); Email: julianeade@boscop.org.

² Annotation by author.

³ Harrison Owen: *The Spirit of Leadership – Liberating the Leader in Each of us*, 1st edition 1990, 2nd edition 2000, p. 10. For more details on ...what Open Space is, how to create it, and what it might mean...” consult Harrison Owen’s other books *Open Space Technology: A User’s Guide* and *Expanding Our Now: The story of Open Space Technology*.

⁴ In a one-day Open Space meeting you can usually expect people, who haven’t met very often or at all before, to get to know each other, do some effective networking, exchange ideas and therefore get new insights on a topic. In a one and a half-day meeting you can additionally expect self-organization to appear and designed action-planning makes sense. In a two-day meeting with sleeping twice you can expect the participants to experience self-organization in a way that can make a difference and action-planning will lead to sustainable appointments, next steps. For more details on the different effects of one to three-days meetings in Open Space see on and after February 07 <<http://www.boscop.de>>.

⁵ The First International Symposium on Organization Transformation (OT1).

- **The Circle** – Real things happen in the circle, where there exists no above and below, no “we” or “them”.
- **Breath** – When people are “Out of Breath“ good things cannot happen. We first have to slow down and get back to our very own rhythm for cooperation and learning to unfold.
- **Bulletin Board** – People share their passions and their concerns with each other.
- **The Market Place** – People offer, choose and bargain.

Open Space Technology was „re-discovered“, a new-old practice revived, as Harrison Owen puts it. He – and by now many others – tried it and it works!

3. Who uses Open Space Technology?

Public and private organizations, small businesses, large corporations, associations, cooperatives, community based groups, communities, governments and families meet in Open Space to enhance the quality of collaboration.

Today Open Space Technology is being used in more than 91 countries. Boeing developed a new design for airplane-doors, AT&T designed a pavilion for the Olympic Games in Atlanta, the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) planned its future, the Deutsche Bahn AG planned the process of a merger ...and all that happened in Open Space.

4. How does it work?

Open Space Technology increases effectiveness and commitment. Participants leave with new insights, energy, a sense of direction and the tools to forward.

No prefixed agenda

People come together related to a central theme that is meaningful to all of them (Such as *The Future of our Cooperation, -our Company, -our Health System – What can we do?*). They sit in a circle and everybody has the opportunity to post issues and questions they care for. Within the first hour of the meeting, with a clear purpose in mind, all participants create an agenda and design self-organized parallel working sessions.

Space to participate, communicate and cooperate

Every issue of concern can be addressed. In order to move forward, there is no better way than to start from what a person is passionate about. All those who share the same or a similar passion, interest or concern get together to work on it. The environment helps participants to communicate constructively without outside intervention. Team learning and cooperation take place; the potential for commitment is increased because participants take ownership of issues and procedures. That way, most hidden resources of the system are being activated.

Outcome and Documentation

Open Space Technology is an action-oriented approach. Already during the event the participants start taking responsibility for putting the next steps into practice.

During the process, outputs are published on the Documentation Wall. So everyone can follow what happens in all other groups. Towards the end the participants develop an action plan and create action groups. On the last day, everybody receives the complete documentation containing short reports on the issues explored, actions that are planned and the names of the participants in each group and a contact list of everybody. This information supports the development of rich and diverse networks and the sustainability of further steps (the action planning).

Six to twelve weeks after the Open Space-gathering there is a “Next Meeting” for stocktaking and the planning of further next steps.

5. What is the role of the facilitator?

In the beginning the Open Space facilitator supports the opening of space. Afterwards it is the facilitators' main task to hold time and space, so people can get their work done most effectively. The facilitators' job is it to be present and invisible at the same time. By not intervening the facilitating person stays away from closing space, thereby strengthening the power of the participants and the system. The facilitator knows that the participants have all the competencies and the abilities to handle the situation – even when there is a lot of conflict. When the facilitator succeeds in this art of facilitation (which is always simple but not easy), the result can be powerful, effective learning, connecting, planning, decision-making and acting. It strengthens what is already there: passion, participation, responsibility and performance.

6. Prerequisites for Open Space Technology gatherings

Open Space Technology is not a recipe for every situation, but it always works. It is a great approach for exploring issues, planning for the future, to set-up quickly, to build and support teams, to improve communication and to re-energize an organization. It is not useful in situations in which people think they know the answer already. Leaders who initiate Open Space must be ready for the unexpected and open to change. Their intention should be transparent. The theme for the meeting should represent a real issue of interest.

Open Space works best when people showing up reflect the whole system. In that case it does not matter how many there are: The ones who participate combine all the knowledge and all the possibilities of the group and they are sufficient to initiate change.

Given the following preconditions Open Space “rocks”:

- Work to be done is complex,
- Answer(s) unknown,
- Passion for resolution (and therefore the potential for conflict) is high,
- matters are urgent, time to act was yesterday and
- people that show up reflect the whole system.

Links to further information:

www.boscop.org

Website of the *berlin open space cooperative*, boscop eg. The site of the coop, registered under the German Coop Law, presently shows the work of its 10 members practicing as Open Space facilitators and trainers in Europe and worldwide.

www.openspaceworldmap.org

Open Space World Map presently showing 424 resident Open Space Workers in 70 countries (working in a total of 126 countries worldwide)

www.openspaceworldscape.org

Data base presently showing 300 Open Space events with details to sponsor, date of event, number of participants, title, length of event, facilitator and a number of other details. This site grew out of the Berlin Open Space Landscape that depicted Open Space events that had taken place in Berlin (150) searchable by facilitator and field.

www.openspaceworld.org

Website for the worldwide Open Space movement. Information, contacts, training, annual worldwide OSoNOS meeting.... simply everything to Open Space in 16 languages. The site is maintained by Michael Herman from Chicago.

www.openspaceworld.com

Website of Harrison Owen, the discoverer of Open Space Technology. Here you find information referring to his books, trainings and articles.