



Open Space Technology

Originated by Harrison Owen in 1992, by the book of the same name, Open Space Technology offers a method to run meetings of any size. It is a self-organizing process where participants construct the agenda and schedule during the meeting itself. Open Space Technology enables groups to address complex, important issues and achieve meaningful results quickly. It functions best where more traditional meeting formats fail: in situations involving conflict, complexity, diversity of thought or people, and short timelines.

OST meetings have a single facilitator who initiates and concludes the meeting and explains the general method. The facilitator has no other role in the meeting and does not control the gathering.

How it works:

Participants sit in a circle, or in concentric circles for large groups (300 to 2000 people). The facilitator greets people and briefly states the theme of the gathering, then invites all participants to identify any issue or opportunity related to the theme. Participants willing to raise a topic come to the center of the circle, write it on a sheet of paper and announce it to the group. He/she then chooses a time and a place for discussion and posts the paper on a wall. That wall becomes the agenda for the meeting.

No participant must suggest issues, but anyone may do so. If someone posts a topic, that person is expected to start the discussion on it. That person also must make sure a report of the discussion is done and posted on another wall so that any participant can access the content of the discussion at all times. No limit exists on the number of issues that the meeting can post. When all issues have been posted, participants sign up and attend those individual sessions.

Sessions typically last for 1.5 hours; the whole gathering usually lasts from a half day to two days. Sessions may be shorter to fit a shorter meeting time. The opening and agenda creation lasts about an hour, even with a very large group. After the opening and agenda creation, the individual attendees organize themselves into each session. People may freely decide which session they want to attend, and may switch to another one at any time. All discussion reports are compiled in a document on site and sent to participants, unedited, shortly after.

Four Principles and The One Law

These "rules" are announced and described during the opening session. These describe rather than prescribe; they but simply describe what the system expects will happen:

1. *Whoever comes are the right people:* This alerts the participants that attendees of a session class as "right" simply because they care to attend (even if that is only one person).
2. *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have:* This tells the attendees to pay attention to events of the moment, instead of worrying about what could possibly happen.
3. *Whenever it starts is the right time:* This justifies the lack of any given schedule or structure and emphasizes creativity and innovation.
4. *When it's over, it's over:* Participants are encouraged to not to waste time, but to move on to something else when the fruitful discussion ends.

The One Law is the *Law of Two Feet* (or "*The Law of Mobility*"), which reads as follows: *If at any time during our time together you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet. Go to some other place where you may learn and contribute.* This last "law" emphasizes that no one should sit in sessions that they find boring; instead only people genuinely interested in the topic at hand should attend the discussions.

For more information, visit www.openspaceworld.org.