



International Association of Facilitators
The Art and Mastery of Facilitation – Worlds of Change
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
April 27 – 30, 2000



World of Community Building

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY: SELF ORGANIZATION AT ITS BEST

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Abstract

Open Space Technology enables groups to take risks, develop practical visions, rekindle passion and take responsibility for their own agenda, self organize in work teams, and flow with the energy of the moment, releasing spirit and maximum creativity. It is a simple, yet powerful technique that can be used for intact groups or diverse coalitions, for one-time meetings and conferences, or ongoing in-house organizational development.

Story Number One

The best way to learn about Open Space Technology is to experience it. The next best way is to hear stories about it. Here are two stories from my recent experience.

The groups were not natural allies- scientists, politicians and business people. They all had a stake in the proposed energy project, and wanted to ensure that their voices would be heard. It had taken years to arrange a meeting to which representatives of all parties would



attend. Once the agreement to meet had been made, the question arose, “what kind of meeting should it be, and who should facilitate it?” The stakes were high, scientifically, financially, and in terms of establishing trust and goodwill. It was decided that an external facilitator was crucial, as was a methodology that would allow each party to feel equally heard and respected, and would allow for maximum idea generation. An independent consultant, me, and Open Space Technology, fit the bill.

On the first morning of the meeting, the participants entered a circle of chairs quietly and somewhat warily. However, once I introduced the theme, explained the Open Space process and invited participants to create an agenda based on their passions, a lively hubbub began that lasted the whole day. Discussions throughout the day ranged from detailed scientific presentations, basic questions about why do this here and now, to debates about environmental and local community concerns. The potential funders present were so impressed by the knowledge, wisdom and passion of the group that they agreed to fund a demonstration project even before the weekend was over. The group was jubilant. The next day, after reading the reports that each group had generated, the group was able to prioritize issues and make plans for further research and action. The group was visually relaxed – the business suits had given way to casual attire, and there was laughter and open discussions of hopes and fears. This was not the end of the road for this coalition. Much work remains to be done to bring the project to completion, but Open Space allowed these disparate groups to overcome their inhibitions and mistrust and to collaboratively create the conditions for a revolutionary energy project.

Story Number Two

A small collection of college teachers who felt that life in their college needed a boost of creativity had formed a group. They were looking for ways to generate ideas from within, to

attract others to the group, and to find funding for their projects. They had had guest speakers in, and had done some brainstorming sessions, but the group had not taken off in the way that they had hoped. One member encountered Open Space Technology at a conference and decided that this was the boost their group needed.

It was decided to hold the one day Open Space during reading week, which unfortunately limited the likelihood of students attending, but gave an opportunity for faculty and administration to attend. On the appointed day, a small but lively group showed up, including the president of the college and the human resources person in charge of funding staff initiated projects such as this one.

During our pre-open space meetings, the group leader had expressed to me her fear that this exercise would be like other brainstorming sessions they had had in which the ideas generated were unrealistic, or were valid but for which no one was willing to take responsibility. I assured her that Open Space makes these outcomes unlikely. We worked carefully to establish the parameters of the Open Space. We clearly delineated ahead of time the budget the group currently had, the types of projects it was authorized to carry out independently, and which types of projects would need to find additional funding and authorization. By making this clear to the group, there would be no misunderstandings or frustration about what was currently possible, and what would be needed to make new initiatives possible. In terms of responsibility, Open Space is based on passion bounded by responsibility. When a participant offers a topic for discussion, he or she must be willing to lead that discussion, and record a summary for the group. During the priority setting and action planning phase at the end of an Open Space, participants sign up for work teams and a champion volunteers to keep the group moving forward until it is time to revisit the issue, ideally in four to six months time.



When the group met for the opening circle, I reminded them to breathe, and to look at each other and to recognize the wisdom that was in the group to accomplish the task ahead of them. They were eager to post their topics, and much negotiation ensued over choosing time slots for discussions from the time and space matrix, because everyone wanted to go to everyone else's session. I told them that I had faith that they could work it out, and indeed they reworked the schedule and combined similar groups so that they could attend the discussions they desired.

The reports the groups generated were stunning – covered in drawings and diagrams and ambitious ideas. The groups were fluid, with the members taking to heart the “law of two feet” in Open Space which states that each person should use his or her two feet to take them to where they are either learning or contributing or both. There is a flow through from group to group to coffee pot, creating bumblebees, who cross pollinate the groups, and butterflies who reflect quietly on their own and remind others to do the same. Most participants visited most groups at some point during the day and a communal momentum grew.

By the time of the closing circle, at which time I passed around a talking stick to give each person an opportunity to speak about their experience, the group was jubilant and exhausted. They were thrilled with the ideas and plans they had generated, and even more thrilled when both the president and HR person said that they were so impressed with the energy of the group that they would be willing to promise immediate funding for some of the proposed projects.

Conclusion

As you can see from these two stories, Open Space can work in very different settings for very different purposes. It works well when the participants are as diverse as possible – from front line workers to managers to top-level decision makers, suppliers and clients. But it can also

work in an intact group of participants with similar roles. Ideally, participants should bring an open mind, a spirit of experimentation, a respect for their own wisdom and that of their fellow participants, and a willingness to let go of control of the outcome. But many a skeptic and naysayer has been won over by Open Space.

No matter the situation, the permission and encouragement to post topics about which one has passion, and to participate in discussions only when they are meaningful, creates a sense of freedom and respect that unleashes an energy that is creative, innovative, and incredibly satisfying. It encourages people to participate with their whole being – mind, body and spirit. The challenge of taking responsibility for one's passions encourages a level of follow through action that is rarely seen in other types of group interventions.

A one half to a full day session is what is called a "small space". It is useful for introducing a group to Open Space Technology and for raising issues and opportunities and making ownership of the change possible. During a one and a half, two or three day event, there is time to get the book of proceedings (the summaries of each group) into the hands of all participants so that they can read about all of the discussions that have taken place and vote on the top priorities for action. Action teams then self organize and make more concrete plans, including time lines and budgets if appropriate.

Because this process is so responsive to the needs and passions of the group that use it, and because it encourages diverse perspectives and responses, it has been effectively used for organizational change including strategic visioning and planning, community building, social change, personal edification, and professional discipline. Open Space Technology is not appropriate or useful when specific outcomes are pre-determined, or when existing leadership is



not willing to acknowledge the leadership that emerges during the event and is not willing to make changes as a result of the event.

The Presenter

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Monica Stewart, president of Monica Stewart & Associates, is an educator and organizational learning consultant in the corporate, not for profit and public sectors. Her background in education, social services and organizational development has given Monica a unique perspective on facilitating change in organizations. She specializes in large systems interventions, organizational assessment and clarification of organizational direction, leadership development, and conference and retreat design and facilitation.

She is a trained facilitator in Open Space Technology, Action Research, and Process Facilitation methodologies, and is a member of the Open Space Institute of Canada.

Monica lives in Toronto with her husband, her two-year-old daughter (soon to be joined by a sibling) and her cat Kitty.