

## Open Space Technology: An Inviting Practice

### Interview with Michael Herman <mherman@globalchicago.net>

#### *What is Open Space Technology?*

Open Space Technology is one way to enable all kinds of people, in any kind of organization, to create inspired meetings and events. Over the last 15 years, it has also become clear that opening space, as an intentional leadership practice, can create inspired organizations, where ordinary people work together to create extraordinary results with regularity.

In Open Space meetings, events and organizations, participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance, such as: What is the strategy, group, organization or community that all stakeholders can support and work together to create?

With groups of 5 to 1000 -- working in one-day workshops, three-day conferences, or the regular weekly staff meeting -- the common result is a powerful, effective connecting and strengthening of what's already happening in the organization: planning and action, learning and doing, passion and responsibility, participation and performance.

Open Space works best when the work to be done is complex, the people and ideas involved are diverse, the passion for resolution (and potential for conflict) are high, and the time to get it done was yesterday. It's been called passion bounded by responsibility, the energy of a good coffee break, intentional self-organization, spirit at work, chaos and creativity, evolution in organization, and a simple, powerful way to get people and organizations moving -- when and where it's needed most.

And, while Open Space is known for its apparent lack of structure and welcoming of surprises, it turns out that the Open Space meeting or organization is actually very structured -- but that structure is so perfectly fit to the people and the work at hand, that it goes unnoticed in its proper role of supporting (not blocking) best work. In fact, the stories and workplans woven in Open Space are generally more complex, more robust, more durable -- and can move a great deal faster than expert- or management-driven designs.

#### *How did you get involved with Open Space?*

After business school and financial consulting work, I began working and training as an experiential educator, leading youth and adult courses with Outward Bound. One of my mentors, a brilliant educator and learning guide, referred me to the Harrison Owen's "User's Guide" for Open Space Technology. It resonated deeply. I remember that reading it felt like it changed how I sat in my chair. My whole body settled a bit, relaxed, recognizing that this was how things worked when they really worked. Easily, effortlessly, and powerfully effective.

I followed a rapid string of lucky, synchronistic meetings and referrals to a conference in Philadelphia that was being conducted in Open Space. By then, I'd been through years of facilitator training and was experienced with many models for organizing and leading. At that time, I was struggling a bit with the some paradoxes or conflicts implied by some other well-known large-group methods for facilitating change, so I convened a breakout session called "Imposing Democratic Self-Organization." Recognizing the impossibility of this statement, I added "...or How Do We Teach Responsibility?"

As it turns out, unbeknownst to me, Harrison Owen was in the room. I posted my topic for the first session and he showed up with a handful of others. I told a rather long story of my struggle with this question of how to make self-organization and responsibility happen. Harrison's response was immediate: "I don't (make anything happen)," he said. "I just look around for what's working and then ask people how we might grow more of that." I recognized the power and wisdom of this immediately.

Later, in that same conversation, Harrison also said that he hoped that, in a few years, nobody would be talking at all about "Open Space" because it would come to be simply the way we do business. It wouldn't be a method or technique, but a regular, everyday practice of asking our most important community or strategic questions and inviting anyone who had real passion and a willingness to take some responsibility to gather, work and address together the issues involved.

### ***So how does Open Space work in practice?***

Imagine that you're sitting in a circle of friends, colleagues and perhaps some strangers, too. It might be just a dozen of you for a one-day working conversation, but perhaps it's 120 or even as many as 1200 gathered for a 2 1/2-day strategic conference. However many are here and wherever we might be, our chairs are certainly set in one large circle. Even if the circle has several concentric circles, the room is set, from the start, so that everyone can see and hear everyone else.

The middle of the circle, even if it's very large, is empty and open. There are no tables or podiums, but you can see that there are half sheets of flipchart paper and markers on the floor in the center. Then you notice that someone has apparently already been busy with these markers, as there are handwritten posters hung on every wall...although there is a large (and a little suspicious) blank area that fills most of one wall under a banner that says, simply, "marketplace."

Everyone is here because they've been invited and then chosen to be here, because the theme or issue or question at hand is something they have real passion about -- and because they saw this gathering as a unique opportunity for connecting with others who are eager to learn about, plan for, and take action in an area that they see as critical to the success of their own interests, the work of their organization(s), and/or their relationships with colleagues, customers or suppliers.

### ***Tell us more about the invitation.***

The invitation to an Open Space meeting or event is usually very simple, perhaps just a page or two, maybe a short email or postcard, or even something posted on a bulletin board. It should speak as directly and truthfully as possible about what's working, what's possible, and/or what's needed now in some area of real importance. It's not an invitation to complain or even "solve problems," but rather to co-create something that we all really want to be a part of. This doesn't mean that it denies or in any way minimizes the importance of existing problems, only that it seeks to focus attention on current strengths and assets -- and invites people to work together to create more of them to address real needs and desires.

We should note here that Open Space can only fail for two reasons: if people show up with no passion and/or if somebody tries to control the process in order to achieve some sort of pre-determined outcome(s). And, the commitment to openness, passion and responsible self-organization begins with the invitation process itself.

So coming back to our imaginary event, the theme or purpose on which we've been invited to work is open, broad, and demands a creative, collective response. The invitation was extended to a diverse group of stakeholders and clearly stated the circumstances and parameters for our work here. And, to the greatest extent possible, everyone here is participating voluntarily, because they know that they have something to learn or contribute to the work we need to do.

***So that's the set-up. What happens next?***

It's common practice to "Open the Space" by ringing a small set of tibetan templebells whose unique chiming gently and effectively pierces every conversation, even if the group is several hundred strong. This immediately invites and focuses everyone's attention on the person with the bells, who is standing with another person who nearly everyone in the room knows, or knows of. The familiar person is the leader of the sponsoring or planning group. She introduces herself, welcomes everyone into the meeting and into the circle, perhaps adding a very brief word about how and why we've all come together today. Then she introduces the bell ringer as the meeting facilitator and takes a chair in the circle with everyone else.

The facilitator begins with an invitation to do what you've already been doing, looking around the room, seeing who's here, signaling good morning to the people you know and taking notice of any faces new to you. The theme is restated and briefly explained, perhaps a short story of how we got here, with the reminder that everyone you now see in the circle is here because they care about some aspect of this theme -- and have chosen to be here, to learn from and contribute to the work at hand. The facilitator also explains that the big empty wall is, in fact, our agenda. He acknowledges that it is a giant empty space, but reassures us that it will, within the hour, be filled with discussion topics related to the theme. He makes it very clear that all of these breakout session topics will be proposed by us, the people now sitting in the circle.

***Isn't there more structure to Open Space?***

There are Four Principles and one Law which appear on posters around the room. These are very briefly explained by the facilitator in the spirit of orienting hints rather than rules of conduct. The principles are:

- "Whoever comes is the right people" acknowledges that the only people really qualified or able to do great work on any issue are those who really care, and freely choose to be involved.
- "Whenever it starts is the right time" recognizes that spirit and creativity don't run on the clock, so while we're here, we'll all keep a vigilant watch for great ideas and new insights, which can happen at anytime.
- "Whatever happens is the only thing that could have" allows everyone to let go of the could haves, would haves and should haves, so that we can give our full attention to the reality of what is happening, is working, and is possible right now.
- "When it's over, it's over" acknowledges that you never know just how long it'll take to deal with a given issue, and reminds us that getting the work done is more important than sticking to an arbitrary schedule.

Taken together, these principles say "work hard, pay attention, but be prepared to be surprised!"

The Law of Two Feet, which sounds more like a rule, but is really like the Law of Gravity, describing a basic reality. It says simply that you, and only you, know where you can

learn and contribute the most to the work that must take place today. It reminds you to use your two feet to go where you need to go and do what you need to do. If at any time today, you find that you are not learning or contributing, you have the right and the responsibility to move... find another breakout session, visit the food table, take a walk in the sunshine, make a phone call -- but DO NOT waste time.

This one simple bit of "structure" makes everyone fully responsible for the quality of their own experience. It creates bumblebees who buzz from session to session, cross-pollinating and connecting pieces of the work. It creates butterflies who may not join any formal sessions, choosing instead to float at the edges. They create the space for everyone to appreciate the energies and synergies unfolding in the work of the conference. Sometimes the most amazing solutions seem to come out of nowhere -- so that's where butterflies tend to look for them.

After a quick logistical review, the facilitator invites anyone who's ready to come to the center of the circle, grab a marker and a sheet of paper, and write down their burning question, passionate issue, or great idea. To the surprise of many, a number of people spring from their chairs and are quickly on all fours in the center of the circle, scribbling their offerings. In one event I did, participants actually ran for the markers and paper. I kept a copy of the conference video just to prove it!

As each person finishes, they read their issue(s) out loud. These aren't speeches; just simple announcements. "My name is \_\_\_\_\_, my issue is \_\_\_\_\_," and we're on to the next one, while they tape their sheet to the wall and assign it a place and a time (from a pre-arranged set of space/time choices). This is how even very large groups can create two or three days of agenda in just one hour. As the wall fills, those who were at first surprised, find words for their issue and grab a marker. And then, as fast as it started, it's done. "Buy in" has been accomplished, the agenda is full of real issues, each one has someone to lead it.

### ***Once the agenda is created, how do you proceed?***

Having done the impossible in the first hour, the energy level is pretty high now. The people are ready to get to work on the details. The facilitator gives a few more instructions and the whole group moves to the wall and signs up for the sessions they want to attend. Minutes later, the first sessions start without any announcement or instructions, because everybody knows where they need to be. Suddenly the large circle is many small circles, in the corners of the room or in separate breakout spaces, each working on some important part of the main theme. Every session has been proposed by someone who really cares about that item and has taken responsibility for making sure it gets addressed. In longer meetings, the convener is also responsible for recording the main points and conclusions reached in his or her session.

As the first sessions finish, at roughly the scheduled time, the second sessions begin. If the first issues are not fully resolved in one session, people will often keep working, or schedule a sequel session. Some people have spent the entire 1 1/2-hour session on one topic; others have bumblebeed or butterflyed around, connecting different issues. Everything is moving -- people, ideas, resources, beliefs, relationships -- but it all revolves and relates to the purpose stated in the invitation. The process ebbs and flows, and the work continues, session after session. In multi-day meetings, everyone also assembles in the morning and evening for short "news" sessions, where things like new sessions, major breakthroughs, and dinner plans can be announced easily.

In some events, especially longer events, the proceedings are captured by computer. The person who convenes a session also takes responsibility for capturing the notes and typing them into the computer. The rule-of-thumb is that one day in Open Space will get you a lot of great discussion, two days will give you time to capture what happens in a typed proceedings document, and a third day (usually a half-day) will allow a more formal convergence to specific plans for immediate action. Sometimes smaller groups can work faster, but the overnight "soak time" does make a difference, letting the dust settle and clarity shine through.

*insert box*

When practiced with care, Open Space helps organizations pull themselves back together — beyond "learning and analysis," on the way to inspiration. Because of its "organic" nature, Open Space doesn't take a lot of training, instruction or investment to use. So it's been used easily in "hot spots" like the Middle East and post-apartheid South Africa. It's been used in school groups seeking peaceful and sustainable communities, producing phenomenal results. For example:

\* In the midst of post-911 budget cuts and other major change issues, Peoria, IL, School District 150 held a 3-evening, 200-person summit meeting to create a community-wide vision and set new priorities for revitalizing their inner-city schools. The meeting was well-covered by local broadcast and print media, the 100-page proceedings was publicly available via the District's website, and the top priorities identified on the third evening became the working agenda for their new superintendent and school board.

\* The school district in Fairbanks, Alaska (covering an area the size of the entire state of Connecticut) held a 2-day, 250-person conference on 'Becoming a Peacemaker.' Half the participants were students in the middle and high schools (ages 13-18) and all participants had some experience with mediation and conflict resolution. The kids did exceptionally well in Open Space and one high school student led a series of four breakout sessions to create an entire suicide prevention program for the middle school students. The statewide suicide prevention hotline was up and running within weeks of the conference.

FairbanksPeacemakersInvite |

<http://www.adsa.ws/BAP/4.19.02OSinFBX/FBxBAPApril2002.htm> |

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### ***How have you tried to evolve Open Space?***

I have been tagged over the years as both an Open Space "purist" and an active designer of "hybrid" spaces. I have worked to identify for myself and share with others

the "essence" of the method that is Open Space Technology. At the same time, I have managed to use these insights to "Open Space" in ways that true purists have sometimes questioned.

The "standard" form of Opening Space is a 2.5-day process, but I've done half-days and one-days. I've done series of sessions, three consecutive evenings in a community dealing with a failing school system, for instance, or four 1.5-hour sessions sprinkled throughout a Fortune 150 company's four-day global strategic leadership and planning summit. I've created online conferences and "marketplaces" for ideas and conversations that embody the whole of the spirit, if not every letter of the method that is OST.

In the early days, Harrison Owen's "User's Guide" suggested that OST meetings could be finished with computerized voting. He used some relatively simple software to collect, tabulate and graph 100's of participant priorities as "votes" in about an hour on the last day. Then action plans would be created for the top-voted issues. This process was dubbed "convergence" and it was designed to take all of the energy and "diverging" creativity unleashed in the first two days of Open Space and "converge" it back into a short list that "managers" could deal with.

Since then, the world has changed, and I think our collective ability, and also our technology, to handle ongoing chaos and turbulent progress has increased. Especially in community groups and organizations, there isn't necessarily any need or benefit to "converging" all that energy into a few issues or controlled management. On the contrary, if there is passion and responsibility in any area, it's best that folks DO something with that – even if it means that the group ends up with more than a manageable "short list" of projects going forward. It's all good to have the learning and contributing continue!

Recognizing this, some of us have developed and practiced what we've called "non-convergence" where we simply Open the Space again at the end of an OST conference or meeting. We open for the next round of questions, open for a more focused set of issues, open for a more practical set of "actions" that could be initiated and followed up on after the big meeting. We simply leave time (space) at the end of the program to Open a new Space, to make a whole new agenda, but this time it's focused on actions and initiatives. In this way, we've been moving OST beyond the realm of meeting method, in the direction of ongoing leadership practice.

We've supported this ongoing opening and development with online tools that can help keep the Space Open, essential tools that create digital bulletin boards, posting Spaces for ongoing actions, new meetings on old issues, new meetings on new issues, and the news and results that come from those new sessions. Tools like wiki websites, conference weblogs, project weblogs, and email listserves are available for little or no cost to community groups and do much to keep the spirit and activity of an Open Space meeting alive after the "meeting" is over. There is even an online Open Space website where groups can hold web-based follow-up meetings in the digital equivalent of an Open Space conference.

Overall, I think this shifting from event or meeting methodology to ongoing organizational practice is the most important evolution over these last twenty years. We're learning that we can be this effective every day.

### ***How does Open Space relate to other ways/tools for dialogue?***

The nice thing about working with and practicing the essence of Open Space is that it plays so well with other methods. Combinations that form are usually driven by some local, community or organizational, attachment to some of these other methods, even as they also have a desire to Open some Space to do and connect more. So we need to be able to weave the existing methods and languages together with the spirit and practices of Open Space. That said, I generally find that when I add things to Open Space, I end up working harder on the one hand and not always getting more energy, action or ownership on the other.

Care must always be taken, when adding things to Open Space, that we are not designing away the space for participants to take direct and personal responsibility for creating what works best for them. It is so easy to make design decisions that impose constraints that really aren't necessary. Take the simple example of a community conference, when Open Space is considered as an alternative to a "traditional" conference. The usual design question would be should lunch be plated or buffet? But, might the meeting be held where participants can go out and buy their own, eating in small groups, getting some fresh air, choosing exactly what suits them nutritionally and financially. What about potluck where everyone brings something to share? Notice in the latter options, the conference organizers don't need to deal with money or budgets or the risk of guessing how many people will come, how much they'll eat, or what they'd prefer. Nobody needs to do extra "fundraising" to pay for it. Meanwhile, participants get a lot more food options to choose from and the organization benefits from their "ownership" of the process, i.e. nobody complains about the food!

Coming back to the various methods then, what they have in common -- what really makes them work -- is a determined focus on identifying what's working, inquiring into what could be done to grow more of those things (rather than attacking "problems"), and allowing anyone who is willing to learn and contribute, anyone who cares and is willing to take some responsibility for doing something, to gather and work together. Common mechanisms include open invitations, talking circles, storytelling, diversity, issues that really matter and people who really want to do something about them.

### ***What are some challenges you face with Open Space?***

Perhaps the biggest challenge in using Open Space is getting comfortable, or helping others (organizers, sponsors, clients) to get comfortable with the ease and relative painlessness of the whole process. So often we think that if it doesn't hurt, we're not really working, and thus are shirking our responsibility. We have what I think is an unbalanced view, a misunderstanding of the value of Opening and Holding Space for important issues to be considered and work plans to come together.

Another way to say this is that the hardest part about using Open Space is to convince others that it is real work. If I spend several days bouncing email messages back and forth among colleagues, scheduling one meeting, or even more days seeking help to find people who really care and might be persuaded to come to a meeting on a given issue, then spend even more time convincing them all to come, the total time could be days or weeks.

When I show up in an Open Space meeting with several dozen or several hundred people who share a stake in the same major issue or situation, like the future of the community or school system or company, I can post my own sub-issues and initiatives. Immediately, I find people who can help me and our meeting is scheduled, conducted

and documented all in the same day. What's more, when we're finished with our first meeting, we can announce our results to a receptive, informed, active and connected group of colleagues.

If it takes weeks or months, but happens in an office, we call it "real work." If it takes only hours, but happens in a comfortable, casual environment, we often fail to recognize it as real work, real productivity. And this is the real challenge: helping people see that grinding things out (often in relative isolation) with limited effect is not the only option. It's possible to invite and get everyone working together for bigger, easier and rippling effects. The challenge is cutting through to what really works, and Open Space is a way of practicing and embodying more and more of *that*.

### ***What do we get at the end of an Open Space day?***

Despite the uncertainty about what issues will ultimately be posted, what the agenda and action plans will ultimately look like, there are some things that we know for sure when we begin our journey in Open Space with a first invitation and meeting:

1. All of the issues that are MOST important to the participants will be raised.
2. All of the issues raised will be addressed by those participants most qualified and capable of getting something done on each of them.
3. In a time as short as one or two days, all of the most important ideas, discussion, data, recommendations, conclusions, questions for further study, and plans for immediate action will be documented in one comprehensive report -- finished, printed and in the hands of participants when they leave.
4. When appropriate and time is allowed for it, the total contents of this report document can be focused and prioritized in a matter of a few hours, even with very large groups (100's).
5. After an event, all of these results can be made available to an entire organization or community within days of the event, so the conversation can invite every stakeholder into implementation -- right now.
6. AND... results like these can be planned, implemented and sustained faster and more easily than any other kind of so-called "large-group intervention." It is literally possible to accomplish in days and weeks what some other approaches take months and years to do.

It really is as simple, and challenging as that. One or several leaders put out a direct and open invitation. The people show up, and after only the briefest of introductions, they identify all kinds of issues and opportunities, invitations to conversations with neighbors and colleagues, that they themselves take direct, personal responsibility for addressing. When they capture the notes from their conversations, they are published and shared -- as invitations to action. And some of those actions almost always include putting out new invitations to new meetings and events. In this way, an Open Space meeting can start a powerful and productive cycle, an ongoing process, that is truly inviting -- in both its essential spirit and its literal practice.

The good news -- and the bad news -- is that it works. Good news because it gets people and processes moving, bad news because that may mean lots of things are going to be

different than before. Wanted things can appear, unwanted things disappear, and sometime vice versa -- but that's how life is.

In short, then, Open Space invites life back to organization and organizations back to life.

*Learn more about practicing Open Space at Michael Herman's OST Resources Archive ([www.globalchicago.net](http://www.globalchicago.net)), including a free downloadable early version of Harrison Owen's OST User's Guide. Join the worldwide OST community of practitioners at [www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org), where the latest version of the User's Guide and other books can be purchased in the Open Space Institute online bookstore.*

# Where and Why to Open Space

**OPEN SPACE is APPROPRIATE for GETTING PEOPLE and INFORMATION**

***MOVING:***

- Planning and completing special projects, with or without formally organizing a special project team;
- Resolving cross-functional questions, with or without formally organizing a cross-functional team or task force;
- Design and development projects, related to new products, services, processes, customers, standards, or other strategic change or improvement projects;
- Exploring and addressing a range of cultural issues, including diversity, learning, support, orientation, quality, and the like;
- Rapid response to surprises, whether to seize an opportunity or pick up the pieces and get back on track;
- Creating strategic plans that everybody understands and cares about accomplishing and...
- Staying on track with strategic check-ins that ensure that the details of the plan are still appropriate and still moving toward successful execution.

**OPEN SPACE yields IMMEDIATE BENEFITS, including:**

- Experiential, Breakthrough Learning and Creativity
- Appropriate Structure and Control
- Open Communication and a Genuine Sense of Community
- High Play, High Creativity, High Efficiency, High Productivity
- Shared Leadership, Active "Buy-in" and Personal Responsibility
- Inspired Performance and Growth from Within

**OPEN SPACE is NOT MAGIC, benefits can EVAPORATE when:**

- Leader(s) believe they already know the answer(s) and are looking for ways to sell or impose those ideas on the rest of the organization;
- Leader(s) believe that they are the only ones responsible for, or really necessary for, the organization to do its best work;
- Leader(s) are seeking the appearance of participation, but are unwilling or unable to deal openly and directly with high passion or concern, increasing complexity, real diversity of people or opinions, and/or the urgent need to make decisions and take action.