

Inviting Organization

evolution is now and open space

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Working in Open Space: A Guided Tour

by Michael Herman

Our last grasps at controlling people and organizations are slipping into the swirls of constant change and we are quickly discovering that in this new reality, simple conversation qualifies as real work -- and is essential for powerful, profitable action. As specialization and customization increase, complex webs of relationships and information emerge, pressure for frontline decision-making and on-time delivery rises, and the best work of every individual becomes essential for overall success, it's never been more important to be connected -- and reconnected -- with our partners at work.

Open Space Technology is a simple, powerful way to catalyze effective working conversations and truly inviting organizations -- to thrive in times of swirling change. What follows is a unique narrative tour of an Open Space event that highlights those things that are common to nearly every Open Space meeting AND points out a number of ways of and possibilities for fitting Open Space into any organization, setting or situation.

Think of this story as an Open Space adventure with a seasoned, but blindfolded, guide...

Welcome to Open Space...look around, please, and see who's here. 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. If it's just a few, we might be in your office conference room or a small hotel meeting place. If it's a very large group, we're likely in a hotel ballroom, a high school gymnasium, or even a warehouse facility that your company has cleared out especially for the work of this 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."

Someone sits down next to you, probably an old friend, somebody you know, but perhaps haven't seen for awhile. You begin a conversation, "well, hello...good morning...I didn't expect to find you here...gosh, how long has it been, how are your kids...well of course I should have known you'd be interested in this...how did you hear about it...I thought of you when I first saw the invitation...glad you were able to move your schedule to be here...wouldn't have missed this for the world...what do you suppose is going to happen...not sure, but I know we need to do something about..."

Your conversation is repeated around the room as others arrive and connect. They join you sitting in the circle or stand at the edges, talking with people they know or people they are connecting with for the first time. Some

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are sitting quietly by themselves, taking in the whole scene, glancing at the notes they've brought, or perhaps having a look at a one- or two-page handout that might have been placed on every chair. There is a table with coffee and juice, doughnuts, bagels, fresh fruit. Everyone is eating or drinking something.

And everyone is here for a purpose, having received an invitation and having made whatever simple or grand arrangements it took to get themselves here this morning. Everyone is here because they've 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.

The invitation itself was very simple, probably just a page or two, maybe a short email or postcard, or even something posted on a bulletin board. It spoke plainly about what's working, what's possible, and/or what's needed now in some area of real importance. It was clearly not an invitation to complain or even "solve problems," but rather to co-create some dimension of the organization, the community, or the world that we all really want to be a part of. This doesn't mean that it denied or in any way minimized the importance of existing problems, only that it really focused attention on our strengths and assets -- and invited people to work together to create more of them.

If circumstances allowed, you received this invitation well in advance of the gathering date(s), so that you could plan your schedule around it. A late invitation just isn't as open, credible and welcoming as one sent in advance, whatever "in advance" means in your organization. Alternatively, this gathering could be an urgent call to respond to some new situation or opportunity that's popped up. Either way, the invitation announced the theme (purpose or intention) for this gathering and provided a brief explanation (or reminder) about its importance or connection to your life. Perhaps it also invited you to spread the

word, to other people you know who are interested in this work.

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.

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

The simple, clear, broad and open invitation process assures that the people who show up have real passion for the issue AND signals to them that the best outcomes are theirs to create. A good invitation lets everyone know, even those who can't or won't actually attend, that this meeting is intended to go beyond suggestions, beyond recommendations, beyond rubber-stamping, beyond past expectations. This meeting is for real responsibility, real learning, real action on the issue(s) at hand. Even if the number of attendees had been limited, for financial or other concerns, this could and should have been done in ways that don't limit the passion and possibility of the work.

So, as you look around at the crowd assembling now in the main meeting room, you are aware that everybody in this diverse group somehow received the same invitation, that everybody here seems to have some connection to the theme question, but that nobody seems to really know exactly what will happen next. The level of anticipation and energy rises as the stated starting time arrives and seems to pass, the noise level in room rises, too -- and then a totally new sound rings through the room.

Someone is ringing a small set of bells whose chiming pierces every conversation, even if the group is several hundred. This immediately invites and focuses everyone's attention on the one with the bells, who is standing with a person who nearly everyone in the room knows, or knows of. This

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 why we've all come here today. Then she introduces the bell ringer as the meeting facilitator and takes a chair in the circle with everyone else.

At this moment, the facilitator is, quite possibly, the only one in the room who has absolutely no doubt whatsoever that this group of 12, 120 or 1200 is on the brink of filling that large, suspiciously empty wall with a detailed agenda that will keep everyone working, playing, and learning for the duration of the conference -- on the brink of what most (at this point) would call the impossible. The sense of anticipation and energy is so high in the room that even the sponsors and planners of the event are a little edgy, and eager for the agenda to appear. But first, a few instructions must be given, a few simple principles introduced, one basic law enacted, and a few logistical items explained. All of this, you notice, is also presented on the handful of posters that are scattered around the room.

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. The logistics of this are equally clear.

While the reality of this responsibility sinks in, the Four Principles are explained. What seemed strange when you read the posters earlier, now seems to make a lot of sense. "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. And finally, "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 one law is The Law of Two Feet, or in some cases, The Law of Personal Mobility. 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 demands that you 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 simple rule makes everyone fully responsible for the quality of their own work and work 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. As each one 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.

Having done the impossible in the first hour, the energy level is pretty high now. 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 work isn't finished, it continues or a sequel is scheduled. 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 intention stated in the invitation. This motion ebbs and flows, but 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.

In some cases, smaller groups might create handwritten proceedings to be typed up after the event. With larger groups and longer meetings, where follow-up and follow-through is critical, the typed proceedings can be dumped into an intranet format where future meetings can be announced and progress reports added onto the original proceedings. Over time, these proceedings on an intranet system also make a powerful orientation and training resource, at both project and organizational levels.

In the closing circle, everyone in the room attests to the fact that, together, we have done what most thought was impossible. Specifically, we have...

- identified, explored and addressed all of the most important issues,
- gathered new ideas, resources and people and connected them to these issues,
- documented all of this in somewhere between 5 and 500 pages of notes and next steps,
- established strategic themes, clear priorities, immediate actions steps
- distributed all of this information to a (re)energized and action-ready community of people
- empowered them to tell that story to the rest of the organization, community, or world, and
- seeded cycles of invitation that will continue to pull people into places where they can maximize their own learning and contribution.

Longer term, with proper care and feeding, the realities and practicalities of the Four Principles and The Law of Two Feet can permeate the organization, inviting people at every level to turn attention into value, planning into vision, movement into learning, management into leadership that makes a real difference. These things are, however, easy to see and tough to measure.

Therefore, you'll need to measure the success of Open Space the same way you measure everything else you do, in terms of

product development time, process cycle time, employee and customer turnover, total sales or volume of service, profit margin and any other ways that make sense. After all, we don't "Do Open Space" just because it's fun. We do it to invite important projects, relationships, strategies and measurements to move quickly in positive new directions.

Hailed for its utter simplicity -- and its power, Open Space starts with open-minded leadership, an issue that really matters, and an invitation to co-create something new and amazing. What happens in the meetings is high learning, high play and high productivity, but is never pre-determined. And what emerges, over time, is a truly inviting organization, that will thrive in times of swirling change.