

Opening Space for New Life at Work

By Michael Herman

Imagine for a moment 150 people from your organization getting together for a three-day meeting and making real progress on your most pressing business issues. The catch: there's no pre-set agenda.

Imagine that they identify 70-plus issues, discuss them all in two days, create a 150-page typed record of their work, distribute that document to all participants on the morning of the third day, and then converge it all into immediate action plans in ten major strategic areas that are understood and agreed upon by everyone.

This is not just wishful thinking. Hundreds of schools, churches, corporations, and community groups worldwide have used Open Space Technology (OST) to address high levels of complexity, diversity, conflict, and urgency in their work. It's one of those "minutes-to-learn, a lifetime to master" practices that anyone with a good head and a good heart can do (see end of article for resources and training information).

What is Open Space Technology?

According to Julie Benesh, an organization development manager at a major Chicago hospital, Open Space is not so much a tool, technique, or process as a "way of life that affirms possibility and raises spirit to build constructive workplaces and communities."

Over the last 15 years, Open Space—used as an intentional leadership practice—has inspired ordinary people to work together and create extraordinary results.

In Open Space meetings, events, and organizations, people create and manage their own agenda around a central theme. This overall theme or agenda can be as broad as: "What is the strategy that all stakeholders can support and work together to create?" Or as narrow as: "How do we get this one key project done on time and on budget?"

With groups from five to 1000—working in one-day workshops, three-day conferences, or in a 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. The key is "opening the space," so people and information can really move.

"Open Space is the most effective process I've seen. Nothing else does so much so quickly," said Kay Vogt, a psychologist and independent consultant.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN?

We never know exactly what will happen when we "open the space" for people to do their most important work, but we can guarantee these results when any group gets into Open Space:

1. The issues MOST important to participants will be raised.
2. The issues raised will be addressed by those participants most qualified and capable of getting something done about each of them.
3. In a time as short as one or two days, the most important ideas, discussions, 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 when time is allowed, the total contents of this report can be focused and prioritized in a matter of a few hours, even with very large groups.
5. Results from the comprehensive report can be made available to an entire organization or community within days of an event, so every stakeholder is invited to take action immediately.
6. Lastly, results like these can be planned and implemented faster than any other "large-group interventions." It is literally possible to accomplish in days or weeks what other approaches can take months or years to resolve. ✚

How, When, and Why?

Open Space gives people the room they need to get work moving, the opportunity they need to connect deeply throughout the organization, and the focus they need to get real work done. It asks people to express their own passions and take direct responsibility for making things happen. It invites learning, community, and spirit.

"OST has had a strong impact on me personally," Vogt added. "It has enhanced my sense of personal freedom and deepened my connections with others."

Likewise, Uwe Weissflog, a consultant and former vice president of global strategy at an engineering and design firm, said OST resulted in bonding between employees as well as concrete results.

“Seldom have I experienced community in such depth as we did during the Open Space training...I’ve used the method twice for strategic planning purposes,” Weissflog said. “Nearly all of my coworkers told me this wouldn’t work with the engineers in our company, but the results have been phenomenal. In one of the meetings, 85 people worked for two days and generated 120 pages addressing 18 topics that are of vital interest to our existence as a company. This technology is dynamite and I will use it as often as possible.”

Open Space Technology enables any kind of business or group to focus attention on their most important issues, and invites everyone to learn and contribute as much as they can toward their successful resolution. Open Space eclipses the need for teambuilding, and makes organization-building a practical, powerful reality.

Open Space has been used to smooth the way for difficult mergers, business turnarounds, new product development, mission-critical projects, school system redesign, and community healing.

“I convened an Open Space meeting with fifty high school administrators,” said one school superintendent. “The Open Space agenda belonged to the group...they ran with it, and discovered their shared values and beliefs. They found their strength for themselves and I witnessed new spirit emerging in our school district.”

Good News, Bad News

Many businesses have become “learning organizations,” but often this still shows up as preach and teach, plan and sell, ask then tell—all watered-down versions of command and control. OST, on the other hand, is a powerful acknowledgment of life’s chaos. However, it’s not right for all situations. For example, OST does not work well if leaders within an

organization believe they already know the answers, if they are seeking only the appearance of participation, or are looking for a way to impose ideas on the rest of the organization. If key leaders believe they are the only people necessary for the organization to do its best work, the space for “best work” never really opens.

What we all want is to be inspired at work and appreciated for our efforts. But as soon as managers put “inspire the troops” or “get inspired” on their to-do list, the creation of spirit at work gets flattened into just another task.

“If command-and-control management is crowding Spirit right out of your organization’s back door, create some Open Space and welcome it back in!” said Scott Anderson, principal of a Michigan consulting firm. “The ultimate in user-friendliness, Open Space encourages organizational truthfulness and personal responsibility...key ingredients for transformation.”

The good news—and the “bad” news—about Open Space is that it really works. Good news because Open Space gets people and workplaces moving—bad news because that may mean things are going to be different from before. Wanted things appear, unwanted things disappear—and sometimes vice versa. But that’s life. In short: *Open Space Technology brings life back to organization and organizations back to life.* ❖

For more information on Open Space Technology, visit www.openspaceworld.org and www.ost.michaelherman.com or send an e-mail to email@michaelherman.com. You can also download free e-books on OST at www.michaelherman.com, or visit your local bookstore for Open Space Technology: A User’s Guide, and other books by OST originator Harrison Owen.

PHENOMENAL RESULTS

When practiced with care, Open Space helps organizations pull themselves back together—beyond “learning and analysis,” on the way to inspiration. OST is producing phenomenal results, in all kinds of organizations, all over the world. For example:

- Rockport Shoes closed down operations for three days for a 300-person, company-wide strategic planning session. During this meeting, one security guard’s off-hand comment resulted in a new \$24 million business, almost overnight. (The new business lines were black and white shoes for people who walk a lot at work!)
- In Racine, Wisconsin, 35 teenagers gathered together at a four-hour after-school meeting, during which they started the movement that published a youth art newsletter, attended public government meetings, made front-page headlines eventually causing a skateboard park to be built in a prime location downtown along the lake, and quickly created the largest YMCA Earth Service Corps. chapter in the country.
- Boeing integrated production of pressurized doors for all of its airplane models in Open Space; AT&T invited 22 vendors into Open Space and totally redesigned their pavilion for the Atlanta Olympic Games—both in record time!
- The Village of Hoffman Estates gathered 100 high school students together with 25 village employees to address the challenges of, and find solutions for, bullying in schools and safety in the community. ❖

Michael Herman lives and works in open space with colleagues worldwide and clients in all kinds of organizations. He offers a wealth of business resources, community connections, and personal reflections at www.michaelherman.com