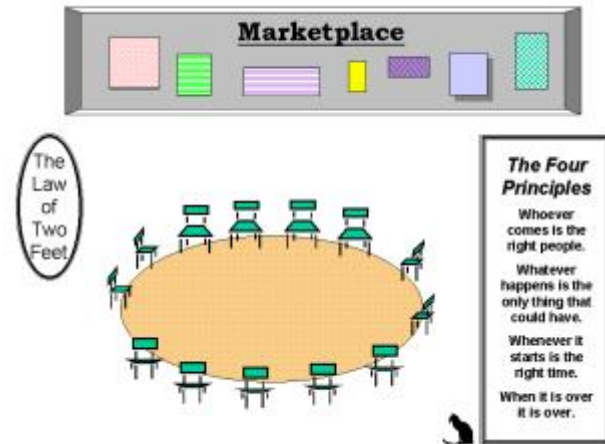# Open Space Technology Basics

Purpose

Open Space Technology invites people to self-organize by taking responsibility for what they love as a means to address complex, important issues.

Number of participants: 5-2,000+
Typical Duration: ½ day to 3 days
More information:
www.openspaceworld.org

Principles and the Law

The Law of Two Feet (or, with a nod to the disabled, the law of mobility) names the two fundamentals on which Open Space runs: passion and responsibility. Passion engages the people in the room. Responsibility ensures that things get done. The law invites participants to take responsibility for what they love -- standing up for that and using their two feet to move to whatever place they can best contribute and/or learn. Four principles become visible when following the law:

Whoever comes are the right people. Whoever is attracted to the same conversation are the people who can contribute most to that conversation—because they care. So they are exactly the ones—for the whole group—who are capable of initiating action.

Whatever happens is the only thing that could have. Use disruptions as a source of curiosity and creative exploration. Focus on NOW—the present time and place. Don't get bogged down in what could've or should've happened.

When it starts is the right time. The creative spirit has its own time. Contribute to the flow of creativity when it starts.

When it's over, it's over. Pay attention to the flow of creativity – not the clock. When energy starts to wane, ask: *Is it over?* If it is, apply the law of two feet. If it's not, make plans for continuing onward.

Process

An urgent theme or question focuses the event. The art of the question lies in saying just enough to evoke attention, while leaving sufficient open space for the imagination to run wild.

All participants are seated in a circle (or concentric circles if the group is large). The principles and the law are introduced. Participants identify any issue for which they have some genuine passion and are prepared to take personal responsibility. They come to the center of the circle, write their issue on a piece of paper, announce it to the group, and post the paper on the wall. When all the issues have been surfaced, the participants go to the wall, sign up for the issues they care to deal with, and get to work. From there on out, the group is self-managing. As small groups meet, they generate reports. Participants come together at the end of each day to reflect and reach closure for the session.

The Steps in Brief

Setup: Chairs in a circle, no table, multiple breakout spaces

Supplies: Markers, paper

Days Before
1. **Create a focusing question.** Frame the highest purpose and widest context for your discussion in a positive way.
2. **Invite the people.** Reach out to all the people who have a stake in the question. Include the theme, date, place and time of gathering in the invitation.

Day Of
3. **Create the circle.** Set up chairs in a circle or in concentric circles, leaving space in the center. Choose a blank wall for the Agenda Wall and label it AGENDA. Put blank sheets of paper and markers in the center of the circle.
4. **Set up breakout spaces**. (To determine the approximate number of spaces, take the number of participants divided by 2-3, divided by number of sessions. Example: For 30 people, assume 10-15 people will post sessions. With two time slots, you'll need 5-8 spaces. If you have one big room for the main circle, people can move their chairs for the breakout sessions and bring them back when they form the big circle.

    Sample timing:
    10 min Welcome
    20 min Set the intention and explain the process
    10 min Set agenda (post topics)
    60 min Breakout sessions
    60 min Breakout sessions
    30 min Plenary discussion: session highlights
    10 min Discuss next steps
    10 minutes Closing reflections (pass the mike)

Adapted from Holman, Peggy. (2010). *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

5. **Welcome everyone**. Sponsor thanks participants for coming, speaks to the calling question and who is present.
6. **Explain the process**. Facilitator explains the theme, the process the group will follow to organize and to create a record (optional), the Law of Two Feet, and the Principles of Open Space.
7. **Open the marketplace.** Invite anyone who cares about an issue to step into the middle of the circle, take paper and marker and write the topic and their name, announce it, and post it on the Agenda Wall – one sheet per topic—as many topics as he/she wants. They will be session hosts, responsible for facilitating their session(s) and seeing to it that a report is made and shared. If the session hosts want to combine their groups because they have similar topics, that's fine.
5. **Provide the final instructions**. When ALL offerings have been made, let participants know how much time they'll have for the conversations and when to reconvene as a whole group for closing activities. Invite people to sign up for what they are interested in and take responsibility for their schedules, using the Law of Two Feet.
6. **People participate in discussions**. While people talk, the Facilitator takes care of the space. Reporters create session reports and post on a News Wall in the room or in an online space.
7. **Share discussion highlights.** Reconvene in one circle to share highlights, "ahas" and next steps: simply listening to whatever people have to offer.
8. **Identify next steps**. Ask the group for a couple volunteers to take the lead from here. This is also a time to identify any other next steps.
9. **Wrap up**. Invite people to speak a word or phrase of closure, going around the circle. If you like, you can ask people to make individual commitments, though that can take a little longer.
10. **Repeat**. If it is a several day gathering, do steps 5 through 9 daily.

After
12.   **Mail out whatever record is created.** and an address list to all who came. (optional)

For More Information

OpenSpaceWorld.org — OpenSpaceWorld.org is a starting place for exploring resources for using Open Space Technology.

Open Space Listserv – Online Open Space community email list and library for stories, learning, and friendly global support, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. OSLIST archived since 1996 - http://www.mail-archive.com/oslist@lists.openspacetech.org. To subscribe, visit

Holman, P., Devane, T., & Cady, S. (2007). *The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Describes sixty-one change methods for engaging whole systems.

Owen, H. (2008). *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide (3rd ed.).* San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

A hands-on, detailed description of facilitating Open Space Technology. Purpose of Open Space Technology: To enable groups to address complex, important issues as a high performing system by inviting people to take responsibility for what they love for a few hours, a few days, or as an everyday practice.

Adapted from Holman, Peggy. (2010). *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.