

Inviting Leadership in Open Space

A Guide for Training and Practice



Michael Herman

December 2016

Before We Begin

In the preface of his original Open Space Technology User's Guide, Harrison Owen wrote:

If I have a vision for Open Space Technology, it is that it become rather like accounting: something we all must do because it works, and because it is useful. My concern is that we do it well. To this end I have written this book, not so much as the definitive statement of the right way to proceed, but rather as an invitation to join the process and do it better.

So use this book as seems fitting, and please join me in what has been, and will continue to be, a marvelous co-creative adventure. Of course, there is one small responsibility that accompanies this invitation. Please share what you discover and we will all be the richer.

This collection is for Harrison and the many other friends and colleagues who have invited me deeper and deeper into Open Space, for all the clients who have invited me into their work, and for everyone who will read it, invite others, and share what they discover. Please join us!

For Openers...

If a living system is unhealthy, the way to make it more healthy is to reconnect it with more of itself. *–Francisco Varela, Biologist*

We have been doing Open Space for a very long time in South Africa. But we don't call it Open Space, we call it "meeting under the trees." What I learned at this conference is that we could be doing our government under the trees. *–Open Space participant from Durban, South Africa*

There are three ways of trying to win the young. There is persuasion, there is compulsion and there is attraction. You can preach at them, but that is a hook without a worm. You can say "you must volunteer," and that is of the devil. Or, you can tell them, "you are needed," and that appeal hardly ever fails. *–Kurt Hahn pioneering German educator and founder of Outward Bound Schools*

Every person is a particular kind of leader; no leader is a particular kind of person.
– Ancient Chinese proverb (adapted)

Play for more than you can afford to lose, and you will learn the game. *–Winston Churchill*

We must become the change we wish to see in the world. *–M. Gandhi*

Work is Love made visible. *–Kahlil Gibran* (...and Leadership is Practice made visible! –MH)

It's not that Open Space is better than traditional forms of organization. It's the going back and forth that makes us stronger. *–Chagdud Tulku, Tibetan Master (paraphrased)*

I hate quotations. Tell me what you know. *–R. W. Emerson*

Contents

Welcome to Open Space	6
Many Stories, Many Places	8
Youth Action Emerges in Open Space	9
What Else Has Happened in Open Space?.....	12
Talking About Open Space	15
The Genesis of Open Space Technology	16
What Is Open Space Technology?	18
Working in Open Space: A Guided Tour	20
Open Space Everywhere	25
Some Essential Elements of Open Space Technology	28
Open Space is Inviting	30
Open Space as Practice: Inviting and Hosting	31
Preparing for Open Space: An Essential Shift and Some Practical Issues	32
Crafting the Invitation: Getting to the Heart of What Matters	33
Crafting the Invitation: So What's the BIG Idea?	34
Crafting the Invitation: What Do You Want Anyone to Do About It?	36
Crafting the Invitation: Some Opening, Inviting (Sample!) Language	37
The Logistics of Hosting: Setting the Stage, Supporting the Flow	38
Keeping the Space Open: Action, Practice, and Positive Impact	39
Let's Go!.....	40
Facilitator Toolkit.....	41
Planning and Preparation Worksheet	42
A Sample Script for Opening the Space	45
Capturing the Conversations	48
The Way Forward: Keeping it Going.....	50
Rules for Ongoing Open Space	51
Open Space Starts When We Pick Up the Phone.....	52
The Inviting Organization Emerges.....	53
Additional Resources	58
About Michael Herman	59

Permission has always been granted gladly to those who've emailed and shared something about themselves, their work, and their use of the materials, especially for non-commercial uses. If you want to use this guide for commercial purposes, please <mailto:michael@michaelherman.com> to discuss.

Welcome to Open Space

The city of Fairbanks lies near the center of the immense piece of territory that is the great state of Alaska. If you head out of town the wrong way, especially at night, you can drive a very long way before you discover your error – hopefully while you still have enough fuel to get back. Years ago, after dinner at the home of a client, a few of us visitors headed back to our lodgings together. Our driver, a careful sort of Bostonian, refused to leave our host's driveway until we'd located the correct map. Easier said than done. The car was littered with maps, to this place and the other, that people had been drawing for him all week. By the time we did finally locate the one that would lead to our lodgings, all of the windows were heavily fogged.

It was the middle of April, thirty-three degrees, and midnight. The ground still buried in snow, the sky black like crazy, not one shred of a moon. A steady rain was turning to snow and the roads were turning to ice. With the windows still fogged, our driver eased back out of the driveway and idled slowly up the street, defroster blazing and blowing. The fog cleared quickly, everywhere except right in front of our driver, who began fiddling with the defroster in frustration. "I can't see where I'm going!" he complained. I looked over at my friend Chris and buckled my seatbelt.

Then I looked at the windshield and laughed, "Well, actually," I said, "you can see where you are going OR you can see where you are driving... And since the map is not the territory, why don't you give ME the map and YOU stick to the territory." Leaning over, I snatched the map from the dashboard, clearing the defroster vent, and the window quickly cleared. I tossed the map on the seat and we headed out into the vast Alaskan night.

Maps are important. They give us the comfort we need to get out of the driveway and on our way. Then, they sit there on the seat until such time as we might need them to reorient ourselves in suddenly unfamiliar territory. This guide is a kind of map, a rough sketch of evolution in Open Space specifically and organization generally. It can give us some comfort as we set out into Open Space [or Agile software development] and help us re-orient and understand what is going on, once we're out there in the complexity of the territory.

We're pushing deeper and deeper into the territory beyond command and control, hoping that someone really is still in command and feeling rather out of control. In some business organizations, we've seen signs for 'the Agile enterprise' that learns by experimenting and 'the learning organization' supposedly able to educate and re-educate itself -- but as often as not these show up as preach and teach, plan and sell, study and tell -- all still watered-down versions of command and control.

The root meaning of 'education,' however, is 'to draw out' -- which sounds a lot like invitation. As command and control continue to slip away -- into the vast open space of the internet, the global economy, international politics, and all of life's local uncertainties -- the bad news is that invitation may very well be all that we have left. The good news, however, is that it may be all that we need.

This collection of stories and practice materials is a map for leaders, sponsors, hosts, and facilitators of work in Open Space. Notice I did not say participants. They will need just a short briefing, maybe 10 or 15 minutes long, to be able to create their own complex and perfectly detailed agenda for working together on any issue of real importance. This guide will help you invite participants, give them that short briefing, and support them in doing great things.

This is a substantially reworked and extended version of the guide I've shared in ten previous editions, since 2002. The materials shared here were created and collected over almost 20 years of practice, in all kinds of organizations, around the world. Much of it was first published on the internet. Please excuse any formatting issues or broken links. Open Space and Inviting Leadership are a practice, I'm still learning, and this is still a work in progress.

The first section offers some of my favorite stories, to give you some idea what's possible working in this way. The pieces in the second section starts to explain how the practice works. What is Open Space and the Guided Tour piece have been used by many as handouts for prospective clients and sponsors. The third section walks through the planning process, focusing on the invitation, which I think drives everything else. In complex adaptive systems, initial conditions are everything. The Toolbox section includes some technical guides before the final section puts all of this in a much bigger evolutionary context.

See also Harrison Owen's *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (Berrett-Koehler, Third Edition). What I'm offering here is no substitute for that original text. It's everything you'll want to know about Open Space as a meeting methodology. What I want to do here is invite you to understand and adapt it into everyday, and evolutionary, practice.

Good luck, and have fun! This really is a great way to work and lead and be together.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael". The signature is written on a set of three horizontal lines, with the top line above the letters and the bottom line below them.

I cannot say what you will experience, but I can say what you will not -- you will not be experiencing a management fad. It's too simple, too obvious, too long-lasting, and too applicable to the whole of life, to be a management fad.

—An Australian CEO

Many Stories, Many Places



Youth Action Emerges in Open Space

It was late October and too cold to be out without coats, but there we were, pacing in the dark of a parking lot. My good friend and colleague, Brian Reilly (Program Officer, The Johnson Foundation) was fuming about being accidentally locked out of his new house. Personally, I was glad to have the time to talk, so I kept pulling his energy back to our work and what he wanted to do with his role in Sustainable Racine, a whole-community redevelopment project in Racine, Wisconsin. Eventually, we got around to his passion for youth leadership. What emerged over the next many months turns out to be one of my favorite stories of organizing in open space.

In line with his passion for youth leadership, Brian had been talking to a number of young people in the community. He really wanted to get them together and get them more involved in the work of Sustainable Racine. We went round and round in the parking lot...intentions, resources, history, opportunities, intentions, invitations, history, intentions, opportunities...and finally to a plan. The final version of the invite is included at the end of this story.

Four weeks later we met again, for the first youth conference, and first Open Space meeting, ever hosted by the Johnson Foundation at their Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Wingspread Conference Center. Thirty-five youth, ages 12-22, came to participate in the four-hour meeting. In true Open Space style, they self-organized and self-managed an agenda of 14 of their most important issues. They captured hand-written proceedings and typed a contact list so that they could keep in touch beyond the meeting.

Though their interests and proposed activities were later clustered into six major areas for future work, the dialogue in the closing circle focused on an immediate opportunity for action and recognition. A 23-site, all-Racine meeting was already scheduled for a Saturday, about six weeks later. With that in mind, the group decided to table their main interests and put all their efforts into getting as many of their peers out to represent the youth perspective at the all-community meetings day. Everyone pledged to contact at least three friends.

An estimated 1,000 people showed up to participate the multi-site dialogues, about 100 of those were youth. Another 3,000 people watched on TV. Afterward, 12 out of 100 people selected for the 'visioning committee' were under 25 years old.

This felt like the first success for the youth group, even as they continued to debate whether they were a 'process' or an 'organization.' By choosing to call themselves 'Youth Action,' they made sure that the debate didn't slow their activity. Another direct result of the first meeting was the emergence of a 'youth art' newsletter.

Going back to that first meeting, one of the major issues for the group was skate boarding. So when the development of a new skateboard park hit the newspapers, some members of the group worked to inject their interests into the discussions of donors, developers, planners and architects. In the end, the youth involvement made the front pages of the local papers and the park location has been moved from its proposed industrial park site, to a more desirable downtown park location.

In May, the group gathered for their second large-group session in Open Space and returned to work on their six main issues: art, internet access, the construction of a youth center, skate boarding sites, sexually transmitted diseases, and environmental issues. They also added an important seventh issue: growing their circle(s).

This second meeting was scheduled from 5:37p to 8:04p, in an effort to remind parental chauffeurs that "whenever it starts is the right time" and "when it's over it's over, and when it's not, it's not." (The first meeting had run over by about 20 minutes, for which a number of folks apparently took some heat.) At this meeting, the group grew to more than 60 members who

recommitted themselves to looking into similar projects in other cities and to finding adults and other resources within the Racine area.

When they reconvened in July, still in Open Space, they brought the fruits of their research and resourcing efforts and the group expanded to 75, including some new adult supporters. This meeting was also significant in that two girls in the group did the honors of opening the space. (Brian had facilitated the second open space meeting.)

These girls' leadership efforts and open space facilitation work with the group also earned them an invitation to attend a national conference sponsored by the YMCA Earth Service Corps (a cutting-edge youth led, adult supported, environmental- and service-learning program). There, they knocked the socks off of an impressive gathering of youth leaders and adult supporters. Folks were so interested in their stories and successes with Open Space, that a block of time was cleared in the conference schedule so that the girls could demonstrate Open Space Technology. They opened a small space there for the 100+ participants...a little too small a space, actually, for one breakout group that focused on 'race relations,' which could have gone on much longer than the scheduled time available.

Currently, it seems that this group is becoming an important cluster of activity within the overall Sustainable Racine effort. They expect to keep meeting formally, in Open Space, every two months or so, with lots of informal, supporting conversations in between. A special meeting with an architect for their proposed youth center is also in the works, with the support of the Sustainable Racine project office. Finally, efforts also are being made to establish a Racine Chapter of the YMCA Earth Service Corps.

This story's come a long way from that cold parking lot and Brian's three-paragraph invitation, last November. And it may be just beginning. If this is something you'd like to see happen in your community, email Michael Herman, who can connect you with Brian and the youth leaders in Racine. You might also be interested in visiting the YMCA Earth Service Corps (<http://www.yesc.org>) website or emailing YESC Training Director Charlie Murphy.

UPDATE: August, 1998... this just in from Brian, via email..."Good news--open space as taught to Earth Service Corps people by Dana and Becky replicates itself. I heard from a woman today who has used it several times in Minneapolis! Funny. As in funny-cool, not funny-ha ha..."

UPDATE: May, 1999... In April, 1999, three youth leaders attended one day of the Chicago Open Space Training Workshop, where they shared their learnings and questions with other leaders. This helped them prepare for a presentation they made at the National Town Hall Meeting on Sustainability, in Detroit, Michigan, in May, where they shared their stories and did a short demonstration of the Open Space Tech process. Work continues on the development of their YESC chapter, currently the largest chapter yet established.

UPDATE: 2001 or so... In the process of cleaning up the <http://www.openspaceworld.org> training event calendar, which is open to practitioners around the world to post training workshop info, though only a few of the most experienced facilitators worldwide actually do post there, I recently discovered that one of the girls was running a weekend OST training workshop. How satisfying it was to see her posting her training right in there with Harrison Owen, OST originator, and other master facilitators. That one four-hour summit meeting just keeps rippling.

UPDATE: 2008 or so... I get a call one Saturday morning from Brian, who's just heard from Morgan, one of the three young leaders. She called to share that she was opening space at a large regional conference that morning, focused on issues and opportunities for ending the death penalty.

Finally, here is the original invitation that was distributed by hand and by bulletin board postings at schools and youth centers.

Sustainable Racine - Community Renewal Project - Racine Wisconsin

What Would the Racine Region Look Like If Young People Helped Shape a Sustainable Future?

Sustainable Racine is an initiative to create a better future for the Racine region. Young people, like all others, have significant roles to play, many of which are still to be created. Many civically active adults know youth involvement and participation are important. However, few are very successful in inviting it.

Sustainable Racine has begun with a committed group of volunteers, mostly adults. It is time to grow the circle. How can you help Sustainable Racine be successful in involving all kinds of young people in building a more sustainable Racine?

Please join a group of young leaders to help them design a strategy.

We'll meet at The Johnson Foundation's Wingspread conference center, 33 East Four Mile Road on Thursday, December 11, 1997. We'll start at 4pm and end promptly at 8pm. Dinner will be served.

Because space is limited to the first 50 who respond, please call Brian Reilly at The Johnson Foundation at... to reserve your space before December 5th.

Co-sponsored by: Racine Community Coalition for Youth - Sustainable Racine - Univ. of Wisconsin-Parkside's Center for Community Partnerships - Youth as Resources - The Johnson Foundation

What Else Has Happened in Open Space?

After 30 years and 100,000+++ meetings and events, the better question might be: "What has NOT happened in Open Space?" That said, here are some frequently shared stories:

The City of Albuquerque launched, in 2016, a set of public conversations to support the largest transportation investments in the city's history, to reshape their main downtown thoroughfare (a section of historic Route 66), AND the simultaneous rewrite of the zoning codes in that area. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to leverage \$3 billion in public spending into perhaps \$10 billion in new economic development activity. They began with three public meetings in Open Space, combined with local facilitator training and coaching. In the midst of old and active political battles, the first three sessions gathered concerned citizens from around the city, for open, mostly civil, conversations. This surfaced a framework for ongoing dialogue, balancing and connecting history and preservation with new economic development, and community engagement with various social justice imperatives. GreaterCentralAve.com

The Chicago Community Trust and a number of co-sponsoring activist organizations used [OpenSpace](#) for the first Illinois Food Security Summit, a 200-person, 3-day conference that brought the full range of Illinois food security players into one room for the first time. The group included vegans and beef producers, organic farmers and chefs, food pantry volunteers and government agencies. They raised and addressed 70 different issues, identified a number of immediate next steps, and established the Chicago-Area Food Policy Council to shepherd future activities. The story that still comes up over and over again from participants is that they continue to be amazed that so many different kinds people, who met there for the first time, are still talking — and are now working on dozens of large and small, old and new projects together, including several more statewide summits. See also [Proceedings](#) and [FoodSummitStory](#). **UPDATE 2006:** ...asked to facilitate a follow-on, regional food summit held in Rockford/FourRivers area. **UPDATE 2016:** A Farmers Summit on community supported agriculture is planned for early 2017.

A global corporation convened a **Senior Executive Summit meeting in South Africa** for 120 leaders, to coincide with the announcement of an important legal ruling. At stake was fully 10% of revenues going forward, an even higher share of annual profits, and perhaps the beginning of the end of seemingly unshakable market dominance. No matter the legal outcome, their future would now require a tremendous change in mindset. During our meeting, the decision came down, and went against them. Pre-set market-facing plans were set in motion. The extended leadership group was already fully mobilized for making the shift from "big" to "smart." They identified 14 strategic imperatives, examined them fully in our first day of working sessions, used computer voting software to prioritize these issues for two rounds of action planning on the morning of day two, and ultimately fed all of that into functional team meetings on the second afternoon. Over the next year, they used open space successfully several more times and adopted "setting the PowerPoints aside" as a standard part of their executive forum events.

The Agile Software Alliance and Extreme Programming Universe ran one third of their annual, 300-person, international conference in Open Space and documented the proceedings in a new web format called a WikiWeb. Agile/XP is a new approach to software development that looks very much like OST. A number of people attending this conference learned enough from watching the process to go out and facilitate their own meetings in Open Space. **UPDATE 2011: The Agile Alliance Board** now does much of their face-to-face (board retreats) work in Open Space ways, that initial conference experiment has bloomed into many regional groups and regular conferences, called Agile Open(s), and an "Open Jam" space is still part of every annual conference.

Peoria School District 150 held a three-evening, 200-person summit meeting, in the midst of post-911 budget cuts and other major change issues, to create a community-wide vision and set new priorities for revitalizing their school system. 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. [Website](#) | [Proceedings](#)

Jewish in America: The Conversation, a new program initiated by The Jewish Week, the largest American Jewish newspaper. The two-day summit retreat, held at the Aspen Meadows Institute, offered a safe and creative environment for 75 American Jews who are leaders or potential leaders in their respective fields to talk about the future of Jewish life in this country and what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century. Participants came from a wide span of religious, political and generational perspectives, but shared a common love for the Jewish people, its history, survival and advancement. They met, talked, prayed, imagined and planned together. More at... [TheConversation](#) (website) and [TheConversationNews](#) (news reports). Using what they learned in that first event, organizers have continued "The Conversation" as an annual Open Space conference they run without any need for my ongoing support.

Transforming Philanthropy is an initiative that began with the [GivingConference](#), hosted with Phil Cubeta at [GiftHub](#), which brought together philanthropists, weblog publishers, financial advisors, and community organizers. A core group then moved to [OmidyarNetwork](#) and convened a number of O.net members summits. Some of the people at the first of those summits went on to organize [RecentChangesCamp](#), which connected software technologists and community leaders and activists (see [OregonianNewspaper](#)). All of these summits have been 3-day meetings, attended by 40-120 people, and run completely in [OpenSpace](#). At least three new conferences are now being planned for 2006. [Update May 2006](#). [Ted Ernst](#) facilitated another in this lineage, O.net Uganda, 2007 and later introduced WikiSym to meeting in [OpenSpace](#). Theresa Williamson took [OpenSpace](#) back to her work running [CatalyticCommunities](#) in Rio de Janeiro. **UPDATE 2011:** See [RecentChangesCamp](#) which has been a great success story, in its own right, now having been repeated on three continents since 2005. Beyond this, results flowing from [RecentChangesCamp](#), WikiSym's shift to Open Space, and other Giving Conference beginnings get harder and harder to track and record — which is just great.

Peaceful Development Organizers in Kathmandu, Nepal, held a one-day introduction to [OpenSpace](#) for about 20 students and staff at a local college. Based on the success of that day, they held a second day for more than 40 community organizers and facilitators, which set the stage for a first annual 4-day, national conference and leadership training program on peaceful development and the future of Nepal. Funded by the Open Space Institute USA, it enabled seventy-five community leaders from every part of Nepal used and learned [AppreciativeInquiry](#) and [OpenSpace](#). [NepalConferenceSummary](#) | [NepalTrainingSummary](#)
UPDATES: When a thousand year old sacred "gate" was destroyed later, in the course of civil unrest and rebellion, in the village of one of my colleagues there, he wrote to say that he was organizing an Open Space on rebuilding the gate. Later still, when the Maoists rejoined the government and the new government was formed, my colleagues wrote again, to say that they were working toward an Appreciative Inquiry + Open Space meeting for the newly formed 600-member Constituent Assembly (national legislature).

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 that for the middle school students. The statewide suicide prevention hotline was up and running within weeks of the conference. The conference in Fairbanks was followed by a 2-day OST training and practice workshop, attended by about 60 youth and adults. Six months later, they reported that they were holding 1-3 OST meetings per week, in and around Fairbanks.

Deep Earth Academy, with National Science Foundation support, rewrote the book on informal ship-to-shore science education. The [JOIDES-Resolution](#) (JR) is an international research drilling ship, managed like other joint science stations in space or antarctica, and the source of perhaps 60% of everything we know about climate change. The [Deep Earth Academy](#) works to translate the science done aboard the JR into classrooms, museums, and other learning places. With planning grant funding from the NSF, DEA gathered 55 scientists, educators, media experts, and other specialists for 2.5 days in open space — to rewrite the book on informal

ship2shore science education and draft a set of collaborative, synergistic pilot project proposals. Participants raised 35 issues, explored them in depth, prioritized all of it, and then began drafting specific project proposals. We posted all of their notes in a [new project website](#) which will be used for the next two years as the proposals are funded, the pilot projects are implemented, the outcomes evaluated and a much larger implementation grant. **UPDATE Fall, 2013:** The organization chose to fund four of eleven proposed pilots, all of which have been developed successfully. Next up, implementation grant submission early 2014.

In 1991, US West used OST for a 3-day, 175-person labor-management summit meeting to resolve escalating contract conflicts, **avert a major strike**, recover from a damaging flood, and prepare themselves for telecom mergers and the buildout of the internet. Labor pushed for the meeting, but both sides were well-served by the results.

AT&T **fast-tracked 10-months of design and planning** work into ONE 2-day contractor summit when they were offered the opportunity to build their pavillion in the center of the 1996 Olympic Village in Atlanta. Twenty-five contractors came into the meeting with lots of difficult history and a blank page to design from. They produced a superb design, a full set of working drawings, and managed to have quite a bit of fun in the process.

Lansing Community College gathered 145 people, from every part of the organization, for a three-day **strategic planning meeting**. In about an hour, they created a 70-workshop conference to address the most important issues facing their college and the surrounding community. When it was all over, they had identified 10 to 20 immediate action steps, in each of seven strategic areas, and captured it all in a 150-page report. They all left the meeting with a copy of that report in hand, next steps in mind, and the ability to explain those next steps to their co-workers throughout the college.

Some years ago, TransNet, the national transportation company of South Africa used OST to help build community connections and lay the groundwork for **cooperative business activities** in the midst of post-apartheid confusion. One meeting brought 300 senior transportation executives together. Another gathered 80 community choir leaders.

At a time of similarly-intense confusion and conflict, peace activists and organizers in **Jerusalem and Palestine** are working together to bring people together in Open Space.

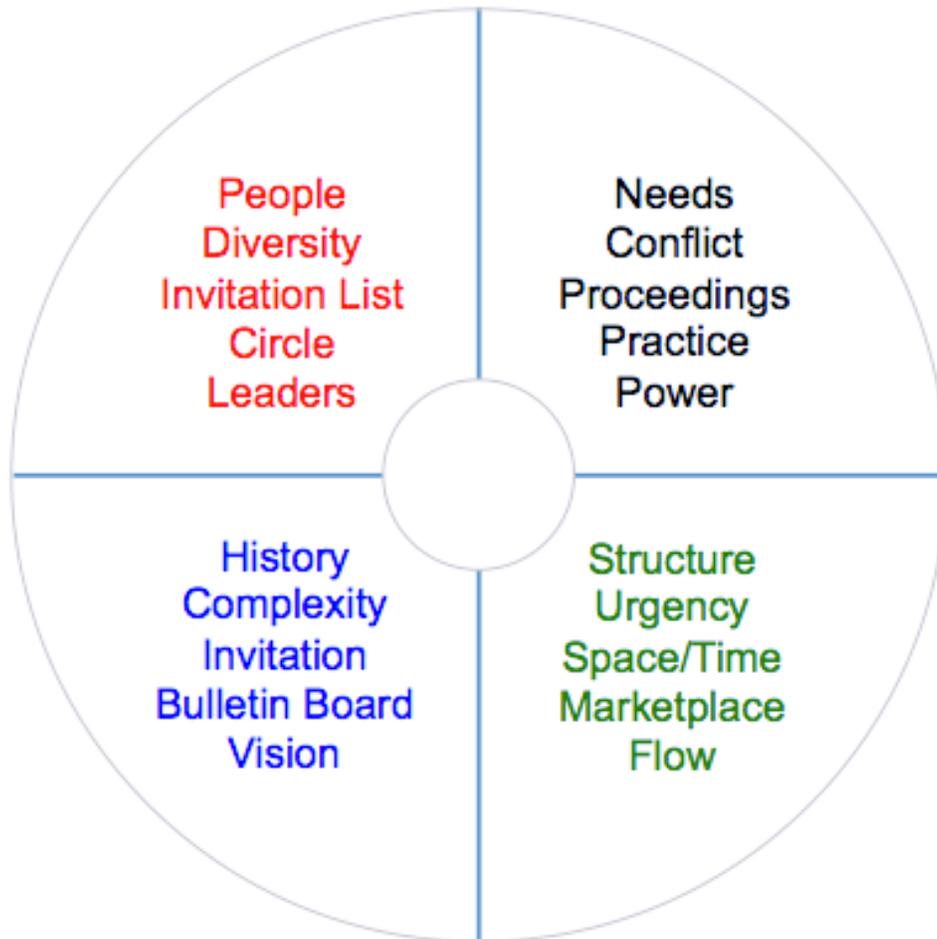
Rockport Shoes held a 3-day, 300-person **company-wide strategy** conference in one of their warehouses and stumbled onto a couple of brand new product lines that netted \$18 million in their first year of sales. The idea came from the security guard and made the previously quite skeptical CFO very happy.

Wesley Urban Ministries in Hamilton, Ontario, adopted OST as the basis for **organizing and managing** their whole, 100-person staff. Over the next 3 years, they increased services delivered by 50%, with no added resources. On top of that, they had turnover of exactly 0%, in an environment known for high stress and burnout.

In one of many OST events at Boeing, engineers used OST to **streamline operations and simplify communications** across the myriad groups responsible for designing and building pressurized airplane doors. The conference was run simultaneously in Seattle and Wichita, its two major door-assembly sites. Another conference brought the full array of human resources functions together to synergize efforts on "people issues."



Talking About Open Space



The Genesis of Open Space Technology

Reprinted from Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, by Harrison Owen

How Open Space Technology came to be was not a matter of careful planning and thoughtful design. It began out of frustration, almost as a joke.

In 1983, I had occasion to organize an international conference for 250 participants. It took me a full year of labor. By the time I had finished with all the details, frustrations and egos (mine and others'), that go with such an event, I resolved never to do such a thing again. This resolution was confirmed at the conclusion of the conference, when it was agreed by one and all (including myself) that although the total event had been outstanding, the truly useful part had been the coffee breaks. So much for one year's effort arranging papers, participants, and presenters. The only thing that everybody liked was the one thing I had nothing to do with: the coffee breaks. There had to be a message here.

My question was a simple one. Was it possible to combine the level of synergy and excitement present in a good coffee break, with the substantive activity and results characteristic of a good meeting? And most of all, could the whole thing be done in less than a year? The line of inquiry I choose to follow took some interesting turns, but essentially it started with the notion that if I could identify certain basic mechanisms of meeting, or human gathering, it might be possible to build them into an approach that would be so simple that it could not fail and so elemental that it might possess the natural power of a good coffee break.

With these thoughts in mind, I recalled an occasion* in the late '60s when I was working as a photojournalist in a small West African village by the name of Balamah located in the interior of Liberia. One of the high points of my visit was participation in the rites of passage for the boys. As you might imagine, this was a major celebration. It occurred every seven years, and was the moment when the village inducted its male youth as full fledged citizens. No longer children, they were expected to assume adult roles and responsibilities. The actual celebration continued for four days with all sorts of rituals and other activities. Through it all there was amazingly nothing, so far as I could tell, that looked or acted like a planning committee, not during the event or prior to its occurrence. Nevertheless 500 people managed to manage themselves for four days in a highly organized, satisfactory, and I have to say, enjoyable fashion. How could that be?

I do not claim to have the whole answer to the mystery of Balamah, but at least part of their secret lay in the fact that the village (like all West African villages) was laid out in a circle, with an open space in the middle. The chief's house, and the house of some of the important elders bordered what, in an American or European town, would have been the village square. But here it was a circle, and I think that difference is important.

My experience tells me that the circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication. There is no head or foot, higher or lower, simply people being with people face to face. After all, we do not have a square of friends and on a cold winter's night it is nice to be part of the family circle. Place people in rows (classroom or theater-style) and they all face the source of power and authority, and it is clear who will talk and who must listen. In squares and rectangles, there is separation which may be useful to keep combative parties apart as in negotiation, but genuine, open, free communication tends to be at a minimum. Circles create communication.

The celebration in Balamah occurred as an ordered progression from the periphery of the town to the center of the circle, and back again. Dancers, drummers, horn players, religious and political leaders, all gathered in the outlying sections of the town, and then swirled to the center in kaleidoscope of color, rhythm and song. The circle came alive with ceremony, speeches, and above all, dance. Intensity rose to peak, and the peaked again, until at last it ebbed as villagers flowed outward to their homes. It was as if the village were breathing, and just as no planning committee is required for respiration, none was needed in Balamah either. It seemed to me that in the geometry of the circle and the rhythm of breath I had found two of my basic mechanisms of meeting.

If the circle and breath provide the fundamental shape and dynamics, then we need only some way of establishing content and determining periodicity (time table) in order to create our conference in the coffee-break mode. Effective meetings, after all, deal with some issues in a certain order. The alternative is noise and confusion.

Two additional mechanisms suggested themselves from the life of Balamah. The community bulletin board and the village market place. The bulletin board provides a convenient, low-tech means for identifying what people are interested in. The market place provides the mechanism for bringing interests together in an orderly way. Both mechanisms are so ancient and ingrained in the human experience that explaining the rules is quite unnecessary. And of course if the village market place has not been a part of your experience, a shopping mall will do.

In theory, given a circle, breath, the bulletin board, and the market place, we should have the effective ingredients for high levels of productive meeting, without the interminable planning sessions and an army of on-site facilitators, to say nothing of a resident meeting management team. The question remained: Would theory translate into reality?

MH: It's worth noting that in the twenty-some years I've known and worked with Harrison Owen, I've never once heard him claim to have "invented" Open Space. He regularly insists quite the opposite, that he simply "rediscovered" it, in the bottom of a second martini.

After being cajoled by friends into agreeing to organize another of the large conferences he mentions above, he'd retreated to the bar to find a way out of his predicament. Two martinis later, Open Space emerged. The following year, the Third Annual Symposium on Organization Transformation (OT-3) ran in Open Space. It wasn't tried with real humans, as opposed to the consultant types at OT, until several years later, when the first patents for nylon were expiring and DuPont needed a breakthrough like they'd only seen a few times in the company's history. Harrison proposed Open Space and the genie got out of the bottle.

A few years after that, Harrison and some colleagues organized a conference in Goa, India, the theme of which was "The Business of Business is Learning." When the main organizer was interviewed by the Indian press, they asked him what they called this approach. He answered, "Open Space..." and then added, "Technology," because "Open Space" didn't sound important enough. The longer name stuck when The New York Times picked up the story.

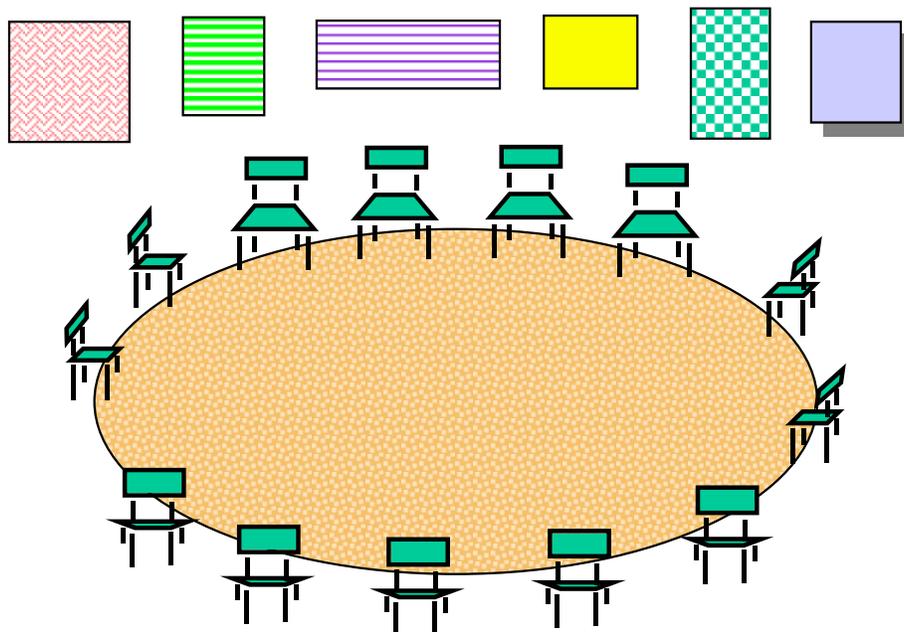
It's sometimes useful to distinguish between the Open Space we live in, the emergent and chaotic reality Harrison rediscovered, and Open Space Technology the meeting methodology he proposed to more easily align with it.

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 30+ 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 2000+ people — 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.



When and Why?

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.

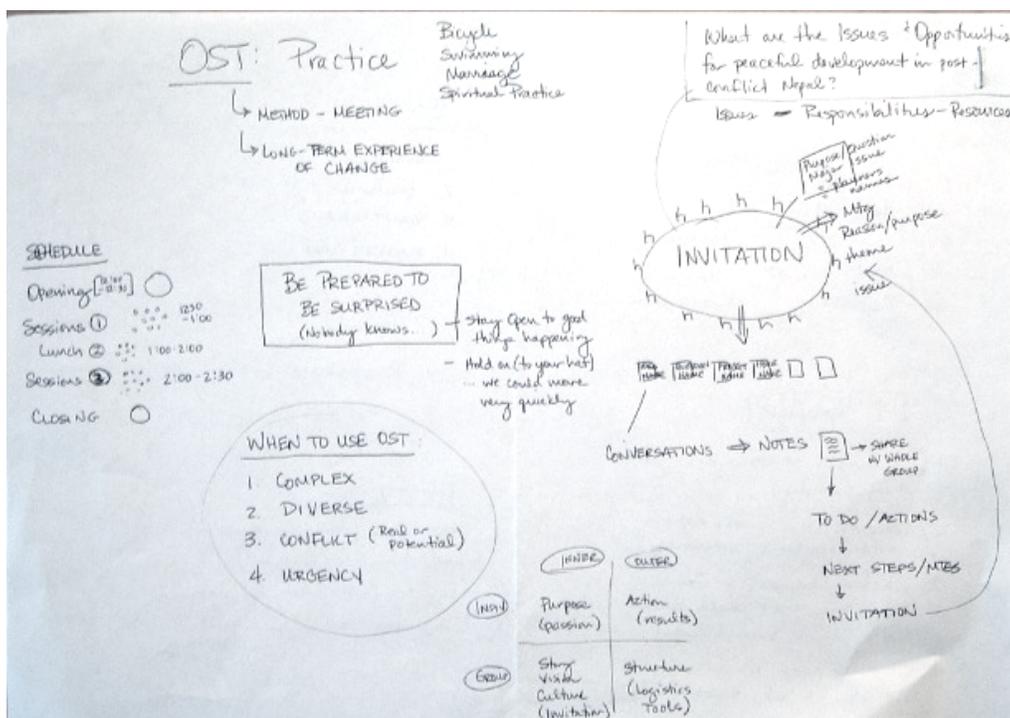
And, while Open Space is known for its apparent lack of structure and welcoming of surprises, it turns out that the Open Space meeting or organization is actually very structured — but that structure is so perfectly fit to the people and the work at hand, that it goes unnoticed in its proper role of supporting (not blocking) best work. In fact, the stories and work plans 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.

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. 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 and implemented faster 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.

The good news, and the bad news, is that it works. Good news because it gets people and work 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 sometimes vice versa — but that's how life is. In short, then, Open Space brings life back to organization and organizations back to life.



Working in Open Space: A Guided Tour

In times of turbulent change, spirited 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 individual control seems to be slipping away, it's never been more important to be stay connected within and between teams, work groups and whole organizations.

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

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 (old friends you haven't met yet). 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."

Connecting

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 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.

Inviting

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.

Focusing

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.

Self-Organizing

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.

Action

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 bumblebee'd or butterfly'd 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.

Results

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...

- (1) identified, explored and addressed all of the most important issues,
- (2) gathered new ideas, resources and people and connected them to these issues,
- (3) documented all of this in somewhere between 5 and 500 pages of notes and next steps,
- (4) established strategic themes, clear priorities, immediate actions steps
- (5) distributed all of this information to a (re)energized and action-ready community of people
- (6) empowered them to tell that story to the rest of the organization, community, or world, and

(7) seeded cycles of invitation that will continue to pull people into places where they can maximize their own learning and contribution.

Transforming

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.



Open Space Everywhere

Whether you're just learning about Open Space, have some experience as a participant or facilitator, or even when planning your first Open Space meeting, the patterns described below can guide your work in Opening Space and help you skillfully adapt Harrison Owen's *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* anywhere.

You can see these patterns turn up in stories of open space events. Looking across these three groups, you might also notice that the four conditions loosely inform the planning considerations and ultimately the mechanisms of the actual meeting. The condition of diversity, for instance, is reflected in the invitation list and honored when marketplace gives everyone the space to chart their own course in the work.

Initial Conditions – When to Open

Open Space is an inviting alternative to the usual meeting, conference or summit format, in organizations, communities, alliances and networks, when these conditions are present – and especially when levels are high and/or rising:

- **Complexity** – when the question to be solved is bigger than any one person, group or area of expertise will be able to fully address.
- **Diversity** – when successful resolution of the issue or question necessarily must include input and action from a wide variety of different kinds of stakeholders and/or with a wide diversity of interests.
- **Conflict** – real or potential, when there's real passion in the situation, meaning people care enough to fight for or about something.
- **Urgency** – when the time for decisions and action was yesterday.

Open Space will work with almost any question and any group that cares about that question, but it works even better when things get challenging in these ways.

A Simple Plan – Get Ready to Open

Open Space is a practice in finding one more thing to NOT do. Here are the essential considerations, without any requirement that they be accomplished any certain way.

- **Invitation** – There needs to be some reason to meet, an important purpose, a gap in what's known and some need (according to the conditions above) to close that gap. Usually this involves words, often they're typed and shared online, but that's not required. The main thing is that people get the message about why, where and when to show up – and have the OPTION to show up or not.
- **Invitation List** – This is diversity of stakeholders in action. Anyone who's input and energy is needed, anyone who MIGHT care enough to show up, to learn or contribute, should be considered for inviting.
- **Space/Time Logistics** – This usually includes markers, papers, tape, chairs, a meeting space with a roof, flipcharts and devices – but really good meetings and events have happened without each and all of these things. The barest essential is a place and a time to meet, even if the place is virtual.

- **Products** – This usually means a report of some kind, the aggregated notes from all the sessions. Sometimes it's enough to walk away with a story, or a list of takeaways identified in the closing circle. Other times, you might walk out of a meeting with working drawings for a building. The point here is to plan to have on hand, in the room, whatever tools or information are needed to produce the things you want.

There are always a lot of things we COULD do before any meeting, but what really matters is an issue of importance, a group that cares, a place and time or other platform to meet, and way to capture the results. That's it.

Basic Mechanisms – Practice Space

Here we look at the basic mechanisms at work in Open Space. These are forms that people everywhere understand and know how to operate. Again, offered without any need to specify exactly how these things will be operationalized in any particular setting.

- **Invitation** – As used here, invitation includes some articulation of the conditions above, a purpose or question of import, a list of invitees, a place and time to meet, bundled up and offered as the option and request to participate. Invitation is also every breakout topic that's announced and every breakout report is an invitation to some kind of action. Inviting is something to do and to aspire to be. It reminds us to focus on purposes that matter and voluntary self-selection.
- **Circle** – No matter the actual shape, the circles let everyone see everyone else, and address everyone else. They let everyone know who's in and who's not. Circles support clear, but permeable, boundaries, belonging, commitment and communication. Circles create space for everything that matters: caring, connecting, sharing, learning, working, celebrating. Circles hold spirit and possibility – and share responsibility.
- **Bulletin Board** – One of the simplest ways to maximum information with minimum effort. However you do it, there needs to be some way to see all of the issues raised and all of the reports brought back. In non-reading cultures this might end up being a certain kind of story circle, virtually invisible. In online settings, the whole platform can look like bulletin board. Both allow for easy, open, many-to-many communication.
- **Marketplace** – This is about making room to move, for people to create the structures they need to support them in their work. Marketplaces, also called platforms in business-speak today, allow flow and open exchange, make working faster and easier, and give the right and the responsibility for managing their own learning and contributing, all in service of the shared purpose. Marketplaces support complex (not complicated) responses to complex situations. The clearer and more compelling the purpose, the easier it will be to make fewer limiting rules and support more emergent structures and active exchange. The trade-off for some people exerting less control, for letting people move and connect, might be everyone wasting less time on waiting, work arounds, compliance and cover-ups.
- **Breathing, Pulsation, Iteration, Practice** – This describes the easy movement between plenary sessions and breakouts, the iterative nature of having several rounds of breakouts, but also the realization that this new way of working might well take several iterations for a group to learn to maximize its potential. Open Space allows us to ask bigger questions and address bigger issues than normal meetings and organization can normally handle. That doesn't mean it's not going to take several rounds and ongoing practice to get the job done.
- **Storytelling** – It's all stories. An invitation is a story about what we want. The circle is a container for stories and bulletin board helps share them around. Stories are what we're trading in the marketplace. And the notes we capture, the stuff we take away, the stories we tell about what happened... are all fodder for the next invitation(s). Stories literally keep us,

and our work, going. When all else fails, invite some stories about what's good and right and working. Then open a little space to make more of that.

None of this is prescription or requirement. You don't need all these conditions for Open Space to work. There isn't any one way to plan a meeting, invite stakeholders, create a bulletin board or open a marketplace.

If you can't Open Space the way it's written up in Harrison Owen's OST User's Guide (book/html), just look for ways to bend the practices you have, in the direction of... invitation, circle, bulletin board, marketplace, and practice. Invite people into a purpose that matters, make the boundaries clear but permeable, open access to information and the tools to distribute it, give people as much room as possible to direct their own work, and look for ways to establish an easy rhythm and ongoing practice.

An Open World

Finally, if you look for these forms in the world, in the business press for instance, you might begin to suspect that we are, already, living and working in Open Space, no matter how big, how slow, or subtle, the patterns and movements. Wherever we are, we have only to point to the conditions, make a simple plan, and use these basic mechanisms to open some space. This can take many different forms, but the underlying patterns are everywhere the same. For instance...

In Haiti, John Engle and colleagues there developed a way of working in Open Space with non-readers/non-writers. The briefing is done with four skits, rather than posters. There are no markers and paper. Conveners simply stand up, one-by-one, announce their topics from the edge of the circle. When they've got enough topic for the first session, they repeat the topics and the conveners scatter. Everyone else follows, forming small groups around them. At the end of the session, they come back, tell their stories and announce another round of topics.

In Lean Coffee, small groups meet in coffee shops and other public places, to discuss some area of interest. The group writes their discussion topics on cards and spreads them out on the table. They prioritize them quickly by dot voting and then discuss them in series, in the order of importance. Each topic gets a short 7-10 minute timebox, with thumb voting on 3-5 minute extensions. It's possible but not common to break into parallel groups. It's been called, "How to do Open Space in an hour or so."

And, Agile software development looks a lot like making software in Open Space. All the most important features and functions are posted on a wall or in a software tool that allows for sorting, splitting, and prioritizing issues. There is a cadence of iterative meetings and a foundational acknowledgement of uncertainty, the illusion of control, the power of self-organization (autonomy bounded by transparency), and the need for adaptive rather than rigid planning. Agile methods are how software engineers deal with high levels of diversity, complexity, conflict and urgency in such projects, as well. Form teams, open a backlog, and get to work.

See the Additional Resources page for more Kindred Methods and Mash-ups.

Some Essential Elements of Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology (OST) can take many forms, shapes, sizes, etc. but there are a number of essential elements or characteristics that either support or manifest in really open space. Here are some of them...

The Energy of a Good Coffee Break – Most people know that the best part of traditional conferences is the coffee breaks. OST began as an experiment with running an entire 4-day conference as nothing more (and nothing less) than one large, perfectly and appropriately organized coffee break. The experiment has been largely successful!

Growing More of What Works – How do we design and implement (impose) self-organization? How do we teach responsibility? In the end, we can't and we don't. So much better, faster and easier to look for what's working and invite people to grow more of it. As we give our attention to what's working, we get more of it, and problems take care of themselves.

One More Thing to NOT Do – As in, one more thing to not do for people that they can do better, faster and more appropriately for themselves. As such, opening space becomes a practice in finding one more thing to not do. Every decision we make for people, often in the name of efficiency, narrows the space, limits the options, and erodes responsibility and ownership... All deadly for long-term effectiveness.

Passion Bounded by Responsibility – In the end, OST runs on exactly two things: passion and responsibility. Brainstorming and suggestion boxes are passion without responsibility, lots of "could do's" and "should do's" but not many "will do's." Mandates and assignments are responsibility without passion, a recipe for crummy work, crummy health, or both.

Appropriate Structure and Control – Some people like to say that Open Space is too unstructured. It is not. It is a perfectly, elegantly, intricately organized structure, created from "nothing" but initial conditions and sustained by the passion and responsibility of those in the space, who will always move, especially unconsciously, towards structure that is perfect for the moment, in every moment. In other words, order (and organization) need not be painful to be real and effective.

A Practice in Invitation, an Inviting Practice – The essence of OST is invitation. Invitation gathers people into the event, where they are further invited to post more invitations. The results and notes of the groups that gather around those smaller invitations are invitations to carry the work into the larger world. Practicing invitation...

Fully Present and Totally Invisible – The facilitator gives his/her full attention to the group, expanding awareness to gently hold the whole space, all of the people and issues, in a way that gives everyone and everything room to move and do what they need to do. It's a state of sensing and allowing everything to move while apparently doing nothing more than quietly picking up empty cups and otherwise tidying the place up.

Letting go... into Movement – OST is a simple, powerful way to get people, information and whole organizations moving. It's not so much about feeling good or talking tough, but that can happen. What it's really about is getting the most important things done in organization - done now and done well.

Conflict, Complexity, Urgency, Diversity – OST works best where conflict is present or possible (meaning people really care), things are complex, there is real diversity of players and the answer was needed yesterday. And the more of all of that you have, the better OST works. Go figure.

What do you really want to do? + Why don't you take care of it? – The highest form of OST facilitation practice is to turn back everything to the people. When confronted with a question,

respond with two: what do you really want to do? And why don't you take of it? Everything the facilitator does for a group is one less thing the group knows it can do for itself.

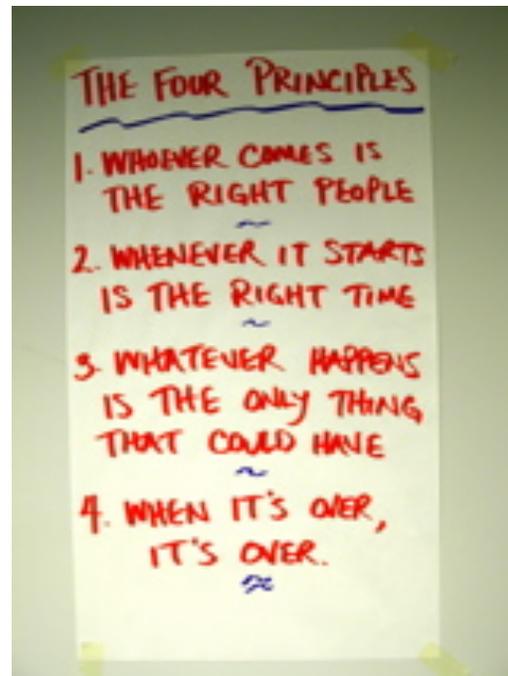
Circle, Bulletin Board, Marketplace, Breathing – The four basic mechanisms at work in Open Space, all of which are deeply familiar to most, if not all, humans. These are the structures that support purpose, vision, learning and action in any organization.

Invitation, Invitation List, Space/Time Logistics, Footprints – The four required inputs for meeting in Open Space... An important reason to gather (invitation), all those needed to address the issues (list), a place and a time to meet (spacetime logistics) and some support for real and/or ongoing impact (footprints) to show up.

Real Action, Beyond Buy-In – So much work in organization is done to get 'buy-in' and 'action.' In Open Space, buy-in happens before the meeting even starts, when people read the invitation and decide to attend. Action happens in the first hour when they take direct responsibility for their issues and passions. Everything else is gravy... A power that most organizations only dream about. Open Space makes it real, and even normal.

The Law of Two Feet – You (and only you) know if you are learning and/or contributing. This is a law like the law of gravity. You can choose to challenge it or not, but it's safer to work with it. And when you notice that you are not learning or contributing, it is both your right and your responsibility to move somewhere else. When everyone in the room is maximizing their learning and contribution, amazing things can happen.

The Four Principles – Whoever comes is the right people (the people who care), whatever happens is the only thing that could have (don't fight with what's happened, keep moving and looking ahead), when it starts is the right time (spirit and creativity don't run on the clock, look and feel for readiness, instead of watching the clock), when it's over it's over (and if it's not over, keep going). These aren't prescriptive, they are the results of thousands of little experiments. They are descriptions of how almost anything works... When it really works.



Space Invaders – Occasionally someone will claim or dominate the space that belongs to everyone. Sometimes leaders or planners can't resist filling up the space with pre-determined agendas and plenary presentations. Sometimes a participant will try to control a session or some part of the larger agenda. Other times, a participant might get excited and try to "organize" something that "everyone" should do. The law of two feet takes care of many occurrences, but if it breaks down, the facilitator seeks ways to remind and re-establish it. This might be as simple as proposing a break and leaving the room, giving others an option to follow. Other times it might be diplomatically deflecting a leader's or sponsor's request to "do something" about some discomfort framed as process breakdown. The only way to break open space is to try to drive, contain or control it.

Voluntary Self-Selection – The opposite of mandate, coercion and imposition – and the functional essence of invitation. Everybody retains their own agency. Everybody gets to choose for themselves.

Open Space is Inviting



Open Space as Practice: Inviting and Hosting

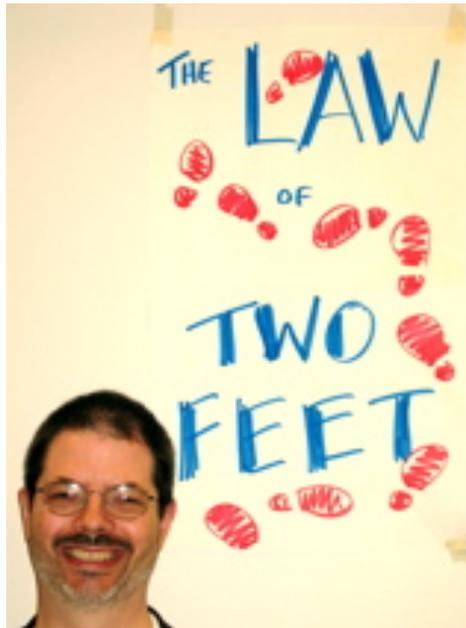
I teach Open Space Technology as the skillful practice of invitation in organization, for the purpose of getting the most important things done, in the easiest possible ways. Bulletin board and circle are tools. Their skillful application and adaptation is a practice: experiment, examine, and repeat.

In the following pages, we get down to the details of Open Space as a practice, with heavy emphasis on the Invitation. In complex adaptive systems, like organizations and meetings, initial conditions make a big difference.

We'll use the term Invitation in two ways. First, the Invitation is the story of whatever it is that you'd like people to get together and get done. Second, it is the package of that story, addressed to a specific group of people, specifying a Space and Time to gather, and usually some explanation of the longer time frame that our work will address.

This section might help you sort out what is most important for yourself and/or your organization or community and put it into an Invitation. If you share that around in any of your usual ways, many of the "right" people are very likely to show up at the place and time you designate. Once they gather, with a common passion for the issue(s) you raised, most of the logistics get very simple. People get down to work quickly and naturally, to address the issues at hand, the issues you raised. As their conversations progress, strategic "action" happens.

The approach outlined here works equally well with any meeting, retreat, workshop, conference or summit event, regardless of size, people or purpose – with or without Open Space Technology. We've used it for hybrid events, as well, held *partially* in Open Space, the only difference being that those events don't have as much room for people to work – directly and immediately – on the most important issues.



Preparing for Open Space: An Essential Shift and Some Practical Issues

Sometimes the best preparation for Open Space is a messy process of deeper churning, challenging inquiry, and iterative conversation. It's not just the ideas that get churned and changed, it's the people, too. As with other kinds of work, it helps to loosen up a bit in the beginning.

Significant change can and does happen before the meeting or event even happens – and will likely continue, in subtle ways, long beyond the closing circle. Understanding that we are immersed in an ongoing process and flow, rather than simply planning an isolated event, is an essential shift in itself. After that, we have only to keep up the practice of opening, inviting, supporting, and making – more of what works.

In the beginning, it's helpful to name four or five big chunks of practical preparation for an Open Space meeting. Sometimes the first two areas get rolled into one, other times the input of a leadership group is so important that it is addressed as a distinct piece of work. Either way, these are the things to work out:

The Invitation is simply the vehicle (likely a document) that delivers the BIG question, purpose or theme to be addressed, riding atop the cleanest possible story of (1) what is happening, (2) how we got here, (3) what is needed (to make or do or discuss) now, (4) when and where we will gather (to make or do or discuss it). This might be as short as four sentences, or as long as... it takes. Less is usually more. What is important is that when people on the Invitation List read it, they hear the history, happenings, and needs as their own. This is how they know that they belong in the gathering when it happens. The key to writing the invitation is to speak the truth and ask, very carefully, for what is most important at this moment in the history of the group or organization. Good invitations often mix and balance grandness and achievability, passion and practicality.

Special Inputs and Decisions from a leadership group can point out for invitees (1) latest data on conditions, needs and expectations, (2) strategic directions and priorities, (3) assets and resources already available for consideration or application, and/or (4) acknowledged boundaries, obstacles or otherwise non-negotiable parameters within which work must somehow progress.

The Invitation List should include everyone, yes everyone, who might have a stake or interest or contribution to make to the purpose. Anyone willing to show up, learn and contribute to the work can be welcomed.

Program Logistics includes the place, total time, schedule, materials and any sort of food plans. All of these things need to be scoped, scaled, and selected in alignment with the purpose stated in the Invitation and the people on the Invitation List.

Sustainability and follow-through depend primarily on the support provided, assuming the purpose and intention was some sort of *action*. No support, no sustained spirit -- and probably no *action*. Some important supports include documentation, next meeting dates, funding or other resources, and sometimes facilitation support for future meetings. Support lets people keep connecting as long as it takes to make good on the purpose.

Crafting the Invitation: Getting to the Heart of What Matters

Consider the following, not as essay questions but rather like the headings of bulleted lists. What a good invitation needs is the facts, short and sweet, the most important things, that everybody already knows, all swept together in one place, for easy review and action.

What is the "purpose" of this particular meeting/workshop? And for what time period? What qualifies as "action" and what is required in an "action plan?" If the purpose is not "action" then what is that "purpose"? Vision? Strategy? Structuring? Support? Healing conflict? What kinds of things will be accepted as successfully satisfying the "purpose"?

What are the best things we've ever done in this group, that have any connection to the "purpose"? Are they recent enough to be held up as examples to be repeated or exceeded?

What are the current conditions that matter? Survey data? Anecdotal data? Priorities? De-prioritizations? Current crisis? Upcoming changes?

What are the things we know we want/need to do/have/create now or next? What activities must be created or continued regardless of any current crisis, conflicts or shifts?

Who are the people needed to get it done? How soon can they clear the day(s) needed?

What resources and supporting structures are available to leverage? Coaching programs, communications tools, internal facilitators, volunteers, meeting spaces, budgets, etc.?

What sacred cows, "dead mooses" and other lines are not to be crossed? What is still unspeakable or immovable here?

When will we meet, and where? (days, times, location(s))

When will we know that this process is really working? In the meeting? After the meeting? One month later? Four months later? Next year? Next survey? And how will we know... at each point?

What documentation is required from the meeting? Who will use it? Who will distribute it and to whom? Will it be the beginning of a longer record, a formal report, or a one-time announcement?

What support and resources are required for the most important change(s) desired to actually happen? If not available, can they be acknowledged? Invited? Created in the working sessions of the workshop? Who will personally support the ongoing process?

What else is going on in the world, in the community or organization, and in individual situations that seems to matter now?

It's not necessary to answer all of these or answer any of them at length. Picking three or four of them, answering each with just a few lines, and running those answers together in the same order as the questions appear above usually makes a pretty good start.

If you get stuck, set it aside for awhile. Don't churn and dig yourself into a hole. When the spirit and ideas flow easily again, write that down. If I crunch a bit on questions like this one day, set it aside, and pay attention the next morning, I often find the crisp clarity I'm looking for. The clarity and flow and ease we bring to crafting the invitation seeds the same in everything that follows.

Crafting the Invitation: So What's the BIG Idea?

Open Space (and any other approach that really does invite and support meaningful and positive change) is fundamentally, on the part of leaders, sponsors and facilitator(s), a *decision and commitment to movement*. The theme tells everyone where to go(!).

The whole of business strategy really comes down to two simple questions: "Where do we go?" and "How do we get there?" The first is for leadership to answer; the second is for everyone. Leaders name the mountains; organizations find the way to get up.

In the BIG PRINT of an Open Space invitation, leaders name the theme. They point in a strategic direction – in a few words that everyone understands. Then they ask the big, open question: How will we get there? What are the issues and opportunities for...? The Open Space format gives everyone room – and responsibility – for scrambling toward the answers.

The theme and question are the heart of an Open Space invitation, just as the purpose is the heart of the meeting. The theme is the simplest possible statement of the largest possible purpose. These give form and scope and direction to the meeting. Everything that happens follows as answer to the central theme and question posed by the leader(s).

The good news is that it's just that simple. The bad news is that it's just that simple. I defer to Harrison Owen, originator of the Open Space approach:

...I doubt that there is any such thing as a 'generic good theme.' But I have found that there are some general criteria:

- Short. Anything more than a half dozen words is usually too long.
- Always stated as a question. Questions open space. Statements close it.
- Stated in the language of the people. Every organization or group of people has its own special language and code words. The theme should be stated in that language/words. This is one reason why a great theme for one group will automatically be a dud for another.
- Cuts to the heart of the matter. There is a place for diplomatic statement, but it's not here. Verbal obfuscation rarely arouses passion -- and you want a lot of passion.

A really good theme will be so specific to that group that others will simply not notice it – or if they do notice, then not be inspired by it. My favorite came from the USWEST Open Space done years ago...

USWEST (the phone company) was in disastrous shape. Everybody knew it, and this was particularly true in the (US) State of Arizona. Theme was: *Fixing Arizona?* Believe me, attendance was not a problem. We were turning them away. As for passion and conflict – we had all that in spades. [Which is exactly what is needed to succeed!]

Lot of folks spend a lot of time working on the theme with the client. I can see the sense of that, as it provides an essential opportunity to explore the issues and, not incidentally, to be very sure that the client (group) really wants to take the trip and is prepared for genuine open conversation with no attachment to specific outcomes. All to the good. But when it comes to creating the theme I have found that (typically) five minutes will do it.

If the reasons for the Open Space meeting are hot, bothersome, exciting, anxiety-producing – the essential words are usually right on the tip of everybody's tongue. They need only be captured. And if there is no heat, no bother, no excitement, no anxiety – then why bother with the Open Space? Likelihood is that it will be Blah.

Once again, Opening Space is fundamentally, on the part of leaders, sponsors and facilitator(s), a *decision and commitment to movement*. Naming the direction isn't usually the hard part. The real daring of leadership is in making the decision and commitment to *invite* some significant slice of *everyone* to deal with IT directly – *and now*. But if not now, then when? And if not the leader, then who?



Crafting the Invitation: What Do You Want Anyone to Do About It?

Once the Heart is opened, the Theme clearly stated, and the Tone and Commitment resolved, the actual Invitation document is a short, practical story that includes all of that, AND... literally asks people to do things. The first and most important action requested is *showing up* – at a specific meeting place and time. Here are some other possible requests:

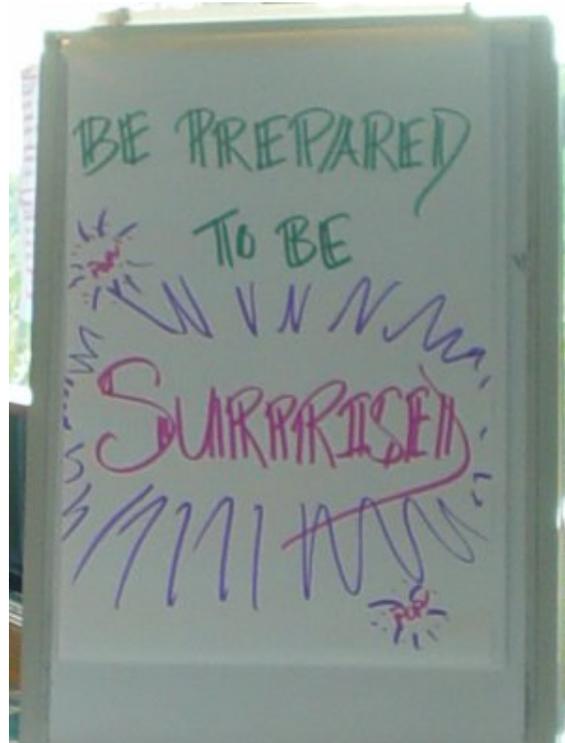
- Notice what is happening, why this is time to act
- Review survey data, anecdotal data, priorities put forward by leaders
- Talk to others – what are the most important issues and priorities?
- Consider actions needed in your local group or area
- Identify resources that you have and that you need (budget)
- Identify needs for support (people) to address the purpose
- Understand "purpose," and its satisfaction, as objective of the day
- Bring laptop, cellphone, data, notes, and have somebody(ies) on call
- Be prepared for additional input on priorities from leaders (possibly)
- Expect a wide open format for the day, expect to set your own agenda, connect it with others, and commit to the specific next steps that you see as most important
- Expect to take direct responsibility for the things they really want and care about
- Commit to staying for whole program. Sometimes some sort of "schedule" or explanation of format is included, but that is not required
- Consider this as first of a series of (quarterly?) sessions for doing most important work that can't or won't happen anywhere else

The finished Invitation ultimately embodies (and invites) the resolution of all of the purpose, people, logistical, and sustainability questions listed earlier. It captures the essence of the group's history, current conditions, strategic needs, performance indicators, expected products, and all of the other conversations that are leading up to the meeting.

Once it's finished, the hardest (often "invisible") work is done and the "real work" of distributing the invitation, registering participants, procuring of materials, and perhaps developing ongoing support can begin. Notice that the latter of these tasks *could be* specified as *all or part* of what participants are invited to do and create.

More often than not, the invitation document is not the real invitation. It's only a prop for the inviting conversations that leaders and planners will have with the people on the invitation list. The invitation document might go out as a simple letter, poster, or email message. Then many invitees will want to know "...yes, but, what is going to happen?"

The only honest answer is, "We really don't know, except that we're all going to do as much as we can to address and resolve all of the most important issues." And the essential question back to invitees is: "What do you think we should be focusing on now?" This is the real invitation, the real opening, and every invitee can be actively assured that if they come ready and willing to work on the issue(s) they've named, that these things can and will be addressed. The next page offers some examples of inviting language.



Crafting the Invitation: Some Opening, Inviting (Sample!) Language

Here are some examples of opening, inviting language. None of this is *right* – but some of it might be useful in framing and finishing your invitation. Best to let it inspire, rather than replace, your own voice:

Please join us for... Our purpose is simple and important...

We need (and want) your deep engagement in the issues and opportunities surrounding the present and future of... toward the resolution of current issues and realization of untapped potential for...

We have done well and we must do better... to serve ourselves, our organization(s), and our communities...

The work of this session will contribute/lead toward...

Because you care about... you have the skills, experiences and insights that are essential to make it better.

Differences of opinion do exist, but it is out of this rich diversity that powerful new futures can be formed now.

...hope that each of you will put it all on the table... no sacred cows... no undiscussables... the only caveats and boundaries are...

...hope to mix past experience, present realities and all our hopes and dreams for the future into new...

Where there is agreement, we can move forward. Where there is difference we can seek understanding, common ground, and workable compromise.

None of this can happen without open, honest conversation and caring from each and every one of us.

What will happen? (1) Before we leave every issue of concern to anybody will be on the table, if they choose to put it there. (2) All issues will receive as full a discussion as you choose to give them. (3) You will receive a written record of the discussions and recommendations before you leave. (4) All issues will be ranked in the priority order determined by this group. (5) And finally, we will identify working groups and immediate next steps for all of the large group's most important issues and any other issue that you want to pursue. That's a promise.

...if you walk out of here muttering to yourself that we never talked about the really important issues that you cared about, please notice that the person responsible for that is you.

It's time to get to work... what are the issues and opportunities for... that you care about? ...what are your ideas, questions, recommendations, concerns, needs and desires for resolution and future directions... right down to the the level of implementation?

The Logistics of Hosting: Setting the Stage, Supporting the Flow

The hardest work of Opening Space is usually internal – personal and cultural. The logistics, on the other hand, are decidedly simple, if only because we are actively working to *not* make decisions or provide materials that participants can do a better job of making and sourcing for themselves.

We need only to provide the space and most basic tools. Even with the most simple room set-up, it will be immediately clear that leaders and sponsors have prepared for participants' arrival. In all things logistical, less is more.

In the case of meals, for instance, the best solution is often to let participants fend for themselves. This maximizes choices, gives people a chance to take a walk and catch their breath, and makes the planning cheaper and easier. If meals are to be provided, a buffet plan maximizes food choices, timing flexibility, and planning ease.

The next three pages offers a fairly complete list of logistical issues and options to consider when working in Open Space. Take a minute to review the things in this worksheet.

As you work through these details, consider that the most durable support for the meeting probably comes from the connections made between leaders, sponsors, planners, and facilitator(s). This group's collective ability to sense what is happening, to name and agree on key issue(s), to engage others in conversation and decision-making – over and above being able to get practical things done, on the ground, where it counts – *this* is the space into which the participants will be invited. The quality of this space depends on leaders' and sponsors' personal passion -- and their willingness to take responsibility for it.

How to proceed? Use the worksheet and the questions raised earlier, have the conversations with colleagues, do the tasks. Keep talking, keep crossing things off the list, keep refining the focus, and keep opening the inquiry. Begin in Open Space, even before the Open Space. Feel it, embody it, first. Rest into it. Practice it. Then just keep expanding it – so more and more good work can get done.

Finally, there is the detail of what to say in that moment when all the people have gathered and you're ready to begin. This really is the easy part, but see the appendix for a sample script, with notes to highlight the main points that need to be made.

Then, get out of the way! Traditionally, right after the opening is the time for the facilitator to go take a nap. After that, the facilitator should strive to be fully present, and totally invisible, paying attention, picking up cups, and holding a space for everything that comes up. When in doubt, revisit the four principles... Whoever comes is the right people, Whenever it starts is the right time, Whatever happens is the only thing that could have, and When it's over, it's over.

Practice being fully present and totally invisible. Resist any and all temptations to *make* anything happen. Before, during and after Open Space, there is only inviting and supporting, hosting.



Keeping the Space Open: Action, Practice, and Positive Impact

In most situations, the first *task* is to produce an effective event, but the *real goal* -- and challenge -- is usually to keep it going. The latter requires more than a planning team, more than a leadership sign-off or pep talk, and more than technical facilitation support. It takes active personal support for opening, inviting, and connecting. Facilitation and planning can produce an endless stream of events. Leadership coaching is often essential for developing the high levels of personal support and conscious practice that will turn meetings and events into positive and sustainable change.

Support and practice of what? On the outside, Bulletin Board and Marketplace. What we create on the wall in an Open Space meeting is a simple bulletin board. All of the conversations that pop up on that board create a sort of Marketplace for ideas, information, resources and actions. Here are some technical things that keep these things going after the event:

(See the Toolkit section for more about participant notes, proceedings documents, and a short list of "rules" for ongoing Open Space.)

- Publish the list of issues and conveners (the bare minimum record of what happened)
- Create a gallery of session notes poster boards (typed up or just posted in the office)
- Publish the list of participants and contact info (connects everyone to everyone)
- Use computers and have conveners type up their own notes (during longer events)
- Identify immediate next steps and/or resources available in each breakout session
- Use the last 2-4 hours of the meeting for re-opening for action
- Distribute notes to all participants within 24 hours of the close of the event
- Convene a short follow-up meeting (or series) for leaders and project champions
- Publish the notes and enable ongoing posting in a weblog (like WordPress.org)
- Set-up an email announcement list or discussion group, so news can keep getting out
- Offer training and coaching to leaders and others who will support next meetings

As noted earlier, the decision to use Open Space is fundamentally a decision and a commitment to movement and change. Even desirable movements and changes create friction and heat, loss and grief. The less technical side of keeping the space open and moving is keeping company with these difficulties, making and holding space for them to move and change as well. Better to keep moving and growing than grind to a halt, insisting things go as we think they must.

Inviting is something that effective leaders can *be* and *do*. As detailed in these lists, leaders can *do inviting* by drafting, discussing, and distributing invitations. They can focus attention, connect people, host conversations, create space for action to emerge, and keep it going with technical tools. At the same time, they must also *be inviting*... opening, caring, aligning, attracting, inquiring, listening, supporting, grounding and renewing... people.

Let's Go!

What matters most is beginning. What must happen now to make the organization or community work like it should? What can you contribute to making these things happen in the next month, year, or other time frame? What is the most important and challenging question you can ask right now, even if only to a small group of would-be collaborators?

Your questions can be stated in broadly strategic or nitty gritty tactical terms. What's essential is that they make sense to the people who will be invited to participate, and that those invited are actually the people who are ultimately needed to accomplish what is desired. First, draft something. Then test it out on any prospective participants and/or the sponsors or leadership group, inviting minor revisions or complete rewriting, until it "works."

What must your invitees create and do now, based on current conditions, data, news, priorities, resources, needs and all the rest? What is the BIG question, main theme, and deepest purpose? What is the future of [purpose]? What are the Issues and Opportunities for achieving [desired outcomes]? How Can We [succeed] Together Now?

Think of your invitation as a story, or a letter to friends and colleagues. Start it with "Once upon a time..." or "As you've no doubt already heard...", if you like. "Please join us! ...let's go! ...see you there!"

Facilitator Toolkit



Planning and Preparation Worksheet

√	ISSUES AND OPTIONS	SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS *	SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES **
	<i>Key Meetings and Milestones</i>		
	1. Leadership meeting(s) on purpose, framing, support and deliverables		
	2. Input from other stakeholders (interviews, focus groups, surveys, team meetings, public forums, etc.)		
	3. Invitation and invitation list, drafted and approved		
	4. Invitation distributed to all potential participants		
	5. Planning group progress tracking (by meeting, conf call, website, email, etc)		
	6. Deadline for participant registration and establishing final count		
	7. Meeting with hotel or other meeting site staff (for clarifying set-up and service plans)		
	8. Room set-up (when will meeting space be available for set-up)		
	9. Debriefing meetings during event (usually immediately before or after evening news)		
	10. Follow-up meeting with leaders, sponsors and project/issue champions		
	11. Leadership support conference on results, implications, and leverage points		
	<i>Participation and Confirmation</i>		
	1. Invitation (letter, brochure, postcard, etc. - from leader, sponsors, co-conveners?)		
	2. Invitation list - whose attention and action is needed?		
	3. Reply to _____ (what info required?)		
	4. Confirmation of registration to be provided to participants?		
	5. Preparatory materials to be provided to participants?		
	6. Registration fee or other payments to be processed?		
	7. Do participants need directions to meeting site?		
	8. Participant lodging information or arrangements?		
	9. Facilitation travel arrangements and/or budget?		

Planning and Preparation Worksheet, page 2

√	ISSUES AND OPTIONS	SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS *	SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES **
	<i>Room Set-up Standards</i>		
	1. Meeting room (40% of ppts = diameter of circle, or take 50% of theater style capacity)		
	2. _____ Breakout spaces (not necessarily separate breakout rooms (7 per 100 ppts)		
	3. Tape-friendly walls in main meeting room and breakouts		
	4. One big circle of chairs, or spacious concentric arrangement for larger groups		
	5. Small circles of 3-5 chairs in each breakout space, with _____ extras nearby		
	6. Posters about Open Space and theme question (prepared by facilitator)		
	7. Scheduling grid of post-it notes with breakout spaces and times, (by facilitator)		
	8. Paper for posting issues, usually quarter sheets of flipchart paper		
	9. Markers, Sanford brand (wide) washable markers recommended (40 per 100) ppts		
	10. Blue light-tack masking tape, 1.5 inches wide (one roll per 100 ppts)		
	11. NO tables, except for food and computers, including in breakout spaces		
	12. NO podium, projection or stages, share information via posters if absolutely necessary		
	<i>Room Set-up Options</i>		
	1. Breakout spaces all in main meeting room		
	2. _____ flipcharts with easels, one per breakout space		
	3. Natural light in or near main meeting space, if at all possible		
	4. Two cordless handheld microphones for groups over 60-70 ppts		
	5. _____ long tables propped on one end to create additional wall space, if needed		
	6. Nametags, stickers, massage, caricature artist, toys (things I've seen, all non-essential)		
	7. Voting software (can be provided by facilitator)		
	8. Voting dots (if setting priorities the old fashioned way)		
	9. Snacks and drinks		
	10. Meal Buffet Table(s)		

Planning and Preparation Worksheet, page 3

√	ISSUES AND OPTIONS	SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS *	SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES **
	<i>Documentation Options</i>		
	1. Template page on paper for taking notes in sessions (prepared by facilitator)		
	2. Template page on computes with instructions for typing notes (prepared by facilitator)		
	3. _____ Poster boards for capturing notes in gallery		
	4. Computers w/MS-Word for typing notes after breakout conversations (6 per 100 ppts)		
	5. 6' or 8' tables for computers and printer (2 machines per table)		
	6. One printer (need only be connected to one of the computers)		
	7. Power strips and extension cords for computer set-up		
	8. Wired or wi-fi internet access		
	9. Document parts: cover page, invitation, participant list with contact information		
	10. Copier(s) or vendor nearby to produce printed reports for participants		
	<i>Sustainability and Action</i>		
	1. Participant list and contact information included in a proceedings document		
	2. Access to website, mailing list or contact person to distribute .pdf proceedings file		
	3. Meeting time allocated for planning actions and changes (usually 2-4 hours)		
	4. Email discussion list for ongoing news and conversation		
	5. Weblog or wikiweb for ongoing documentation		
	6. Coaching and training for distributed leadership		
	<i>Footnotes</i>		
	* What is required... when, where, how much or many, etc.?		
	** Who will do, decide, deliver, advise, and be informed... leadership, planning group, facilitator, admin, others?		

A Sample Script for Opening the Space

This script is something I first distilled from Harrison Owen's *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (Berrett-Koehler, 3rd Edition, available at Amazon.com). Over the years I've added my own notes. It helps me remember what really needs to be said in the opening of the space – and what really does not. For years, I didn't open the space without a copy of this in my back pocket, but that's just me. I HIGHLY recommend getting the book and working out your own process. In the meantime, here is my opening story with some notes about what's happening each part...

Notice the various pulsations that are established as the Opening unfolds... gathering up energy and attention and then directing toward the theme, looking at who's in the circle and what's around it, reflecting on past and starting to describe the future, expecting the large group to break out in small groups, and come back to the large group, noticing caring and taking responsibility, an invitation to notice learning (taking in) and contributing (sharing out), and also to paying attention to what is going on internally in personal experience and what is going on externally all around the room. In subtle ways we invite these pulsations, a kind of group heart.

See also, Harrison's earliest version of the User's Guide, in this [webpage](#).

The Moment Has Arrived

The group gathers, sometimes over some kind of food/drink, and stands around chatting... The facilitator rings a set of small bells, Tibetan tingsha, rather than tapping on a microphone or yelling or both. People finish conversations and move toward the chairs, maybe the bells ring again, and the chatting subsides. Everyone looks at the facilitator, who simply motions in the direction of the main sponsor/host/leader, everyone looks there, anticipating, and the meeting begins...

Sponsor's Introduction – The Story of How We Got Here

- Three minutes... to tell the story of "how we got here" ...whatever that means to them.
- This might be the history of the company, an acknowledgement of braving the weather to get to the event, something in between... some explanation of past successes and why this new way of working is being tried.
- This puts the largest purpose and the momentum of a shared history into the circle.
- If there is any facilitator introduction, it should be as short as possible. The facilitator history is not important.
- And then the facilitator begins...

Bound the Space – Inviting the Circle to Become Aware of Itself and its Potential

- Enter the circle, walk the edge in silence, drawing the energy and attention of the group together... "Welcome to Open Space"
- Invite people to follow me around the circle, noticing the people as I pass them, "Say hello with your eyes... Some old friends... and others old friends you haven't met yet."
- "What do we know about who's here? ...nobody knows what's going to happen, everybody cares about the theme/purpose/question, nobody in charge, everybody has something to offer"
- Restate the theme, usually in the form of a question... "What are the issues and opportunities for..."
- Aim the energy and attention of the group at the theme/purpose, usually by pointing at the theme on a poster, hung near the bulletin board wall where the agenda will be created
- Possibly summarize again the comments by host/sponsor/client organizer

Explain the Mechanics of the Process – Passion Bounded By Responsibility

- Describe the Process - How this is going to work today
- Explain that, "Anyone who wants to, nobody has to, but anyone who wants to is invited to identify some issue/opportunity related to our theme... "
- "Something you have real passion for and will take personal responsibility for starting the conversation about it... Not something you think *someone* should take care of... something *you* will take care of..."
- "Don't have to be an expert with answers, need to care enough to ask the question and start the conversation..."
- "If nothing occurs to you, fine -- if more than one, post them on separate pages... at separate times..."
- "In a minute, I'll ask you to come forward, grab the paper and markers
- Write your topic and you name
- Read it out -- "my name is ... and my issue is...." (no speeches! and just like 3rd grade, no name, no credit!)
- Post it on the wall so everyone who shares your interest can find your conversation
- "Whatever it is that you care about, related to the theme, your first responsibility is to write it down and read it out, then to post it on the wall and assign a space/time to meet with a sticky note, and then to show up in that space/time and kick off the conversation (usually by telling a little bit about how you came to be caring about and raising this issue."
- Finally if you're capturing notes, "you're also responsible for capturing the notes from your session and bringing them back for inclusion in the book of proceedings we'll create... more on that a little later..."
- "The big wall is empty and very shortly it will be full of our most important issues... but first a few hints about working this way..."

Explain the Posters (usually posted in this order) – While People Reflect on What to Post

- The Four Principles – Some Helpful Reminders
 - Whoever comes are the right people, we don't need 100 people and the CEO to do good work... need the people who care... if nobody comes, might be a bad idea, or just bad timing... you might be the only one who knows enough to deal with it or see its importance... take it as just another piece of information, spend time on it yourself or move on.
 - Whatever happens is the only thing that could have... be prepared to be surprised, it would be very dull if everything always went as expected... forget coulda, woulda and shoulda and go with the flow of what is here and now
 - Whenever it starts is the right time... spirit and creativity don't run on the clock.
 - When it's over it's over... if you finish in ten minutes, don't rehash for another 50...move on... when it's not over, it's not over...so you might have to move, but don't have to stop
 - Sometimes we add, "Wherever it Happens is the Right Place... If your session moves outside or down the hall, leaving a note will help latecomers find you..."
- The Law of Two Feet – Defy it at Your Own Risk
 - "You have the right and the responsibility to use your two feet to go wherever you need to in order to maximize your own learning and contributing today."
 - "When mind wanders, take your body with it... stay whole!"
 - If you're not learning or contributing...go someplace else -- don't waste time.
 - "Means if you aren't enjoying where you are, it's totally your choice to stay or move on, you're responsible for your own experience..."
 - Law is death to egotists and speechmakers
- Creates bumblebees who cross-pollinate and butterflies who create space to just be
- Be Prepared to Be Surprised – nobody knows what will happen or what we can accomplish

Invite Everyone to Jump In

- Can't learn to swim from the side of the pool – time to jump in
- Identify an issue or opportunity for which you have some real passion
- Think of a short title and write it with your name
- Read it out -- my name is... my issue is..... – no speeches required or allowed
- Post it and come back to circle, listen to others' topics
- Clear a path to get to the wall - everyone closest to the wall come toward the center of the circle, before everyone else moves toward the wall.
- Sign up for everything that interests you, even if more than one during the same session (this is not so important in shorter meetings, there's just not time)
- Conflicts...can combine, move or bumblebee, but conveners have final word on it
- On your own, take responsibility for your own meetings/times, bells don't ring until closing
- Go to your first session as soon as you're done signing up, or as soon as you know where you want to go first.

Don't Bother – Some "Normal" Enough Temptations to Resist and Ignore

- Don't Take Questions – If you absolutely can't avoid/ignore a questions, suggest the questioner try out one of these two answers: "What do you really want to do?" and "Great, why don't you take care of it? If those don't work, ask somebody sitting near you and see if they know. Or... find me once the sessions get started and I'll make up an answer." The main thing is not to let anything get in the way of the group moving from this precarious place of not knowing what will happen next into making the agenda of all the next things. Don't fill your newly opened space with a bunch of trivial questions or nervous hesitation.
- Don't try to control what happens when the circle moves to the wall and into the sessions. And don't hang around trying to look like you could intervene if needed. Let them figure it out. Leave the room. Take a walk. Better yet, take a nap.
- Don't Waste Time with icebreakers and/or keynoters. Going around the circle saying names, titles, and other supposedly important stuff. Let people introduce themselves in the creation of the agenda, "My name is _____, and one thing I really care and want to talk about is _____." Everyone who doesn't announce a topic will have their chance in the beginning of each breakout session. Or during it. Nobody can remember all those names, anyway.
- Don't ring the bells to push people to end one session and start the next round. If you must ring in shorter meetings, make it very clear that you're only reminding and inviting, they can make their own choices about the next scheduled sessions.
- Don't announce that lunch is ready. It's easier than that. Just pick up a sandwich, take a big bite, and walk through the main room chewing and eyeing your next bite. The grapevine will do the rest.
- Don't do report outs at the end. Everyone will go to the sessions they care about most. If they miss something, they will read the notes and ask people who were there what happened. That's why we include participant names in the notes.
- Don't do evaluation forms that ask questions that take back responsibility for participants' experiences after we've given them full responsibility for that. If you must ask something on a form like that, ask "What got done here? What got started? And what new issues could you raise if we kept going or met again?" The answers to these can feed into the next invitations.
- Don't lose sleep the night before worrying about what to say and if it will work. Make your posters and other preparations. Rest easy. Read from this script in your opening, if you need to. And know that if people show up because they care about the invitation you wrote, all you need to do is open some space for them and get out of the way.
- Don't expect that Open Space is more magical or "safer" than any other space. Difficulties emerge, treasured ideas break down. Open Space is life space, creative and corrosive, joy and grief, and everything in between, sometimes all at once.

Capturing the Conversations

One way to reinforce that conveners are responsible for capturing the notes from their session is to hand them a one-page template/form like the one on the next page, as they are reading their issues in the center of the circle, before posting them on the wall.

Here are some other things you might put at the top of this page:

- This template page and the flipchart pads in the room are for recording what happens during your session.
- Where to get a digital copy of this format... where to email finished notes... visit this website or Google Doc... tweet your observations using #hashtag... post at this blog...
- Remember to write names of those attending your session for those colleagues interested (maybe months later) who did not attend your session.
- All typed notes will be posted on the wall (as soon as you send them) and then copied for all participants... you will have a copy of all the notes in your hands on the last morning...
- Please Keep It Simple - use simplest • bullets, CAPS for emphasis. All other formatting will be removed to make the document as a whole more readable.
- All notes turned in by 7pm on Day 2 will be in the book distributed to all participants on the morning of Day 3.
- What does everyone here need to know about what happened in your session?

Here are some of the things to include in a formal book of proceedings. For collected samples, including non-document options like a WordPress blog, see michaelherman.com/publications,

- Cover Page
- Ballot Form (if voting) with instructions for reading the book and voting
- Contents Page
- Invitation
- What Happened (usually about half a page, with dates, places, numbers of invitees and attendees, number of issues posted, and a disclaimer explaining that what follows is rough working notes rather than formal or finished reports or decisions).
- Session notes
- Participant List (contact info)
- News Reports (an option if the report is produced days after the event ends)

Finally, are many ways to type notes *during* the breakout sessions. These would seem to be more efficient, but much can be lost when notes are not made visible on flipcharts for group agreement and the processing that goes on when flipcharts are typed up later usually makes for a much more useful report.



In shorter meetings, you can achieve some of the same processing value by asking conveners to transcribe each session's notes onto single poster boards for a gallery wall whereas simply photographing all the flipcharts is not searchable, likely not entirely readable, and not usually checked for usefulness of the content.

When people spend time typing or transcribing, they tend to make sure their extra work will be useful to others.

Photos? Try snapping pics of conveners holding up the issue they posted on the agenda. This captures slices of spirit and content together.

BREAKOUT SESSION NOTES TEMPLATE

Replace this text with whatever brief(!) explanation is appropriate, e.g. items from the list on the previous page, so conveners will know how the notes capturing process will work. Handing this out as conveners read out their sessions in the Opening reinforces their responsibility to capture notes from their session.

ISSUE:

CONVENER(S):

PARTICIPANTS:

(you might pass this sheet for signing during your session)

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION:

(use flipcharts)

IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS:

(immediate next steps, within one week, within a month)

note: this last section is optional, generally used in 1/2- and single-day meetings where there is not time for voting and action planning.

pay attention to choosing between inviting actions "we" can take together now versus "recommendations" that return responsibility for action back to formal leaders. ask for what you really want, whatever serves the purpose best.

The Way Forward: Keeping it Going

Three kinds of issues typically come out of an Open Space gathering of any size, length or import:

- Things that got Done, often these don't show up in the notes. They just happened, everybody saw it, knows it, and they've moved on. This includes tacit agreements and alignments that surfaced or got created.
- Things that got Started, these are most obvious as Next Steps, where the foundation has been laid and the conversation is moving into actions that are generally pretty clear to everyone.
- Things that are still "clear as mud," not well known or not agreed. These are going to take more conversation. Maybe a whole new, focused, open space meeting. The good news is that now everyone knows how to do it. New gatherings or just new breakouts can be called by anyone, on any issue, with learning, contribution, notetaking and reporting done in the spirit of the original gathering.

Things that get done are often hard to track. The effects are small, many and widely distributed. They just happen. The second group can be identified, managed, tracked and are more likely to be noticed when they move to "Done." To make progress on the last group requires some attention to sustained practice(s).

Here's a quick sketch of the sort of process and practice(s) that can keep the most important conversations going and the work advancing from murky to done:

1. Put all the issues back on the wall, on individual sticky notes.
2. Sort them, if it makes sense, into clusters or constellations, which might be overlapping
3. Scan this document for any major themes that might run through many issues but haven't been surfaced as a specific, issue.
4. Read this document, as a team, in order of issue priority. Read for actions, large and small. Refine each issue into a set of possible actions.
5. Begin sorting the actions into the themes, clusters or a canvas (e.g. Enterprise Scrum canvas, Business Model Canvas).
6. Keep reading, refining and sorting, in priority order – restating or even restarting your overall framework as needed to continue to make sense of what you're surfacing – until you get EVERYTHING that matters on the wall (even if they're BIG things).
7. Prioritize within groupings. Pay attention to synergies and dependencies.
8. Notice obstacles to be overcome. Add those as additional actions.
9. Choose a cadence (e.g. bi-weekly, monthly, quarterly cycles) and break actions down into pieces that can (1) deliver some real value and (2) are small enough to be completed in not more than about half of your chosen cycle length.
10. Start each cycle with identification and commitment to a set of actions that can reasonably be accomplished in just that one cycle. Adjust the commitment, cycle after cycle, until you hit your cycle goal dependably.
11. After each cycle, review, update and improve the organization of everything on your "board" or wall. Celebrate "done." Target blockers. Refine large pieces of work into small. Prioritize and re-prioritize based on real value.
12. Somewhere along the way, consider some strategic coaching, to help refine essential practices, roles and artifacts. Because, simple as these things sound, really easy is often quite difficult, especially across multiple teams or new events.

Rules for Ongoing Open Space

These guides were developed at University of Kentucky's Rural Medical Center and reported by Lloyd Kepferle in Harrison Owen's *Tales from Open Space*.

Eliminate constraints on the following:

- Who can call a meeting.
- The type of problem or opportunity that is being addressed.
- The availability of time to have a meeting.
- Who may attend a meeting.
- The availability of information necessary for a group to work.

Personal empowerment is constrained by the following:

- When a problem or opportunity is to be discussed, there must be wide notification of the meeting time and place so that anyone who is interested can attend.
- Proposed solutions/ideas must be broadcast widely so that they can be acknowledged as organizational policies, programs, or procedures, or, if they are contradictory to organizational rules, another solution can be sought.
- Proposed solution cannot be hurtful to anyone else.
- Proposed solutions should channel limited resources so that they have maximum impact on achieving organizational goals.
- Accomplishing the work for which people were hired takes precedence over the group work. However, if the right people (those who really care) are involved in any topic, they will find a way to make sure their work is completed and the work of the group is brought to a successful conclusion.
- Through these simple (ongoing) practices and procedures, any ordinary organization can transcend (not replace) its old ways of being and include and embody (more fully and consciously) this thing we call Open Space.



Open Space Starts When We Pick Up the Phone

Open Space is a thing we can do AND something, a way, we can aspire to be. In the later sense, it is who we are and what we bring to every conversation.

As Harrison wrote recently (2016) in a discussion on the OSLIST global practitioners' email listserv:

For as long as I can remember (which gets shorter and shorter) it has been clear to me, and I actually think I have said (wrote)-- "Open Space begins with yourself."

Doing the "Big One" for whatever cause or reason is great -- but fundamentally immaterial to emerging life. A little splash in the pond, so to speak. And likewise, I do believe that the "difference" between "inside" and "outside" is illusory. What you is -- is what you is. What you do is what you are.

Opening space is not -- as I experience it -- A Facilitated Process, a method, a process. Something we learn and do for and with people. Opening space is fundamental to our relationship with fellow human beings. If we have the privilege and pleasure of Opening Space on the big stage for a grand cause --the results can be awesome. But all that is really trivial compared to opening space every day, in every way, with everyone. That's useful. I think.

Notice what happens when you replace "Open Space" with "Inviting."

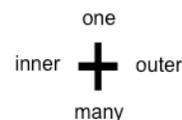
This is what we can put in the center of circle – and bring to every conversation and relationship, team and organization.

The Inviting Organization Emerges

Open Space Technology is one way to enable all kinds of people, in any kind of organization, to create inspired meetings and events. This should create better organizations, and it does. But after more than thirty years of experience working in Open Space, and noticing Open Space patterns at work in the world, we can now see that it's more than that. It's a better, more evolved way of being *in* organization.

Ken Wilber, described by some as "America's greatest philosopher," was reading "heavy" books by the boxful in his teens. Eventually, he dropped out of a biomedical program at age 23 to meditate intensely, sort out all of his reading notes, and flip burgers for money. His first book, the *Spectrum of Consciousness*, was hailed as the first work to articulate clear paths of human development by marrying native/tribal, western/rational, and eastern/transcendental worldviews in art, spirituality, government, science and commerce.

Wilber's basic framework sorted human evolution into four dimensions: inner (subjective) and outer (objective), individual (one) and social (many). In that story, consciousness is inner, individual. Culture is inner, interpreted, collective story. Social structures are the outside of culture and, finally, support is outside, observable, behavior. Then, in each dimension, he mapped levels of development (up to 23 of them!) that suggested a kind of spiraling path for evolution of all things. A history of everything.



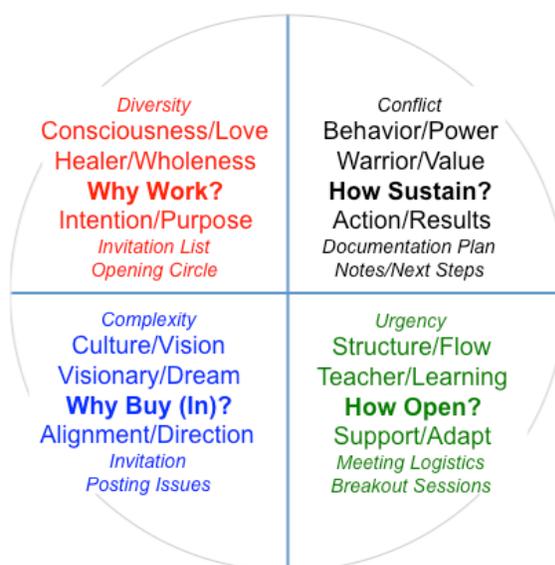
Evolution in Organization

Back in 1998, I heard Wilber in conversation with a group of perhaps three hundred people. As luck would have it, I sat just a few feet from him in the front row. A few days later, my head sort of exploded and I found myself mapping my experience and understanding of organization development into his framework.

My map wove together things I'd learned from Harrison Owen and Open Space, Angeles Arrien's studies of native people's medicine wheels from around the world, organization development pioneers Emery and Trist's original work on transforming bureaucratic hierarchy into self-managing teams.

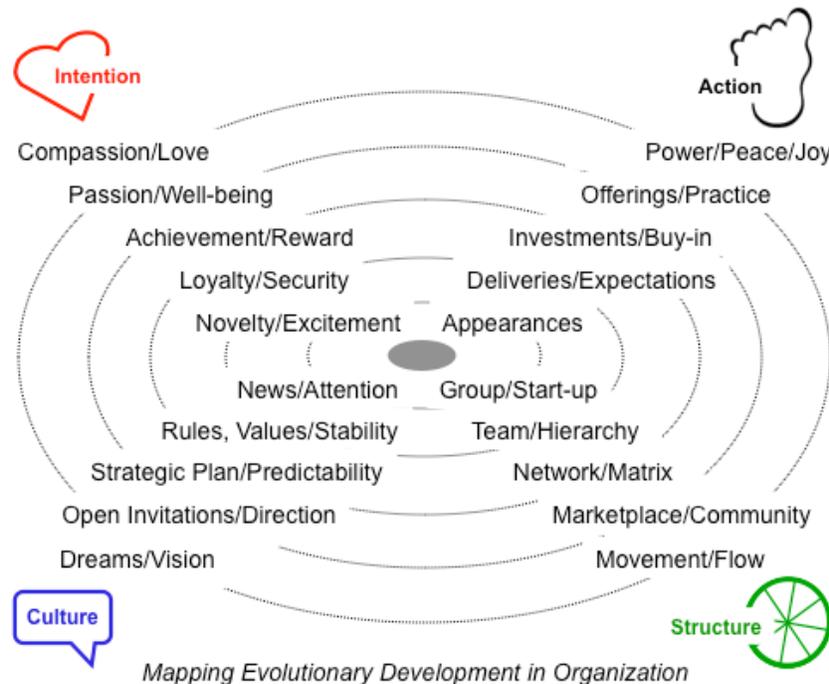
First, I translated Wilber's four quadrants, Angeles Arrien four human resources (love, vision, wisdom and power) and four archetypes (healer, visionary, teacher and warrior), and various dimensions of working in Open Space into more organizational terms. In my translation, individual passion is invited into stories and culture, which then give shape to the organizational structures that support individual action. You can probably think of other things that follow this pattern

Evolution is what happens as we cycle through these dimensions with increasing skill and maturity levels. Following Wilber's lead, I added developmental levels, based on the classical "Great Chain of Being" story of nested holarchies (matter, body, mind, soul, spirit). Which is only to say, I added another very old and deep human pattern.



A Four-Fold Way of Organization, adapted from Wilber, Arrien, Fast Company, and Open Space

Next, I traced development paths in each of the four directions. This is a map that's served me well in sorting out many an organizational and community landscape. I've never found anything happening in organization that didn't land somewhere in this space, though I have seen blockages in the cycling, gaps in the development, and seen organizations wobbling from the imbalances. The levels aren't as useful in navigating organizational territory as are the four dimensions, but they do help with understanding and recognizing them in the real world (e.g. Page 6).



Let's walk through each of one, starting with the upper left, the path of individual intention or motivation. At first we work for the novelty or excitement of it. When we find things or situations we like, we want to secure and defend them. Then we want to achieve more. At some point we might find a calling, have the sense of following our bliss or pursuing our passion. We might find ourselves doing work that we could not refuse, maybe even understanding it as healing something, in ourselves or the world, or both. At highest level, our work might become love made visible, compassion in action, true servant leadership or work as meditation.

Our stories in organization, the basis for culture, evolve from the grapevine into rules and then strategic and tactical plans, eventually opening into invitations and value streams posted on walls and bulletin boards, as in Open Space meetings and Agile team rooms. The peak level here articulates our highest dreams and visions. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is one example. The non-employee security guard who just happened, during a whole-company Open Space meeting at Rockport Shoes, to wish for shoes he could wear with his uniform, is less lofty. But the company sold \$24 million of black and white shoes the following year.

The structure of our organizations evolves out of loose groups, where showing up is what matters. From its beginning, Google employees numbered themselves in the order they joined the company. Next, teams and larger hierarchies develop, where position matters more than order of appearance. Eventually the silos break down into network/matrix type structures where connections are the defining characteristic, reporting lines, dotted lines, and personal connections. Beyond that, in marketplaces and communities, it's the exchanges, the quality of the conversations we have with our connections that matter, and move us forward. Finally, at the highest level, our exchanges dissolve into a sense of flow, a wave of change, as Arlo Guthrie says in Alice's Restaurant (the old protest song), "They'll call it a Movement!" Think Arab Spring and Occupy. Their impermanence doesn't make them less powerful or important.

Finally, individual action evolves from making appearances, to making deliveries that meet expectations, and making investments that bring increasing returns. This is the level where we end up talking so often about getting people's "buy-in." But beyond this, and very dependably in Open Space, we invite people to maximize their offerings, contributions and learning, with the potential for making peace or at least making change and adaptation easier. Consistent with this, in Agile software development we talk about offering minimum viable products as experiments in the marketplace, in order to get the learning. To close the loop, it seems not insignificant that Agile sprung from the shared intention among a small group of leading software engineers, to reduce the suffering of fellow programmers in the face of rapidly increasing complexity, urgency, specialization.

The Inviting Organization Emerges

About the time I was making sense of all this, a Fast Company magazine cover story proclaimed that the "next strategic question" was now "How digital is your organization?" This mattered, they argued, because every time the Question changes, organizations need to rethink what Fast Company called "the four basics of business."

1. How do you attract your fair share of talent?
2. How do you segment and go after customers?
3. How do you use speed?
4. How do you finance operations?

They said the strategic question used to be simply "What business are you in?" Then it became, "What's your business model?" Now, it was all about getting digital – but the stories they told were about organizations that had seen this coming and been working on it for 15 years. This looked like yesterday's news to me. What question were these leading organizations working on NOW, I wondered?

Their story had four dimensions and three layers. Mine was four by five. If my map was any good, I thought, it should show what Fast Company was missing. It should show me the next TWO strategic questions.

First, I discovered "How inviting is your organization?" and what I called the Inviting Organization, practicing invitation with approaches like Open Space. When we work in Open Space, we invite people to take responsibility, to take action, for the things they care about. It doesn't matter how "evolved" their caring is, what matters is that they bring that caring out, mix it with others on the wall, take some notes and go back to the office, or wherever, and try to implement something.

Wilber describes spiritual development in terms of regular practices punctuated by flashes of the amazing. It's a back and forth, peaks and valleys, journey. First, we get glimpses of the peaks. Then, with time and practicing, we pulse higher. We build plateaus closer and closer to those peaks. This is my experience of how teams and organizations develop, too. Start simple, keep at it, have some flashes of greatness, hopefully learning to sustain them and make them ordinary.

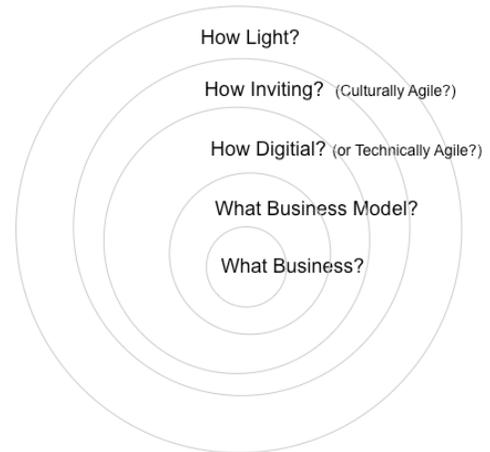
My experience is that just about anyone and any organization can be invited to a higher level of performance in Open Space. Emery and Trist's foundational assumption for all their work with self-managed teams was: "People are purposeful and can be ideal seeking." We might not always agree with their purposes, we might not share their ideals, but they definitely have and seek them. Ideals end up being a whole lot more real, and useful, than "mission" and "values."

I want to suggest that Open Space is a set of mechanisms or tools, that can be taken individually or together as a robust practice. I want to invite you to test that they are sufficient to invite and sustain, people and organizations, at high levels of caring, communication, learning and performance. People can be purposeful and can be invited to seek bigger and higher ideals.

Inviting Leadership is something we can practice, applying the patterns of Open Space, as a technical doing in organization. But it's also something we can aspire to be, a way to live. Inviting allows us to leverage everything we have been in organization and puts us within reach of those highest-spirited, peak experiences, together. The more we practice, the easier it becomes to reach and sustain those peaks. The Inviting Organization emerges in Open Space (costing not less than everything, if you're a control-focused manager!) Inviting Leadership invites more leadership. And the doing and being are one.

Inviting Light in Organization

Looking beyond that, just to finish the story, I think the question that defines that highest level of organization is, "How light is your organization." Emery and Trist described four organization "environments" that map easily to the first four levels here. Then they added a fifth one they called "vortical." It was a powerful but fleeting state. That they associated more closely with crises and breakdowns reminds us that transformative moments are often a mix of joy and grief. But I want to focus on the shape they described, the vortex.



I often feel that shape of energy when I sit in Open Space circles. I hear it in participants reporting, "I was going to be a butterfly this time, but I got sucked into the discussion of..." Sometimes we describe big change as spinning or swirling. And, when we're practicing in organization at a high level, I think our work in these four quadrants gets to swirling, too. "How light is your organization" reflects this sensation. Light is love. Light is clear. Light is fast. And light is power or peace – all at once, without effort or separation.

Please Join Me

This practice guide opened with a bunch of favorite stories. My closing invitation is to think about your own favorite stories. What kind of intentions and caring did people bring? What were your vision, storytelling, and culture like? How did the structures support or limit movement and learning. And, what sorts of important, valuable and powerful things came of it? What sort of love, clarity, flow and peace do you find swirled through your experience? Then consider that the patterns we've learned from more than thirty years in Open Space enable us to – broadly, directly, immediately and easily – invite more of those experiences and results, over and over again, with groups of any size.

The heart of Open Space, Inviting Leadership, and the Inviting Organization is inviting everyone into leadership, into the full complexity of our biggest challenges, whole in their own agency, responsible for managing and maximizing their own learning and contribution – then supporting rather than directing their movement – and doing our best to let go of the details, letting it all be a little lighter, a little easier.



What we call the beginning is often the end
 And to make an end is to make a beginning.
 The end is where we start from. And every phrase
 And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
 Taking its place to support the others,
 The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
 An easy commerce of the old and the new,
 The common word exact without vulgarity,
 The formal word precise but not pedantic,
 The complete consort dancing together)
 Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
 Every poem an epitaph. And any action
 Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
 Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.
 We die with the dying:
 See, they depart, and we go with them.
 We are born with the dead:
 See, they return, and bring us with them.
 The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
 Are of equal duration. A people without history
 Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
 Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
 On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
 History is now and England.

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.
 Through the unknown, unremembered gate
 When the last of earth left to discover
 Is that which was the beginning;
 At the source of the longest river
 The voice of the hidden waterfall
 And the children in the apple-tree

Not known, because not looked for
 But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
 Between two waves of the sea.
 Quick now, here, now, always--
 A condition of complete simplicity
 (Costing not less than everything)
 And all shall be well and
 All manner of thing shall be well
 When the tongues of flames are in-folded
 Into the crowned knot of fire
 And the fire and the rose are one.

—T. S. Eliot (*Little Gidding*, *Four Quartets*)

Additional Resources

MichaelHerman.com – includes a deep collection of practice notes, stories and resources, including connections to Agile software development in teams and whole enterprises.

OpenSpaceWorld.com – Harrison Owen's archive, offers a number of deep perspectives in short papers, including the earliest (0th Edition?) of *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*.

MichaelHerman.com/publications/ost_nonguide.pdf – *Open Space Technology: A User's NON-Guide*, a sort of OST *sutra*, in 37 voices from around the world, edited by Michael Herman and Chris Corrigan from OSLIST email group threads, in 2002. An easy exploration of facilitator non-doing in Open Space.

OpenSpaceWorld.org – connections to a global community of Open Space practitioners, via the OSLIST email group (think global 24/7 help desk), Open Space on Open Space conferences, overviews in many (17?) languages...

See Also These Kindred Methods and Mash-ups

LeanCoffee.com – small, short, serial meetings with just-in-time agenda topics, see also michaelherman.com/wordpress/archives/2015/03/22/lean-coffee/

LiberatingStructures.com – a collection of 33 open alternatives to presentation, managed discussion, brainstorming and other traditional meeting formats, essentially a variety of ways to open small spaces inside of any meeting.

AppreciativeInquiry.org - an intentional approach to identifying what's working and how to make more of it, follows the four-point medicine wheel form, stepping through conversations (open spaces, large or small) on four themes: discover, dream, design and do/deliver.

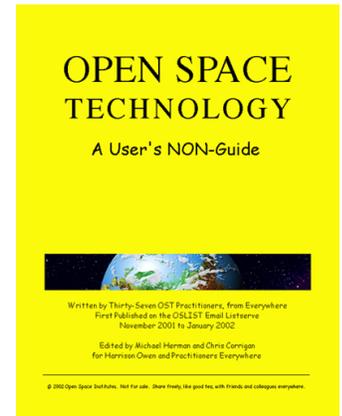
Open Space Cafe – this is a spin on the World Cafe model, which puts people in small groups, commonly around bistro tables, to discuss a series of three questions, take notes, and harvest the insights in a plenary finale. In Open Space Cafe, the first question for discussion is: "What questions should we be addressing here?"

Institute for Cultural Affairs – especially their Workshop Model, wherein participants answer address a big issue or question with 10 responses, written on ten different cards, which are then posted and sorted on the wall. The ICA Discussion Model (observe, reflect, interpret, decide) echoes the various four-fold stories included in this guide.

ScrumGuides.org – it's easy to see the basic mechanisms and conditions addressed by Open Space at work in the Scrum project management framework and other Agile software development methods, now being extended throughout the enterprise. Scrum teams are self-managing, with charters rather than invitations. Their "backlogs" of features to be built echo the what goes up on the wall in Open Space, where the wall = the backlog. Their daily stand-ups echo OST's morning and evening news. When Agile was first explained to me, I laughed out loud, "You're making software in Open Space!" See also PersonalKanban.com.

SMARTer AGILE – a marriage of Open Space and Agile software development, adapted from Sandra Walsh's OpenXP approach to requirements elicitation in wickedly complex software projects. See michaelherman.com/agile for the latest on this and other agile/openspace explorations.

Lean Manufacturing – calling an Open Space meeting, or posting a breakout session, is the knowledge workers' equivalent to pulling the andon cord and "stopping the line" in a manufacturing setting. OR... pulling the cord and stopping the line IS and invitation to co-workers to address whatever issue has been discovered.



About Michael Herman

I've worked as Michael Herman Associates (MHA) since 1991, specializing in inviting active engagement, high performance and adaptive learning (innovation, improvement, change and transformation) in all kinds of business and community groups and organizations.

Prior to MHA, I worked as a financial consultant and project manager to hospitals and led adventure-based teambuilding and leadership programs with Outward Bound USA. When I discovered Open Space Technology, I was fascinated by its practical simplicity, powerful results and great adaptability for “organization building” and “inviting leadership,” embedded directly in ongoing, everyday work.



I've been an active contributor to the practice of Open Space Technology. I founded and manage the OpenSpaceWorld.org global practice website, have served on the board of the Open Space Institute USA, authored/edited numerous articles on the practice of Open Space, and have been an innovator in the international development of the practice — even as my work continues to be informed by many other methods and experiences, especially Liberating Structures and Agile software development. I've also worked as a Scrum Master (CSM) and Agile Coach.

I've worked with Willis Towers Watson, Allstate Insurance, United Airlines, Schlumberger, BP/Amoco, the Agile Alliance, South African Breweries, YPO (Young Presidents Organization), Imagine Chicago, Education Queensland (Australia), the Chicago Community Trust, the cities of Aspen, Albuquerque, Buffalo, and Milwaukee, USAID (Indonesia), the NGO Federation of Nepal, and many other youth, corporate, community and government organizations. I've led training and practice workshops and helped create local practice groups in Alaska, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, Nepal, Ireland, Australia, Canada and the US.

My formal training is in Economics, Finance and Healthcare Administration, at Indiana University and the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.

My home and headquarters, with my wife Jill, is a classic Chicago bungalow, now almost fully restored (having done much of the work myself), in a historic north side neighborhood, on the west bank of the Chicago River.

Tibetan calligraphy on back cover: fearless in open space

پولیس

پولیس