



Notes on Open Space

These notes are based on Harrison Owen's book, Open Space Technology: A User's Guide and were developed in the field by educators affiliated with NSRF.

Harrison Owen's book, *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (second edition), has all of the information one would need to run an open space event. Several of the pages can be used to make overheads, which are useful when you are introducing open space to a group of people.

Read through the whole book to get a sense of the philosophy and approach of open space. In particular, read pages 72-78, and all of Chapter 7. The overheads to make are: the *theme* of the open space session (that is decided by the planners of the event), the *four principles*, the *law of two feet*, and one with a drawing of bumblebees and butterflies. When you review and/or explain the four principles, it is sometimes useful to read the quote in italics (*what if nobody comes?*) on page 96 after reading the first principle. When you talk about the law of two feet, make the statement that is in italics in the Law of Two Feet section on page 98. And when you talk about butterflies, paraphrase the last paragraph on page 100.

Here are some other useful quotes from the book:

"In a curious way, the act of empowerment is best accomplished by saying little and doing less. In the traditional meeting environment, the role of the facilitator often turns into a mad frenzy of seeking to be all things to all people at every moment. Beyond the fact that the role is totally exhausting and ultimately impossible to maintain, it is the very antithesis of what an Open Space facilitator should be doing. In the Open Space environment, the facilitator must constantly turn freedom and responsibility back to the participants." (p 113)

"To the best of my knowledge, there is exactly one way to absolutely guarantee the failure of an Open Space event, and that is to try and control it." (p 63)

It can be important to plant seeds when you talk in advance with participants about the event ("that would be a great open space topic, why don't you think about convening a session?"), and to pay very close attention to the organization of the event. It is important to remember that open space is not a solution to lack of planning time, nor should people arrive at the event "cold."

Mistakes to avoid when organizing Open Space:

1. Spending too much time trying to figure out the times of sessions so everyone can do everything they want to do (you can't do this with a group of 300, but you can get sucked into it with a smaller group of 25 or so!)—lesson learned: spend as little time as possible creating the sessions, signing up for them, and negotiating changes. You can do it with 300 people in 45 minutes (or less), and with 60 people in 20 minutes!

2. Don't call it Open Space if you are doing it for less than a day. Harrison Owen recommends one-three days.

3. Usually, you sit in a circle, and the person holds up his or her sheet with the title of the session on it, walking around the circle, showing it to everyone while describing what the title means. This is sort of PR for the session, and it gives people a chance to think about what is being offered.

4. Once the sessions begin, the planner(s) go to every room and put a sign on the door that has the time slots on it and the names of the sessions being convened in that room during each of the time slots. Leaving it up to the convenors to do that doesn't seem to work.

In sum, open space runs on passion bounded by responsibility (Owen says that "Open Space runs on two fundamentals, passion and responsibility. Without passion, nobody is interested. Without responsibility, nothing will get done."). State the theme, and then go over the four principles, the law of two feet, and the role of butterflies and bumblebees. Finally, describe how you will go about setting up the sessions (if you have a partner, she can actually walk through the process as you describe what to do), restate the theme, and then begin.

It is often helpful to end a long open space event (a day or more) with a "Talking Stick" ceremony. For some people, this is the most moving and most powerful part of the day. It is worth the investment of time to buy some interesting "talking sticks."