

Open space method

“Open Space” is a technique for running meetings where the participants create and manage the agenda themselves. Sessions can be for between five to 2000 plus people (providing you have a big enough venue). This method is ideal if you want participants to gain ownership of an issue and come up with solutions. Participants agree on the areas of discussion that have importance for them and then take responsibility for facilitating the sessions.

The approach

- Participants' are seated on chairs arranged in a circle.
- There needs to be an overall event organiser that sets the topic with a theme or broad open question, for example, “How can we improve mental health services?” and which participants are invited to suggest sub-topics for discussion.
- Participants suggest topics for discussion by sticking post it notes on paper situated in the middle of the chairs on the floor or on the wall, which could be called a ‘bulletin board’. The bulletin board needs to be divided up by ‘market stalls’ (see below – perhaps designated by colour) and time e.g. you might have 1.5 hours for discussion and allocate 45 mins for each discussion thus 2 discussions per market stall.
- Another area is set up close by – with several breakout spaces. Once the topics are agreed, participants will move to this area and move from one discussion to another so that they can contribute or listen to different discussions in a fluid way. This is known as the ‘market place’.

An Open Space meeting will typically begin with introductions by the facilitators (we would recommend at least two). They will introduce the purpose of the discussion and will explain the self-organising process of ‘Open Space’.

Group members then post their topic areas of choice on the bulletin board at a designated stall and time. As each member posts their topic on the board they tell the group what they have written. If there are more topics than times and market stalls, the facilitators can support the wider group to decide which discussions should be prioritised.

Any participant can suggest an issue – but they must have a real passion and the ability to start a discussion. They must also ensure that notes of the discussion are written.

When all issues have been allocated a time and place, participants sign up to attend those individual sessions. Sessions typically last up to one and a half hours; with the whole gathering usually lasting anything from a half day up

to two days! The opening and agenda creation takes a maximum of an hour, even with a very large group.

Now it's time for the individual groups to get to work. With participants moving from discussion to discussion.

Open Space Technology begins without any pre-determined agenda, with work directed by a 'theme', 'purpose' or 'invitation' carefully articulated by leaders in advance of the meeting. The organisers outline a schedule of breakout times and spaces in advance and the combination of clear purpose with the ample breakout facilities supports the process of self-organisation. After the opening briefing, the facilitator usually remains in the background.

Small groups might create agendas on only a few issues. Very large groups can have over a hundred sessions running simultaneously over the course of a day.

Guiding Principles and One Law

The originator of the approach, Harrison Owen, explains 'the principles' and 'one law' that describe – rather than control – the process of the meeting:

1. Whoever comes is [sic] the right people.

You don't need the CEO and 100 people to get something done – you just need people who care. That's precisely who shows up in the various breakout sessions of an open space meeting when they are free from the direction of a traditional meeting.

2. Whenever it starts is the right time.

This reminds participants that "spirit and creativity do not run on the clock."

3. Wherever it happens is the right place.

Space is opening everywhere all the time, be aware. Tahrir Square is one famous example.

4. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have

Once something has happened, it's done. No amount of fretting, complaining or rehashing can change it. Move on.

5. When it's over, it's over

We don't know how long it will take to resolve an issue, but when it is done, move on to the next thing. Don't keep rehashing it just because there's time left in the session. Do the work, not the time.

Owen's one law – called the 'Law of Two Feet' or 'The Law of Mobility' – states that if at any time during the time together you find yourself in a situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet and go someplace else. In this way, all participants are given both the right and the responsibility to maximise their own learning and contribution, which the law assumes only they can ultimately judge and control. When

participants lose interest and get bored in a breakout session, or accomplish and share all that they can, the charge is to move on. In practical terms, Owen explains, the Law of Two Feet states: Don't waste time!

Researched and written by Naomi Gay – Mind Engagement Toolkit 2011