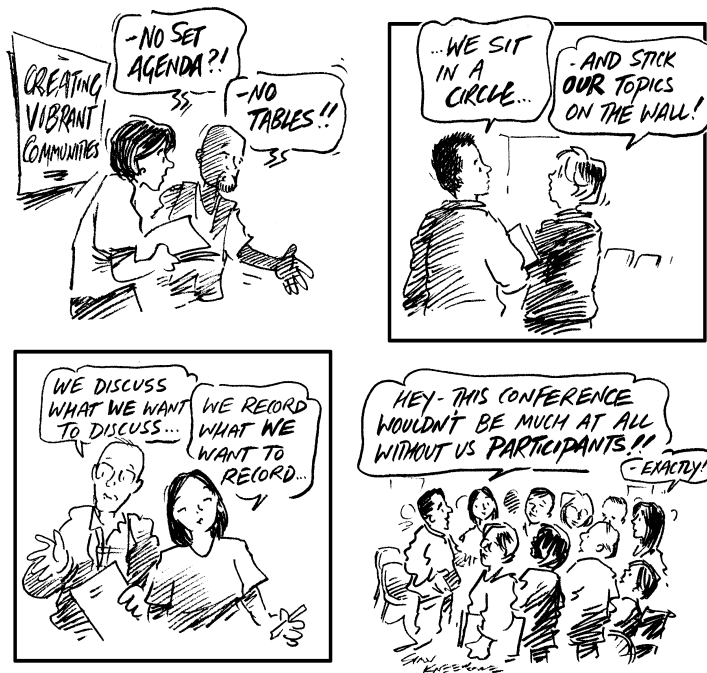


# Facilitating Open Space Technology



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A Beyond the Edge – Babelfish Group Collaboration





## What is Open Space Technology?

Harrison Owen, the originator of Open Space Technology describes the beginnings of the process like this:

“In 1983 I had occasion to organise an international conference of 250 participants. It took me a full year of labour. 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. 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 everyone 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 substantive activity and results characteristic of a good meeting?”

Open Space Technology is a process for group meetings. Like all other processes, the mechanics are relatively simple but there are underlying principles that determine how and why the process works.

## Why use Open Space Technology?

Open Space Technology is an alternative to other meeting processes that enables the participants to identify what’s important to them. It taps into people’s passions and gives them an opportunity to take responsibility. It can lead to surprising results.

When to use OST	When <u>not</u> to use OST
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When there are no pre-determined outcomes</li><li>• When the issue is complex</li><li>• When there are a diversity of experiences and views</li><li>• When you want to encourage participation with responsibility</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When there are pre-determined outcomes</li><li>• When somebody not present has the authority to make the final decision</li><li>• When senior management is not supportive</li></ul>

# 8 steps to Opening the Space

<b>8 Steps to Opening the Space</b>	<b>The Rationale</b>
<p>1. Starting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome and background</li> <li>• Introduce the theme</li> </ul>	<p>Checking in – focusing people’s attention</p>
<p>2. Briefly Describe Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Posting topics on the blank agenda wall</li> <li>• Passion and responsibility</li> <li>• Elements of responsibility</li> </ul>	<p>Giving people a sense of what’s going to happen</p>
<p>3. Introduce the Principles and Law of Two Feet</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bumblebees and Butterflies</li> </ul>	<p>Provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics of how the process works</p>
<p>4. Talk about the Proceedings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The cover</li> <li>• The reporting sheets</li> <li>• The computer room</li> <li>• Breaking News</li> </ul>	<p>Ensure people are aware of their responsibilities</p> <p>Build anticipation about what will be achieved</p>

<p>5. Revisit the process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce morning &amp; evening news</li> </ul>	<p>Allay fears and uncertainties that are starting to emerge in people's minds</p>
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<p>6. Invite people to post topics</p>	<p>The best way to learn is by doing – so just do it!</p>
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...and once the Bulletin Board is complete (aka the agenda)

<p>7. Introduce the marketplace</p>	<p>Provide a focus on the sessions available</p> <p>Ensure people are aware of the next step in the process</p>
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<p>8. Get out of the way!</p>	<p>Allow the self-organising system to emerge from the chaos</p>
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# The role of the Open Space facilitator

## Keeping the Space 'Safe'

While opening the space, you, the facilitator, dominate the space. During the opening you hand the space to the participants – it becomes theirs. Your role after the space is opened is to keep it safe for the participants to do whatever it is they have to do.



## 'Space Invaders'

Some people, for whatever reasons, will try and 'take over' and even control the space. 'Space invaders' might be very obvious or they may work behind the scenes. Sometimes they are not even aware that they are invading the space. It's your role, as facilitator, to keep the space invader from doing just that – invading the space.

## Clean and Tidy

Another way to keep the space 'safe' is to keep it clean and tidy by picking up rubbish, general tidying and removing coffee cups etc.

## Stay out of the way

It's true – the role of the Open Space facilitator is quite different to many other facilitation roles. While people might want you to 'fix' a problem, intervene when something is not working, or 'take control' of the agenda wall, your job is to NOT do all of those things – to enable self-organising to happen. It may get messy, people may demand that you 'do your job', anything but take responsibility for their own experience.

## Morning Announcements and Evening News

In a multiple-day OST event all the participants come together for a short time in a large circle at the end of the day and the beginning of the day. This enables people to reflect on what's happened, to tell stories and to make announcements – especially about changes to the Bulletin Board (new sessions, changes in locations, combined sessions etc). It helps maintain, and build, community.

## **The Reports and the Proceedings (if required)**

You will spend a lot of time ensuring that session leaders have a copy of the reporting form, know where the computers are, or how to access the group site on-line, helping with saving and printing reports, keeping a master copy for the proceedings, and enlarging and posting reports as they become available.

You will also have to prepare a copy of the program for the proceedings, maybe a participant list and sometimes information about Open Space Technology too.

## **Convergence**

In some events it is important to identify the next steps. If this is the case, then a convergence session is incorporated into the program after all the discussions are completed. The process for convergence varies but generally includes some way of prioritising the actions/decisions made and identifying who is going to do what to follow up.

## **Closing Circle**

At the end of an OST event there is a closing circle. This can be done in many ways but often includes an opportunity for everyone to say what they are feeling at this point in time. The closing circle is not a time to open up new conversations, to be analytical – it's an opportunity to bring forth a sharing of the emotional experience of the event. And when it's over, it's over.





# The experience of Open Space

## **It's not the same as other meetings...**

### **The Circle**

The circle is the natural way for humans to communicate – watch people at a party or any large gathering. Small circles form all over the place because that's the easiest way for a group of people to talk with each other. No-one is 'in charge'.

An OST event always starts with everyone in a circle, and this is where the facilitator 'opens the space'.

### **Four Principles**

- **Whoever comes are the right people**  
The people gathered at an OST event are just the right people to spend this time together on this theme. This principle also means that if you convene a session, we will stipulate that just the right people will be there to work with you on your topic or question. No need to worry about who is not there.
- **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have**  
This does not mean that everything is pre-ordained. It does mean that at the end of the day, when you look back, you will notice that the quality of your learning and contributing has been based on the choices you made. Personal responsibility.
- **Whenever it starts is the right time**  
Whenever it starts is the right time. Although there are scheduled 'slots' in open space, creativity does not wear a wristwatch. Open space is an invitation to pay attention to when the time is right and a conversation begins. So whenever it starts is the right time.
- **When it is over, it is over**  
So if you convene a session, and have a great conversation, and your business is done in thirty minutes, there is no reason to sit and stare at one another. If you agree that it's over, you may go somewhere else. Personal responsibility again. And – when it's not over, it's not over. Don't stop a spirited session just because of the clock. You may have to negotiate with people who are coming to start a session in that location, but keep going if that's what is needed.

### **Law of Two Feet**

There is one law in open space. It's called the Law of Two Feet, or the Law of Mobility.

People get around in different ways, but the law is this: if at any moment you find you are not learning, or not contributing, where you are, you may go somewhere else where you can be more productive.



It's natural to walk around up to the moment you are sure you want to get involved with an issue or a topic. When you get the feeling that you want to learn or contribute, stay there as long as you want to stay. Go somewhere else when your learning or contributing is over. Doing that, you are honouring yourself and others. Encourage others to do the same by modelling the Law of Two Feet.

### **Bees and Butterflies**

Two creatures tend to show up when the Law of Two Feet is in effect. The first is the bee. What's the function of a bee? Cross-pollination. You know who you are! You will go from group to group, telling this group what's going on in the other group, making connections. Those of you who are bees are quite welcome in open space.

The second is the butterfly. What's the function of a butterfly? To stand around looking beautiful. A butterfly might not go to any sessions. You'll be standing by the food, or outside in the sun, and someone will notice you and come up to start a conversation. It's possible that this will be an important conversation. And it never would have happened if you were not true to yourself. So butterflies are also quite welcome in open space.



### **Letting go of control - self organisation**

No-one is in charge. Everyone's experience and views are honoured. There are no key-note speakers and no set agenda. There isn't a group behind the scenes that knows 'what's best' for the participants. OST enables the participants to decide what's important.

The facilitator also has to let go of control – to let the people do it themselves. The role of the Open Space facilitator is to become invisible.

### **Passion bounded by Responsibility**

OST works because it is based on people's passion bounded by responsibility. People will talk about what they have passion for, and take responsibility for leading a discussion, and preparing a report of that discussion. This doesn't mean that the person with the passion is an 'expert'. Importantly, if a topic that someone is passionate about doesn't get up on the bulletin board, the only person you can blame is the one sitting in your seat!



## **The Theme**

Each open space event has a theme that bounds the topics for discussion. This theme is developed in consultation with the client to identify the theme that is going to most clearly identify the purpose of the OST event.

The theme needs to excite the potential participants. It often includes 'the issues and opportunities' to ensure that people have a chance to engage in broad ranging discussions around the theme.

The theme is known to the participants in advance and they attend the event because they want to. OST simply doesn't work when people are told (by someone else) that they have to go.

## **The Invitation**

Usually an invitation is sent to potential participants and they decide whether or not they will attend the event.

The invitation should include all the usual information:

- Date
- Times
- Venue
- The theme
- A little about the process of OST

## **The Venue**

Choosing an appropriate venue can be one of the most frustrating aspects of planning an OST event. Although OST can be used in all sorts of venues, there are some key requirements that are helpful.

- **The Main Space**

This needs to be the focus of the event and needs to be large enough to comfortably seat people in a circle.

- **The Agenda Wall**

This wall needs to be clear of paintings and other paraphernalia, and large enough for the topics to be posted so as they are not overlapping.

- **Breaking News**

Another wall is needed to post the reports as they become available.

- **Break-Out Spaces**

Note that this section isn't about break out 'rooms' as such. It's important to make sure there are enough spaces (which may or may not be actual rooms) for people to meet in small groups. It's useful to avoid using the main room if you can – although this is not always possible. If you do have to use the main room for break out spaces, try and limit it to two.

Other spaces might be lounge areas, dining rooms, outdoor areas etc.

- **The venue management**

It is most likely that the venue management has never had an OST event before. It's worth spending some time with them explaining how it all works – they will be interested because it will be unlike anything they've seen before.

## **Allocating Spaces and Times**

Here are some 'rules of thumb' to help you allocate time and space



- Try to allocate break out sessions of 90 minutes each

- Allow between 30 and 60 minutes to open the space, get the agenda up and people ready to get to work

- Allow one break out space for every 10 people

## **Proceedings**

One of the key elements of an OST events is that people walk out with the proceedings under their arm. This requires some serious planning on your part, whether the report is printed or electronic.

- **The Proceedings Cover**

Prepare this in advance, and if possible, personalise with each person's name.

- **Contents**

Participant list – OST Principles and Law – Program of Sessions – Reports

- **The Reporting Sheet**

Keep it simple and make sure there are plenty available. Hand a copy to each session leader and have copies in each space. Be aware that some people will prepare reports electronically, take pictures, using drawing or even artefacts.

- **Printing, enlarging and posting reports**

You need access to a photocopier that can print up to A3 size. Once the report is written, keep an A4 copy safe for the proceedings, and do an A3 copy to post on the 'Breaking News' wall.

- **Copying, collating and binding or electronic distribution**

Have this organised IN ADVANCE, with a contingency plan in case everything goes wrong!

## **Materials and Preparation Checklist**



Prepared matrix of spaces and times



Break-out spaces clearly signposted



Marker pens and paper



Posters of the principles and Law



Various coloured post-it notes



Blue-tac or masking tape



Microphones (especially if the group is larger than 40 people)





## Further reading & learning

Holman P & Devane T eds 1999 The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping The Future. Berrett-Koehler San Francisco

Holman P & Devane T eds Open Space Technology : Collaborating For Change 1999 Berrett-Koehler San Francisco

Owen, Harrison.

1991. Riding The Tiger. Potomac, MD. Abbott Publishing

1994. The Millennium Organization. Potomac, MD. Abbott Publishing.

1995. Ed. Tales from Open Space. Potomac, MD. Abbott Publishing.

1997. Expanding Our Now. San Francisco. Berrett-Koehler

1997. Open Space Technology: A User's Guide. San Francisco Berrett-Koehler

1999. The Spirit of Leadership. San Francisco. Berrett-Koehler.

2000. The Power of Spirit – How Organizations Transform. San Francisco. Berrett-Koehler

Wheatley Margaret J & Kellner-Rogers M 1996 A Simpler Way Berrett-Koehler San Francisco

[www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org) (where you can sign up for the OS-LIST)

Chris Corrigan: Open Space Resources on [chriscorrigan.com](http://chriscorrigan.com)

## About the trainers

### **VIV McWATERS**

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Viv McWaters specialises in facilitation – working with groups, disrupting patterns of thinking and acting so as individuals and teams can explore alternative ways of doing the business that matters. Viv’s style is to bring spontaneity to her work backed by robust theoretical knowledge and clear intent that keeps her work fresh and tailored for every session. She has tested herself in lots of other roles – publicist, researcher, community educator, evaluator, trainer, social historian, author, event designer, manager, and founder of her own business.

Viv’s broad-based background spans the agriculture, forestry, conservation, community development, media, and humanitarian aid sectors – as does her education. She studied agricultural science at Longerenong Agricultural College, and has a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies from RMIT University, and a Masters in Applied Science (Agriculture and Rural Development) from the University of Western Sydney. Viv works in Australia and New Zealand, across south-east Asia and the Pacific, and Africa.

Most recently her work has been focused on disaster risk reduction, emergency response, and participatory development – within communities and organisations – building resilience and capacity.

In January 2013 she published [Creative Facilitation: Bringing Meetings to Life](#) eBook with co-author, Johnnie Moore.

### **ANDREW RIXON**

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Andrew is Director of Babel Fish Group, a boutique management consulting company specialising in Stakeholder Engagement, Business Planning and High Performing Teams. Leveraging the power of facilitative and participatory approaches Andrew has worked across many different industries and organisations within Australia and internationally across the US, UK and Asia.

Andrew also works as a management and leadership educator with experience across Melbourne, Monash and Swinburne Universities teaching Organisational Behaviour, Organisational Leadership, Global Business Strategy and Managing the Growing Organisation. Andrew is a member of the global BP Faculty.