

Open Space

Background

Open Space Technology was created in the mid 1980's as a learning experience by Harrison Owens when he discovered that people attending conferences / workshops preferred coffee breaks and lunchtimes more than formal presentation and planning sessions! He discovered that in coffee break and lunchtime, participants chose who they wanted to be with, and shared topics that were of interest to them.

Process

Open Space events or sessions have no keynote speaker, no pre arranged schedule of workshops and no panel discussions. Instead, participants learn initially about a process to create their own learning experience. They go about creating and participating in discussion of their own forces. The steps are simple -

Step One: Processes and key principles are explained.

Step Two: Anyone wanting to initiate a discussion or activity summarises it in a few words or a sentence on a large sheet of paper and then stands up and has less than a minute to announce his/her interest topic to the group. After selecting one of the pre-established times and places, they 'post' their proposed discussions / workshop on a wall.

Step Three: When everyone who wants to initiate / post a topic is done, it is time for what Owen refers to as the 'Village Marketplace' - participant's mill around the wall of options, putting together their personal schedules for the duration of the event.

Step Four: The first discussion / workshops begin immediately.

Open Space Principles

1. Whoever comes is the right people.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
3. Whenever it starts is the right time.
4. When it is over, it is over.
5. 'The Law of Two Feet' - if you find yourself in a group where you are not learning, contributing or enjoying, go somewhere else.

Final Comment

'Open Space is a brilliant combination of order and chaos. It is a useful tool for any group of people (five to one thousand participants) who are really committed to exploring something that they all care deeply about...'
(Harrison Owen)

Resource

Owen H., (1987) *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*

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