

# OPEN SPACE TECH

## A Brief Overview

### Background

"In my experience Open Space is based on the belief that we humans are intelligent, creative, adaptive, meaning- and fun-seeking. It sets the context for such creatures to come together knowing they are going to treat each other well. When this happens there is no limit to what can unfold."

*Alan Stewart*

### Four Main 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.

### Resources

**Book** - Harrison Owen, Open Space Technology: A User's Guide (Berrett-Koehler, 1997)

**Video** - How Open Space Technology works  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UoG24LdU5Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UoG24LdU5Q)

**Websites** -  
[www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org)



## Open Space Technology

was created in the mid- 1980s by organizational consultant Harrison Owen when he discovered that people attending his conferences loved the coffee breaks better than the formal presentations and plenary sessions. Combining that insight with his experience of life in an African village, Owen created a totally new form of meeting.

Open Space meetings begin gathered in a large circle. Participants learn in the first hour how they are going to create their own agenda topics. Almost before they realize it, they become each other's leaders and supporters.

Anyone who wants to initiate a discussion or activity, writes it down on a large sheet of paper in big letters and then stands up and announces it to the group. After selecting one of the many pre-established times and places, they post their proposed conversation on a wall. When everyone who wants to has announced and posted their initial offerings, it is time for "the village marketplace": Participants mill around the wall, putting

together their personal schedules for the remainder of the Open Space session. The first meetings begin immediately.

Open Space is, as Owen likes to say, more highly organized than the best planning committee could possibly manage. It is also chaotic, productive and fun. No one is in control. A whirlwind of activity is guided from within by a handful of simple Open Space principles.

Open Space experiences work best when participants are passionate about the topic and willing to take responsibility for creating new things out of that passion.

There is one Law in Open Space. It is The Law of Mobility or "The Law of Two Feet": "If you find yourself in a situation where you aren't learning or contributing, go somewhere else." (This includes the possibility of moving to another level of awareness and participation, as well as the more obvious one of moving to another activity.) This law causes some participants to flit from activity to activity. Owen rejoices in such people, calling them bumblebees because they cross-pollinate all the workshops. He also celebrates participants who use The Law of Two Feet to go off and sit by themselves. He dubs them butterflies, because they create quiet centres of non- action for stillness, beauty, novelty or random conversations to be born.

Open space meetings can be done in one day, but the most powerful go on for two or three days, or longer. Participants gather together briefly in the morning and the evening to share experiences and announce any new workshops they have concocted. The rest of the day is spent in intense conversation.

Open Space conferences are particularly effective when a large, complex operation needs to be thoroughly reconceptualized and reorganized – when the task is just too big and complicated to be sorted out by a small number of individuals. On the assumption that such a system contains within it the seeds of everything that needs to happen with it, Open Space provides an opportunity to self-organize into new configurations. For this to work, leaders must let go of control so that true self-organization can take place.

Open Space Technology is also a delightful, useful tool for any group of people who are really interested in exploring something that they all care deeply about.

It has been applied in thousands of meetings around the world with between 5 and 1500 participants.

Open Space is a simple and yet brilliant combination of order and chaos.

