

OPEN SPACE

What is it?

Open Space is a method for planning and conducting meetings by having the participants develop and carry out the agenda during the meeting. It empowers individuals and groups by putting the opportunity and responsibility for creating a useful experience in their hands and by providing a structure for doing it. It builds energy, commitment, and shared leadership with the least time wasted on complicated logistics and advance planning.

How does it work?

- Preparation: Before the meeting, organizers articulate a powerful theme statement to galvanize people's interest and define a broad scope for development of session topics. Invitations are issued explaining the theme and Open Space.
- The Process: At the event, participants convene in a circle, the Open Space. On a wall is an empty schedule with times and available meeting spaces. After explaining the theme and the process, the facilitator invites anyone who feels passionately about a topic within the general theme and is willing to lead a session on the topic to write the title and his/her name on a page. Each session leader then comes to the center of the circle, announces/explains the session and its time and place, and places the page on the wall schedule.

Once all sessions are posted, the Open Space becomes a market place and the whole group moves to the wall to sign up for the sessions they wish to attend. Once complete, any necessary scheduling changes are made based on which sessions are filled and participants then proceed to attend the sessions of their choice just like any conference. Session leaders lead by facilitating the participation of everyone in the group. In all day sessions, time is established for morning and evening announcements in the large group. Session leaders are asked to provide a written report on their session for inclusion in the event's proceedings. This can be done on site on laptops or afterwards.

- Closing: A large group meeting is held to close the event at which any participant may comment on what they have learned. If action planning is desired a work group may be formed to follow up after the event, or this may be designed into the Open Space event itself.

When to use it

Open Space works for small and large groups, 20 - 2000. It is especially useful to focus attention on strengths and assets, to think outside the box about the future or to respond to some new situation. It requires open leadership. Open Space can fail for only two reasons: if people show up with no passion and/or if somebody tries to control the process in order to achieve some sort of pre-determined outcome(s).

For more information on open space and other civic engagement processes, contact the WV Center for Civic Life, Betty Knighton director, at info@wvcivicle.org.

Four Principles and a Law

Whoever comes are the right people. Every effort should be made to invite those critical to the objectives of the gathering. Once it begins, those who have shown up by definition are the right people for whatever they choose to design

Whatever happens is the only thing that could. We all are acting in good faith to do the best we can and will not worry about all the things that might have been.

Whenever it starts is the right time. Creativity and real listening and learning have rhythms of their own and watching the clock can be a hindrance. We all take responsibility for the time we take and the contributions we make.

Whenever it's over, it's over. Sometimes things take longer and sometimes things finish before you expect.

Law of Two Feet

“If during the course of the gathering any person finds him or herself in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they can use their two feet and go to some more productive place.” This can be done with grace and sensitivity while leaving each person free to find his or her way to add value to the gathering.

Two helpful roles

Bumblebees may buzz from session to session cross-pollinating and connecting pieces of work

Butterflies may not join any formal sessions, choosing to float at the edges. Sometimes the most amazing solutions seem to come from nowhere—so that's where butterflies tend to look for them.

Open space is not owned by anyone but owes a great deal to the work of Harrison Owen who wrote a book [Open Space Technology: A User's guide](#) in 1997 and continues to be a guiding force in its development. It is used all over the world. Many resources exist at www.openspaceworld.org.