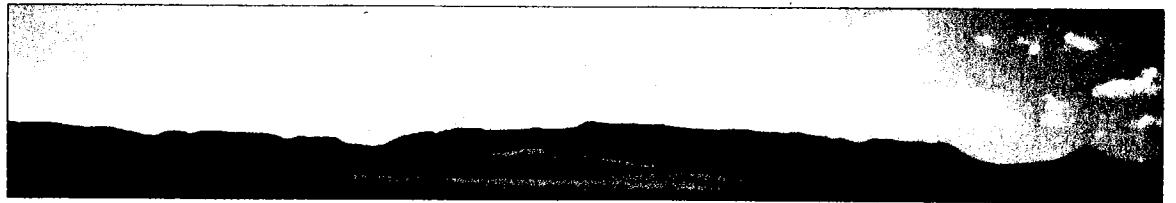


OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

A User's Guide

Second Edition



HARRISON OWEN

Originator of Open Space Technology

Preparation

So you have decided you want to try Open Space—the fact is, it is simple and easy to get started. Nevertheless, some careful preparation is necessary. Not the sort of preparation you may be used to, with months of committee meetings devoted to agenda development and participant selection. But preparation nonetheless.

Appropriateness

The first item to look at is the basic decision of whether to use Open Space Technology or not. In the wrong situation, OST may create more problems than it solves.

Open Space Technology is effective in situations where a diverse group of people must deal with complex and potentially conflicting material in innovative and productive ways. It is particularly powerful when nobody knows the answer and the ongoing participation of a number of people is required to deal with the questions. Conversely, Open Space Technology will not work, and therefore should not be used, in any situation where the answer is already known, where somebody at a high level *thinks* he or she knows the answer, or where that somebody is the sort that *must* know the answer, and therefore must always be in charge, otherwise known as control, control, control.

To take some obvious examples, Open Space Technology would not be the method of choice for installing a new corporate billing system. Presumably the system has been designed, tested, and packaged. At the point of installation, there is little room and even less need for argument, discussion, or change. Simply issue the manuals and allow folks to get on with business.

Conversely, OST will work superbly if the issue is the future of the corporation, and the people (all sorts of people including the top brass) are quite willing to admit that they just do not know the answer, but nevertheless believe that collectively they have a shot at creating a viable solution.

It Always Works

In a curious way, Open Space Technology always seems to work; it just may be that sometimes people are not totally pleased with the results. Not to be mysterious, but in the Open Space environment, people tend to be creative, synergistic (they work together), and self-motivated. If this type of behavior is not desired, it can cause problems.

For example, a Fortune 25 corporation considered OST as a possible component for a new, worldwide orientation program for employees. Their idea was to create a positive and useful first experience by bringing new folks into the fold with the feeling that they had an exciting part to play. Accordingly, they designed a program that would bring together old and new employees to work on issues and opportunities for building a better corporation. One might wonder what the new hires actually had to contribute in such a situation, but the truth of the matter was, a lot. If nothing

else, they had all the questions presumably long since answered by those with more tenure. By revisiting the old questions and finding some new ones, the company thought that everybody might collectively build an effective team that looked to the future.

On the appointed day, a test of the approach was initiated. Sixty-five people, two-thirds of whom had been with the company for less than a year, met with their colleagues. From my point of view, the day was everything it was supposed to be. People talked, worked, energized, synergized, and seemed to have fun. When it was all over, I thought it useful to make a quick assessment of how things had gone. So I asked each person to think of a word that described the day for them. Since the program was designed for the newcomers, it seemed appropriate to ask them for their words first. I was not disappointed, for the words included: *exciting, energizing, stimulating, liberating, and collegial*. Just as I was beginning to feel pleased and proud, I turned to the more senior people and received a nasty shock. Their words: *terrible, unsettling, out of control, confusing, worst day I have ever spent*.

There was no doubting the intensity of feeling displayed by both groups, and I found myself shaking my head in confusion at the obvious difference. Then one of the very senior members said that he had to agree with his colleagues. The day had been awful, and if not the worst, then certainly on a very short list. But in all fairness, he went on to say, Open Space Technology had done everything exactly as advertised. The problem for him was that he felt out of control, and he did not like that at all. As you might gather, this corporation did not use Open Space Technology in its orientation program, but not because it had failed to work.

Focus and Intent

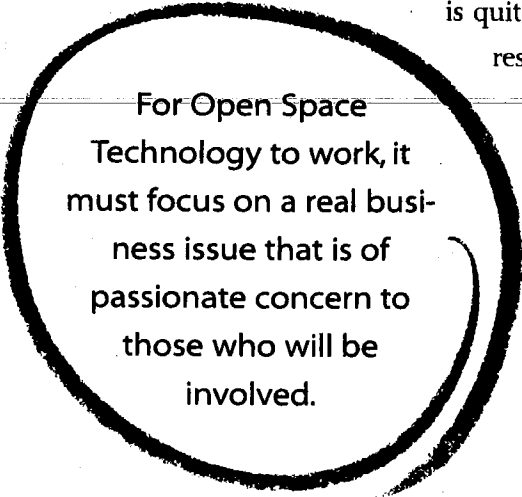
Although Open Space Technology is powerful and effective, never use it for the sake of the process alone, only for the potential results. OST is designed to do a job, to work a real business issue, no matter how you define *business* or *issue*. So a first act of preparation is to determine in concrete terms what you want to accomplish, best stated in a question.

For example, it might be your intent to plot the future of your organization (which some call strategic planning). Your initial question might be: *What are the future issues and opportunities for Oxymoron Corporation? That may seem rather broad, but at least the potential participants would understand that Oxymoron Corporation was on the table and not something else, and further that the whole future was up for consideration, as opposed to simply the compensation scale or new products. As we will discover, Open Space Technology runs on two fundamentals: passion and responsibility. Without passion, nobody is interested. Without responsibility, nothing will get done. Obviously, different people feel passionate about different things (different strokes for different folks). And it*

is quite unlikely that anybody will take responsibility for something they do not care about. It is extremely

important, therefore, to declare right up front what the focus is.

To utilize the example from chapter 1, the 225 people who gathered in Denver felt some real concern about roads on public and tribal lands. The fact that



For Open Space Technology to work, it must focus on a real business issue that is of passionate concern to those who will be involved.

\$1.5 billion was at stake raised their interest even higher and was sufficient to draw them to the gathering and keep them engaged until it was over. It is unlikely, however, that the same group of people would assemble for two days to consider the future of the hardware business.

All of this may appear obvious, but it is amazing how often we find ourselves in solemn assembly with little if any idea as to why we are there, or indeed, who called the meeting. Little wonder that nothing gets done and we leave frustrated. Fuzziness of intention may be tolerated in dictatorial organizations, where the word of the boss is sufficient to provide the rationale, but in the world of Open Space, where passion and responsibility are the essential ingredients, the word of the boss doesn't go very far. There is a more important word: *volunteer*. Being a volunteer is the prime prerequisite for the full expression of passion and responsibility. Only fools volunteer for something they neither understand nor care about.

Under the heading of comprehension and concern, it has been my experience that few people in working organizations care about such abstractions as team building or empowerment, let alone an "Open Space experience." They do care about making a profit, providing a service, creating a product, winning a customer, market share, or even an election. Everything else tends to be viewed as a buzz word, or a "warm fuzzie," drawn from the special vocabulary of strange people who inhabit training departments and the human resource area. As it happens, I think that team building and empowerment are very important, and some of my best friends work in the human resource area. But the point remains: most of the world could care less, which does not make them "bad people," just different.

OST is designed to deal with *real business issues*—no matter how the nature of the business may be defined. If your business happens to be training or human resources, then you may indeed be passionately concerned about what other people may view as "soft stuff." So be it. But never inflict your concerns on others and expect them to care as you do. *For Open Space Technology to work, it must focus on a real business issue that is of passionate concern to those who will be involved.*

The Group

Who should come, and how do you get them there? The answer is: *whoever cares*, and the fact of their caring will be sufficient to insure their attendance. The process of invitation becomes extraordinarily simple. Given the business issue of choice, run it up the flagpole.

I can understand that all of this sounds neither scientific nor orderly. After all, if we only did what we cared to do, not much would get done. Or would it? Isn't it true that jobs done by people who don't care are not worth a whole lot? Is it not also true that people who care greatly accomplish incredible things? And fortunately, there are a lot of different people who care about a lot of different things, which means there is a high likelihood that the majority of things needing to be taken care of will be taken care of—by someone who cares.

The conventional wisdom in many organizations says that until the boss issues the order not much is going to happen. And further, when the order is issued, people in general are not going to like it, because after all, the order requires work. We all know that work is unpleasant or what is retirement for?

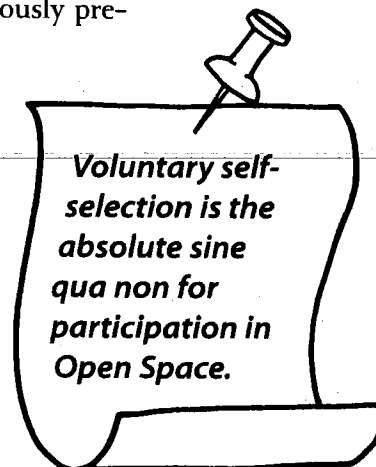
Very quickly, the conventional wisdom creates a negative self-fulfilling prophecy that the only way a job gets done is when we

don't care enough to do it. And that does not make a great deal of sense. The fact is that the best way to get something done well is to give it to somebody who cares enough to do it. Even in those situations where a number of folks are assigned a task, the usual experience is that the actual work is done by a precious few: those who care to do it. So why not avoid all the frustration, guilt, and anger? Assign work only to those who care to do it.

This revolutionary suggestion apparently would not work in what we take to be a standard organization dominated by the conventional wisdom. However, the suggestion points to the heart and soul of Open Space Technology, and the conventional wisdom may well be wrong. For OST to work, people must do their jobs because (and only because) they care. Put in slightly different terms, voluntary self-selection is the absolute sine qua non for participation in an Open Space event.

At this juncture, you may justifiably be wondering about all those people presumed necessary to the task who, for one reason or another, do *not* show up. The answer is painfully simple. If those people are truly essential to the task, the task will not get done until they are ready to do it. Alternatively, it may turn out that those folks were not nearly as essential as previously presumed. In my experience, the latter is most often the case. But the principle remains, the right people for an Open Space event are the ones who want to come: voluntary self-selection is the rule.

None of this is to suggest, however, that maximum best effort is not required to insure that all the appropriate people know about



the event and are given every opportunity to see that participation is in their best interest. In select cases, a personal invitation can be very effective. It is also important that people truly understand the implications of their absence. I have found, for example, that when the issue is the future of the organization (as in strategic planning), people will often find it advantageous to attend lest they not be part of the organizational future.

In the final analysis, the issue is quality and not quantity. It is infinitely better to have a small, select group that truly cares than a cast of thousands whose minds and hearts are elsewhere.

How Many?

OST has worked effectively with groups of from five to one thousand members in face-to-face situations. With a little help from the cybersphere, the constraints of time and space can be stretched, making the potential number of participants theoretically infinite. Of course, practical considerations will reduce that number considerably, but there is no need to worry about overcrowding when it comes to the capacity of Open Space to handle large numbers of people. The real question is how many you need to get the job done.

There is no reason to believe that fewer than five would be unworkable, nor that a thousand is a sort of "sound barrier." I can tell you that one thousand people is a lot of people, and while the energy and excitement is palpable, it scarcely qualifies as an intimate group. At the other end of the numbers scale, there is nothing to suggest that it will not work with fewer than five people. It should be remembered, however, that the total resource available to the group is its membership, which in most cases is more than sufficient. With a group of five, one person represents 20 percent of the total

resource. If that person is feeling a little down or out of sorts, the impact upon the group can be immense. On the other hand, if the same person were feeling a little down in a group of one hundred, the effect of the 1 percent diminution would probably be minimal.

The Invitation

At some point it is usual to issue an invitation. For small groups, it may be verbal, but more often than not something in writing is appropriate. A natural temptation (which must be resisted) is to try to explain everything that will happen during the event, including how and why it will work. After all, we are used to sending out a full agenda in advance with a complete rationalization. Open Space makes that unnecessary. The group will prepare the agenda upon arrival. Thus, providing the agenda is not only unnecessary, it is impossible. So what do you say in the invitation? As little as possible.

The objective is to stimulate the imagination of potential guests to the point that they perceive the pertinence and attractiveness of the issue. In these days of information overload, when it is presumed that more is better, a parsimonious approach may seem strange. Remember, however, that when you give out all possible information, there is no room for imagination. I am not suggesting obfuscation or deceit—just that you say only as much as you need to and allow the creative concern of those who attend to do the rest.

A useful model might be the first paragraph of a really good story. If you tell the whole tale at the outset, nobody would bother reading on. On the other hand, if you say nothing, or little that makes any sense, the reader will not be hooked. The art lies in saying just enough to catch attention, while leaving sufficient open space for the imagination to run wild. Words like *provocative*, *evocative*,

imaginative, or open-ended set the tone, and questions should heavily outweigh statements, for questions create space in which the imagination can grow.

There is, of course, some practical information to be included in the invitation, such as location, time, and logistics. But above everything else, keep it short, simple, and to the point. Simplicity is truly a virtue and it is useful in all areas related to Open Space, beginning with the invitation. In the process of developing OST, I practiced what may seem a rather strange discipline, which I call "less is more." Each time I had an opportunity to run an Open Space event, I attempted to identify one more thing *not* to do. Over the years, I think I have pared it down to the bare-bones essentials.

And what do you say about the process itself? Again, as little as possible. Truthfully, even if you were to send the participants this whole book (God forbid), a substantial number still would not understand, and fewer would believe. But that is not a fatal flaw, for there is another truth. Most people don't really care about the process of a meeting; they care about the issues and the results. So when it comes to explaining Open Space, don't. Simply say that although it may be new to this group, it has been used all over the world with predictable results. By the end of the gathering, the following will have occurred:

- Every issue of concern to anybody will have been raised, if they took responsibility for doing that.
- All issues will have received full discussion, to the extent desired.
- A full report of issues and discussions will be in the hands of all participants.
- Priorities will be set and action plans will be made.

(The last two typically only occur in two- and three-day meetings with computer support.)

For the super-curious, you certainly can give them this book or one of the others to be found on the resource list on page 162. *Tales from Open Space* may be particularly helpful in this regard.

Time and Space

Open Space Technology happens in time and space, and although the requirements are minimal, they are important. Even more important is the understanding that there is no perfect, ideal, or generically optimal time and space for Open Space. Almost anything will work (with some important exceptions). The real question is the appropriateness of both the time and the space to the people and to the task.

How Long?

How much time do you need for Open Space Technology? Within rather broad limits, the answer is that it depends on your intention. On the short end of the scale, less than one full day is usually frustrating. Some colleagues, however, who utilize OST in school systems, have managed to fit the approach into a fifty-minute school hour. Be that as it may, the groups that I work with, which tend to be businesses, bureaucracies, and other organizations, take one full day to really get into the spirit of things. With anything less, they find it is time to stop just when they are truly having fun. One day will allow for a very intense, meaningful, and productive discussion.

If your intention is to produce a set of proceedings, as was the case with the \$1.5 billion event described in chapter 1, a second day is almost essential. The actual proceedings are done with a simple

computer system that will be described in the next chapter. For reasons I do not fully understand, if there is only one day, groups become so engrossed in their discussions that they have little or no time for recording the results. With the knowledge that there will be a second day, participants tend to pace themselves in such a fashion that time appears for the computers. If you say that doesn't make any sense, I must agree with you, but that has been my experience.

Given a third day, the group's interactions take on a wholly different quality. If the first day allows for intense discussion, and the second day for the recording of results, a third day permits prioritization of all issues, convergence of related issues, and the creation of action plans. It is noteworthy that the first two days are not dedicated to separate activities in a linear sequence (discussion then report writing). Rather the group develops a rhythm, or sense of itself, that permits the new activities as time allows. The last day, or more usually half-day, focuses on priorities, convergence, and action planning.

The choice, therefore, between a one-, two-, or three-day event depends entirely on the results required. In one day, the conversation will be stimulating and intense. In two days, that conversation may be recorded for posterity. With three days, priorities can be established and next steps identified.

At the risk of some confusion, I will describe the course of events that holds true for all gatherings (one, two, or three days), and then in chapter 8 I will deal with the special considerations for three-day events.

After Three Days . . .

My mother used to say that after three days guests and fish leave something to be desired. I think the same is true with Open Space

Technology. The reasons have something to do with fatigue levels, which begin to climb, and the natural ebb and flow of group activities, which hit a low point after three days. By the end of three days the energy output has been such that disengagement is the only option. How long groups would have to stay in "neutral" I don't know, but some respite is absolutely essential. After another day or so, I suspect that the cycle would repeat. However, everyone has usually had enough after three days.

OST in Combination

It is sometimes necessary to use OST in combination with other approaches to meetings. There is nothing wrong with this so long as certain principles are kept in mind. The fundamental one is: *Never interrupt Open Space with something else. When you are doing Open Space, do it. When it is over, it is over.*

This means that if you have a series of speakers you want the group to hear, or other programmatic activities you want everybody to be a part of, do it *before* Open Space. The reason is quite simple and relates to the essential precondition of voluntary self-selection, without which Open Space Technology will not work. There will be no problem, however, if the command performance takes place before the Open Space.

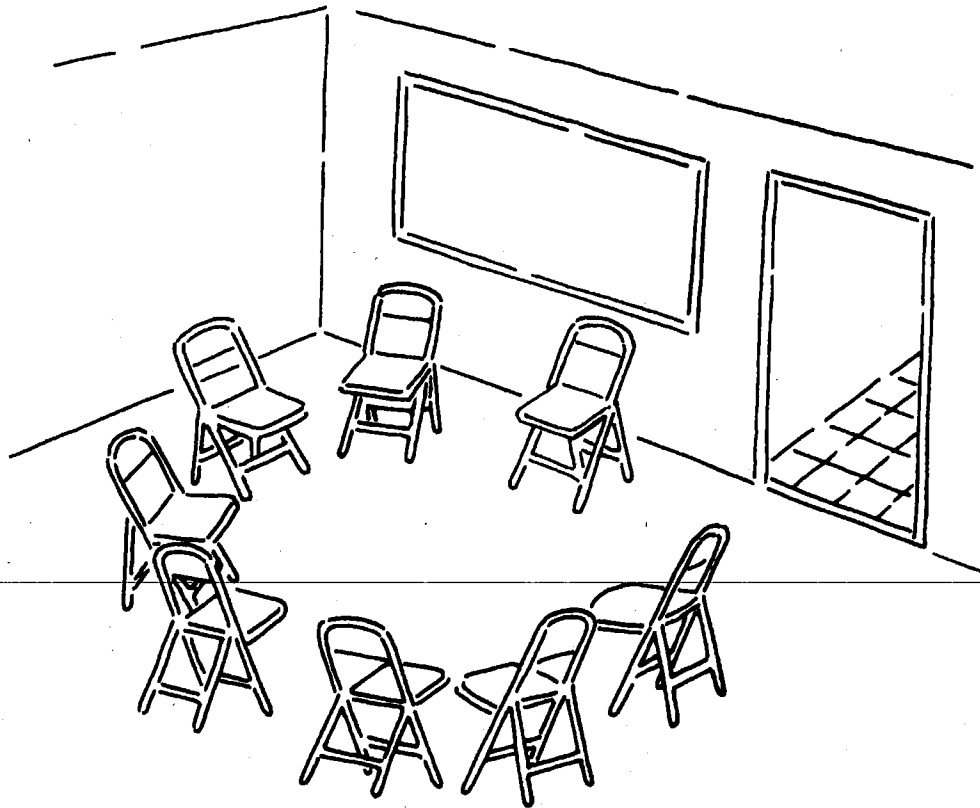
Theoretically, such mandated group events might also follow the Open Space, although experience has shown that the results are less than optimal. The level of synergy and creativity is typically so high in Open Space that it is difficult to sit still and listen to a speaker at the conclusion, even a very exciting speaker.

Space

Open Space Technology requires one main room that is large enough to allow all the participants to sit in a circle, or at the most two or three concentric circles, without crowding. Breakout areas are also required, and we will deal with that issue shortly. When estimating the necessary size of the main room, it usually works to divide the rated capacity by two. Thus if the room is rated for two hundred people theater-style, it will comfortably handle one hundred people in Open Space.

One wall of this room must be free and unobstructed by doors, curtains, windows, or pictures. This wall will become the community bulletin board, where people will be taping up notices indicating their areas of interest. Should masking tape not adhere to the wall, all will be lost. If the hotel management throws a fit at the prospect of material taped to the wall, get a new management, hotel, or both. Just to make sure, I strongly advise doing the "tape test" when the venue is first selected. Apply a piece of the tape to be used to the specific wall and determine that the two will stick together, not just momentarily, but over time and with strain.

It is also useful, but not imperative, to find a room that will be large enough to accommodate the coffee break setup and the computers (if they are going to be used). Placing both of these elements in the large meeting room will insure a constant passage of people in and out, which is very useful for building the group's sense of flow and energy. Security concerns may dictate placing the computers in a separate room, but stealing a full-size personal computer in a busy environment is not all that easy, nor is it something I have ever experienced. Laptops are something else, which is one of the reasons I prefer not to use them.



The point of placing the computers in the main room is to make the report generation process an integral piece of the total fabric. It is not something done by strange people called secretaries. With the computers in the public place, discussions begun in the sessions, halls, and elsewhere continue and grow richer right up to the moment they are captured electronically.

Breakout spaces are required once the process gets going. Note that I said breakout *spaces*, and not necessarily rooms. Some people require four walls, a table, chairs, and a chalkboard (windows optional) before they feel well situated to do anything that looks like work or discussion. For such people, breakout *rooms* are essential.

Other people experience that sort of environment as claustrophobic and greatly appreciate the great outdoors directly, or at the very least mediated through a window. The point is that a variety of meeting spaces is in order.

A great deal of time and effort have been devoted to the understanding of differences in learning styles and pacing (speeds), and there is no doubt that each one of us has our own peculiar requirements that must be met if we are to achieve our optimum performance. Less attention has been given to what might be called *learning spacing*. Each one of us has a set of physical conditions in which we perform best and learn most comfortably. These conditions change with time, subject, and temperament. We all want an environment conducive to our learning, but that environment can be very different for different people, or can even be different for the same people at different times.

Effective circumstances for an Open Space event not only include a sufficient number of formal breakout rooms for those who feel the need of such things, but also a healthy array of other kinds of spaces. Big ones, small ones, by water, in the woods, adjacent to the bar, quiet, noisy, open, closed. I am convinced that the depth and rapidity of learning are directly proportional to the variety of available spaces.

When it comes to formal breakout rooms, a workable rule of thumb is five per one hundred participants. This presumes that there are some additional public spaces in the facility, such as the lobby, gardens, hallways, and of course, the more the better. It also presumes that some people will find it comfortable and convenient to meet in the large main room.

Other Considerations—Like When Do We Eat?

Humankind does not live by discussions alone. Sooner or later, snacks or meals are not only nice but necessary for reasons of physical survival, in addition to providing an important occasion for the ongoing process of dialogue. Unfortunately, most conference coffee breaks and meals are arranged for the convenience of the management, with little regard for the feelings and needs of the participants. When it comes to eating, voluntary self-selection applies just as it does in all other areas of the Open Space experience. To the extent possible, people should be able to refresh themselves when they need and want to, congruent with their other activities. If the discussion has suddenly heated up, no meal bell should be allowed to interrupt. By the same token, when there is a break in the action it is nice to be able to take a pause that refreshes.

Pushed to extremes, this philosophy could well create revolt in the kitchen, which would be a disaster in itself. There are, however, a number of ways to avoid this. For example, all meals can be served as buffets over a several-hour period, allowing people to come and go as they please. For coffee breaks, try replacing the fifteen-minute mad dash, which nobody observes anyhow, with a more leisurely approach. The world will not come to an end if the beverages and snacks are left out for an hour or longer. Of course, things do get cold, or warm, over time, but that problem can be solved by serving foods that do well at room temperature over extended periods of time, such as fresh fruit.

Another strategy is to hold the meeting in a place with easy access to a number of restaurants, all of which have different hours and cuisines. In this way the fate of the total population is not solely

in the hands of one kitchen staff. With virtually no effort, it is possible to insure that there is never a time when something good to eat or drink is not available. This may be somewhat difficult on the waistline, but it has definite advantages for a methodology that took its original inspiration from the coffee break.

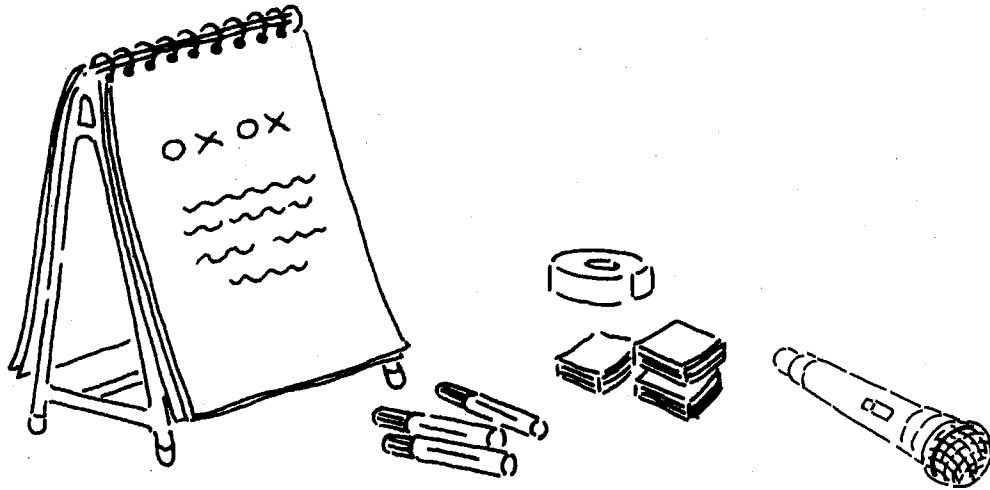
The easy availability of a variety of food and drink over time becomes especially important when multiple cultures are present at a single conference. For example, Americans typically have lunch at noon, with the program resuming an hour later. Dinner appears at six or, at the very latest, seven o'clock. Most of the rest of the world considers this schedule madness and heresy. Siestas are interrupted and the possibility of the late evening dinner precluded. Result? Unhappy people!

The solution is simple. Make it possible for everybody to eat and sleep when they want to. Open Space permits such flexibility while still allowing the task to get done. There is no reason why participants should become prisoners of the kitchen staff. Should the participants also have traveled some distance to attend, the variety of time zones will compound differences of cultures. It is difficult to participate effectively when the belly is unhappy and growling.

Supplies

The basic supplies for Open Space are simple but essential. In chapter 5, I will describe in detail how the following items are used, but under the heading of preparation, the following materials need to be secured:

- **Masking Tape**—five rolls (one-half inch)
- **Ink Markers**—dark primary colors, preferably washable, about fifty per one hundred participants



- **Flip Charts**—one chart with stand per breakout room, five extra pads
- **Post-its**—3x5 size, two packages of one hundred per package

These quantities are not precise, and if your group is very artistic, loquacious, or wasteful, you may need more.

If your group is going to do things like create a set of proceedings, set priorities, and prepare action plans, you may require a number of computers. (See chapter 3.) But bare-bones Open Space will function just fine with the minimal supplies described above. It is even possible to do proceedings, priorities, and action plans without computers, but only for relatively small groups.

A final necessity is a microphone for groups of seventy-five and above, unless the acoustics are superb. In order for the process to work well, people have to hear each other, and soft voices tend to drown in the carpet. A wireless mike is best, for long cords present an unacceptable hazard, particularly when the group starts to move about, which it will. If a wireless mike is unavailable, however, a

corded mike will do, but with the following considerations. First of all, make sure that the cord is long enough to reach any point in the circle. With large groups, this may mean as much as two hundred feet of cord, and that is a lot of wire. Secondly, be very careful when the group starts to move, or somebody will trip, be garroted, or worse.

Consultation with the Management

The management of your conference facility is a most important part of your team. If they have never supported an Open Space event, it is essential that you spend as much time as is necessary to make them feel comfortable and part of the action. They will find that OST is much easier to host, but because it is different, it may seem a little strange.

I find it useful to talk about the total concept, how it got started, and what the experience has been, in addition to the standard details that are usually covered in preconference meetings. They need to know, for example, not only that you need meals on a flexible schedule and refreshments available at all times, but why this is important. As professionals whose business it is to support various sorts of gatherings, I think you will find that their interest will be strong.

If you are fortunate to be the only guests in the facility, a condition I strongly recommend, there will be no problems with other guests. However, if you are sharing a facility, it is quite possible that the apparently random coming and going of the Open Space group may be a little disconcerting to others whose approach to meetings is in the more traditional mode. All of these problems can be avoided if it is clear in advance where your people should not go. If you find

there are too many prohibitions, it may be best to seek an alternative facility.

Under ideal circumstances, the facility staff will feel free to join in the festivities as appropriate. Obviously, if proprietary information or other sensitive matter is being discussed, outsiders will not be useful. But where and when that is not the case, a welcome mat for your hosts is always a plus.

Checklist for Open Space

Appropriateness

Should we even take this trip? Is OST right for our purposes?

Theme

Is it clear, focused, but with sufficient room to let the imagination grow?

Invitation

Is there sufficient information to insure that our guests arrive at the right place, at the right time, ready to go to work? Does our description of the task evoke participation without prescribing the detailed outcome?

Time

Have we allotted sufficient time for what we want to do? One day for a good discussion, two days for a written record, three days to put it all together.

Main Space

Is our main meeting room large enough so that all of our participants may sit comfortably in a circle, or two or three concentric circles, with room to spare?

The Wall

Do we have a relatively unobstructed wall in our main meeting room, long enough so that all of our participants can stand in front of it and not be more than two or three persons deep? Will masking tape stick to the wall? Will the management object if the tape does stick? Did we do the "tape test"?

 Other Spaces

Do we have sufficient breakout rooms for those who like a formal setting (five rooms per one hundred participants)? Will other people with other tastes find something to their liking? Have we advised the management that our participants are likely to be working all over the facility? Are there any areas where our people should not go?

 Food and Drink

Have we made arrangements for the maximum possible flexibility for meals and snacks? Will there be plenty of variety available most of the time?

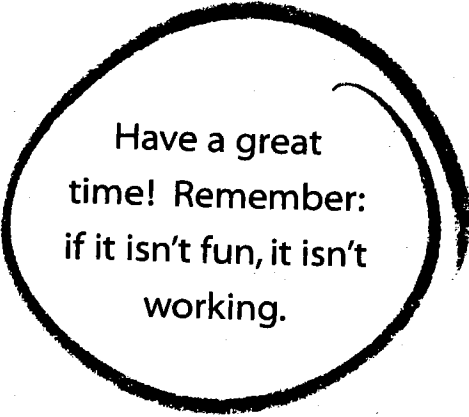
 Supplies and Equipment

Do we have the necessary supplies ready to go?

- **Masking Tape**—five rolls (one-half inch)
- **Ink Markers**—dark primary colors, preferably washable, about fifty per one hundred participants
- **Flip Charts**—one chart with stand per breakout room, five extra pads
- **Post-its**—3x5 size, two packages of one hundred per package
- **Microphone**—cordless if possible, or with sufficient cord to reach all points of the circle

Consultation with the Management

Have we spent some good, quality time with the facility management? They need to know that an Open Space event is probably unlike anything they have experienced before. Because of the simplicity of the arrangements and the responsibility of the participants, management's job is always a lot easier and may actually be quite fun. If you feel free to do so, invite the staff to participate at whatever level seems appropriate. After all, they are a very important part of the team.



Have a great
time! Remember:
if it isn't fun, it isn't
working.

Getting Started: Creating Time and Space

The preparations have been made and the people are assembled; everybody is sitting in a circle. The middle is open space except for a small pile of markers, masking tape, and quarter-sheets of flip-chart paper. It is time to get started.

The initiatory activities of an Open Space event are designed to move people as quickly as possible into active, synergistic co-creation. This is not the time for speeches, lengthy explanations, or acknowledgments. What transpires is the absolute minimum necessary to get the show on the road. Over the years, operating under the principle that less is more, I have found it possible to reduce the opening ceremonies to something close to one and one-half hours. By the end of that time, people will know what they are doing, will have created their agenda (task groups, discussion groups, and the like), and will be heading off to work.

Initiation consists of the following six stages:

1. Welcome
2. Focus the Group
3. State the Theme
4. Describe the Process
5. Create the Community Bulletin Board
6. Open the Village Marketplace

STAGES OF INITIATION

1. **Welcome**
2. **Focus the Group**
3. **State the Theme**
4. **Describe the Process**
5. **Create the Community Bulletin Board**
6. **Open the Village Marketplace**

What follows is my usual approach, but please note, there is no one right way. My way works for me and is dependent on my style, chemistry, and relationships with the groups, along with a host of other individual factors of which I am not aware. What you do will have to be tailored to your idiosyncrasies and those of your group. Having said this, I also believe there is a logic to what I do, and as minimal as each stage along the way may appear, there is a reason for its shape and form. I suggest, therefore, that you try it according to the book once or twice, and then throw caution to the wind. There are certain principles I think you will be well advised to keep in mind, and I will do my best to point them out as we go along. As for the details, this is strictly a "do your own thing" party.

Welcome

Unless you are hosting your own group, the first person to speak in the circle is the official sponsor, whoever that may be. Particularly if you are an external facilitator, it is important that the assembled

body be greeted by somebody they all know, or know of. The meeting environment is not the standard one, and the process of creating the safe space necessary for that particular group to get on with its unique business can only begin when they feel some degree of familiarity and ownership. Seeing a familiar face at the start is a good beginning.

The words spoken should be brief, indeed there is rarely need for more than a few. The invitation will have taken care of the whys and wherefores for gathering, and all the information essential to getting the event off and running will be provided by the facilitator. Recommended speech in this situation goes something like the following: "Welcome to you all. I know we are going to have a useful time together, and now is the moment to get on with it. Here's Harrison . . ." Short, sweet, and to the point. And of course, if there are some essential logistics to be communicated, that can be done too, but above everything else, keep it brief.

Focus the Group

It is my practice to stand outside the circle until I have been introduced. This is not about shyness. In most cases, few if any of the participants will have the least clue as to who I am, so there is little reason for me to be cluttering up the space until I am needed. Once introduced, I come to the edge of the circle and say something simple like, "Welcome to Open Space." I then start walking slowly around the inside of the circle, and as I go, I invite the participants to let their eyes trace the circle to see who is there. The important thing is to move with slow deliberation and allow people time to really see who is sitting in the circle, even if they do not know who the other people are. The slow pace also enables everyone to catch

their breath before rushing onward. By the time I come back around to my starting point, a significant change has taken place. The empty Open Space, which may have seemed hostile and forbidding to many, has now been invisibly filled with the hopes and expectations of the group as a whole, and no word, save for mine, has been spoken. The process is well under way.

State the Theme

The next order of business is to make clear the purpose of the meeting. If you are standing at the edge of the circle, as I usually am, now is a good time to move into the center. From that position, words describing why we are here and what we propose to do will come quite naturally. Avoid long histories or detailed presentations, for people will have received invitations that presumably gave them the necessary details. This is simply a destination check. The plane is leaving for Chicago, and if that is not what some passengers had in mind, now would be a good time to get off.

If you find yourself forgetting what comes next in the process, check the signs on the walls. Remember that you placed them in sequence, starting with the theme. All you have to do to keep your place is let your eyes run around the walls. And nobody will even know you are doing that.

The statement of the theme, purpose, objective should be done in such a way that juices start to flow—more evocative and provocative than descriptive or prescriptive. Do not haul out the mission and goals statement that everybody worked so hard on a year ago, and which has subsequently put group after group soundly to sleep. Now is the time to inspire. *Open Space Technology runs on passion bounded by*

responsibility. If passion isn't aroused, not much is going to happen, and responsibility will never have a chance.

This is also a good time to outline any specific expectations in terms of the end product of the event, the form of the product, or what will be done with it. If all you anticipate is a good airing of general issues, say that, but if the expectation is more precise, that expectation should be articulated. So, for example, if you expect to write up a set of proceedings, as was the case with the \$1.5 billion meeting in Denver, Colorado (see chapter 1), it wouldn't hurt to say something like:

By the end of our time together, we will have written our proceedings. I have here in my hands the front cover and the back cover. As you can see, there is nothing in between. That empty space will remain so unless, or until, we all get to work. To help us with all that we have some very friendly computers located in our Newsroom. But I am sure that we will rise to the occasion, and I can assure you that by the time we leave, you will have your own personal copy in hand. How all of that is going to happen, we will talk about in a moment, but for now just know—it will get done.

Notice the upbeat flavor. The intent is to set positive expectations ("... it will get done."), which is entirely different from ordering people to do something. I also make the point of using "we" as opposed to "you" whenever that fits. As the facilitator, it is not my job to tell anybody to do anything. It is my job to help "all of us" understand that we are truly in this together, and that togetherness is a tremendous resource. Now if these words, or these kinds of words, don't come easily from your mouth, don't worry about it. Find different ones that work for you and do the same thing.

By the end of this stage, the group should know where it is going and be excited to get there. Don't take any more time than is necessary for the task. Indeed, if the group is already charged up when they convene, skip all of the above and go with something like: *We all know why we are here, so let's get on with the business.*

Describe the Process

By now people should be charged up and more than a little curious as to what happens next. If your written invitation was parsimonious, as suggested, participants will have only the barest details, and a few of them may be wondering how they ever let themselves be talked into attending such a strange event. In a word, the troops may be more than a little restless and anxious. All of that is to the good, for both the restlessness and the anxiety can be turned and focused, providing the power for liftoff. Of course, you will have to deal carefully with the possibility that either anxiety or restlessness may go too far, and I will suggest some means to limit that liability in a moment. But please note, I didn't say *out of control*, for if you ever think things can be under control, particularly your control, think again. It will never happen, and should you succeed, the whole enterprise would come to a screeching halt.

I usually start this stage with a comment made as casually as I am able, which also briefly provides something of the history of Open Space Technology.

In case you are curious about how we are going to get from here to there . . . well, it is called Open Space Technology. OST has been developed over a period of time, starting in 1985. It has been used in America, Europe, India, South America, and Africa with groups of from five to five hundred members. The results have been out-

standing. For example, can you imagine 225 people self-organizing a fifty-three-workshop conference in less than one hour, self-managing it over a two-day period, and walking out with 150 pages of proceedings in their hands forty-eight hours after they started? It happened. It can happen here.

I make no effort to give a full accounting of the approach. The objective is not to prove that it can work on the basis of prior experience, but rather to plant the idea that it really has been done before and to set some expectations that this group will join the others in a positive and successful experience.

There are also some other things going on with these words. By citing the numbers and accomplishments of past participants and then asking if people can imagine such a situation, I am intentionally stretching the credibility of the group, possibly to the point of breaking. For the truth of the matter is, unless the members have already participated in an Open Space event, they will find it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine anything like what is described. The conventional wisdom says you just do not (cannot) do things like it, and most people are bounded by the dictates of the conventional wisdom. Were one to ask the group, at precisely this moment, what degree of success they might predict for the whole enterprise, it is quite likely that the consensus would be: None!

You may be questioning the wisdom and utility of raising the group's awareness regarding the apparent impossibility of their task. The reasons to do this are twofold. First, as they acknowledge their anxiety, they will effectively be able to own it and thereby make it available down the road as a source of energy. Of course, I don't want them to become too anxious or they will freeze, but we will deal with the balance as we go along. The second reason, however, is

the major one. When a group does the impossible within the first hour of its meeting, it is very hard to stop them after that. This is called empowerment.

Once the adrenaline is running, it is time to put some content into the notion of Open Space Technology. The approach here is fairly straightforward.

You may be wondering how we are going to do all of this. Actually, it is quite simple. In just a little while, I am going to ask each one of you who cares to—and nobody has to—to identify some issue or opportunity related to our theme for which you have genuine passion and for which you will take real responsibility. Don't just consider good ideas that somebody else might do or be interested in. Think of powerful ideas that really grab you to the point that you will take personal responsibility to make sure that something gets done.

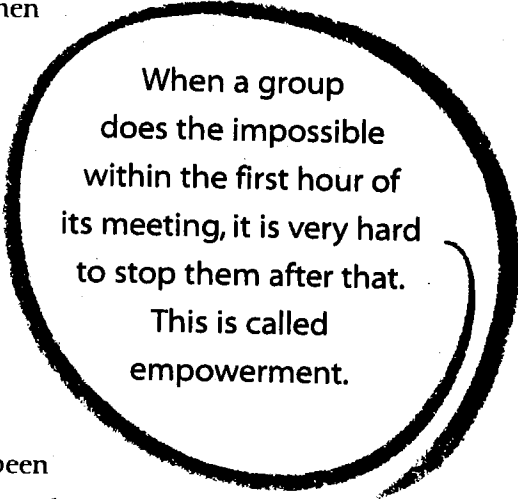
If nothing occurs to you, that is okay, and if you have more than one issue or opportunity, that is fine too. Once you have your issue or opportunity in mind, come out into the center of the circle, grab a piece of paper and a marker. If you have more than one issue, take several pieces of paper. Write down a short title and sign your name. Then stand in front of the group and say, "My issue is . . . and my name is . . ." After you have announced your theme, take your piece of paper and tape it up on that blank wall.

Note particularly the introduction of the twin power points of passion and responsibility, all in the context of the ritual act of walking to the center of the circle in order to announce theme and name. If the circle is large, and particularly if the assembled group is an intact work group, the journey to the center is a long one indeed,

and not to be entered upon lightly. When a person says, "My issue is . . . and my name is . . ." out there in front of everybody, a commitment has been made.

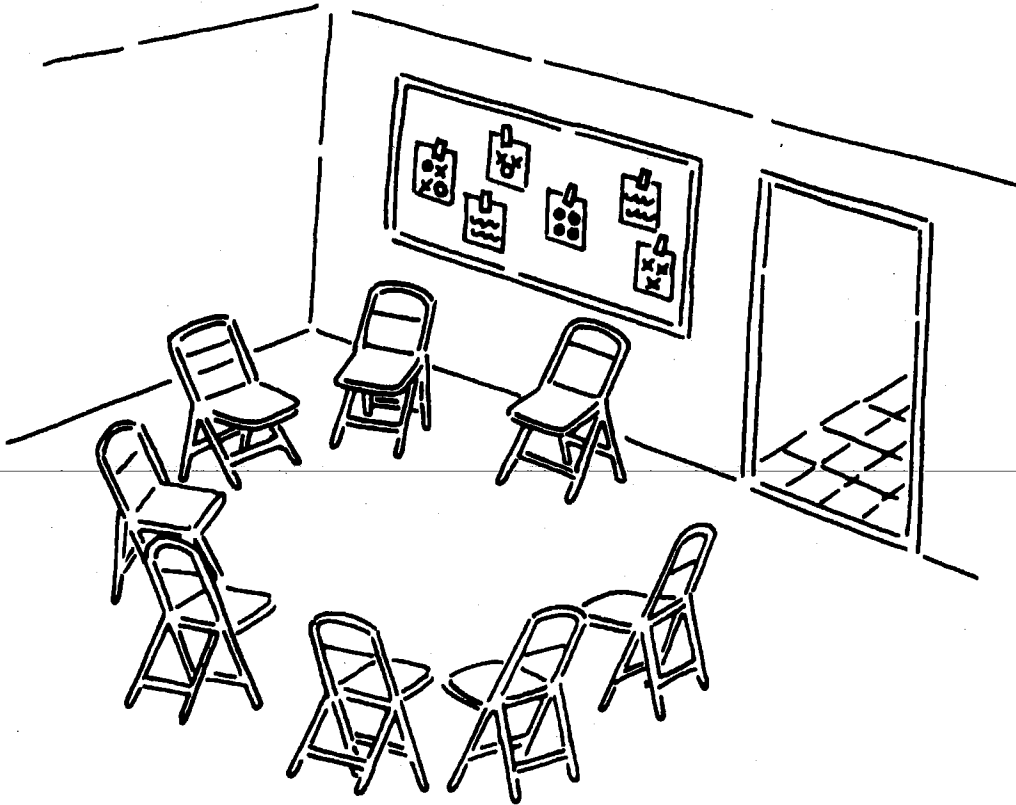
Some people have wondered whether the very rigor of the journey to the center of the circle might not discourage a few folks and eliminate some good ideas. The answer is obviously yes. But my experience has been that no good ideas, supported by passion, disappear (by definition). The world is full of good ideas, but without passionate commitment, they are worth little and go nowhere. In an Open Space environment, where the fundamental condition for success is self-management, passionless good ideas are not only useless, they are a liability. They consume precious space and further suggest that somebody (usually the unnamed great *they*) should be taking responsibility. The point is: *they* do not exist, and nothing will get done until I, you, or we get on with business.

Just about now you may notice many pairs of eyes beginning to fixate on the large, blank wall reserved for the community bulletin board. Usually at this moment people feel, and sometimes express, a degree of apprehension. After all, most people who found themselves sitting in a room with their peers, colleagues, or perfect strangers and looking at a blank wall supposedly representative of their agenda for the next day, or God forbid, three days, would feel nervousness. What are they going to do? How did they get into this mess? Picking up on those feelings, I say:



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Just out of curiosity, how many of you have ever been to a one- (two-, three-) day meeting where the total agenda was represented by a blank wall? I suspect that more than a few of you are beginning to wonder how you got into this, and more importantly, how you are going to get out of it. Well, I have a promise for you. If at this moment you are looking at that wall and wondering "what on earth are we going to do for the rest of our time together?" I promise that within an hour you will be looking at that same wall and wondering "how are we going to get it all done?"



Then it is time to go back to explaining the process. Point out that proposing an area of discussion and taking responsibility for it does not require that the proposer be an expert or that a formal presentation be given. Either or both of those can be true, but it is equally possible that the proposer is virtually ignorant on the particular subject and is looking for some people with whom to share the ignorance and develop some knowledge. Taking responsibility means that the proposer will designate a time and a place and then convene the session. If proceedings are to be created, the convener has the additional responsibility of entering the results of the discussion into the computer, or if they are terribly cyberphobic, finding somebody else to do the chore.

Finding a time and a place may be as simple as indicating the swimming pool at 3:00 p.m. The time can be anytime during the conference, and the place anywhere that people feel comfortable. For some this will be the public areas of the facility, others may choose to go off the site. One time at a seaside conference center, a group decided to meet on a boat in the middle of the bay.

For those individuals who prefer the security of four walls and a formal meeting setting, a breakout room is probably the setting of choice. Whereas the swimming pool area and other public spaces are expandable, breakout rooms do not work that way. But slotting folks into meeting spaces is easily handled with the space/time matrix previously described, and which now should be hanging in the center of the wall. To use the matrix, invite people to pass by it on their way to the wall to post their issue (after they have announced their issue), and to remove the Post-it of their choice from the space/time matrix and affix it to their issue paper. Affixing that Post-it to their paper accomplishes two things: everyone now

will be able to tell where and when the session will be, and simultaneously, all following session leaders will know by the absence of the Post-it on the matrix that the room is taken at that particular time on that day.

You may have noted the one-and-one-half-hour lunch period and thought it excessive, but after all, lunch is a time for further conversation and nobody said that meetings could not be held during that time. And with that amount of time, you can also work in a siesta, which is a marvelous way to revive sagging energy in the middle of the day. And of course, if you have southern European or Latin American participants, they will appreciate the thought. They know what some of their faster-paced colleagues to the North tend to forget, "No day is so bad that it cannot be improved with a nap." (Carrie Snow)

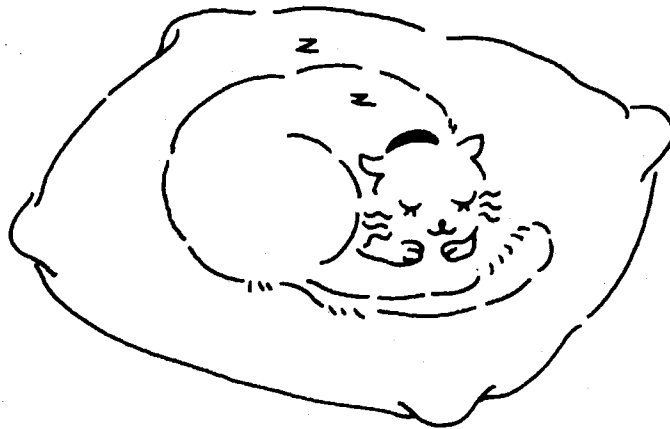
Assure the assembled group that no area of interest will be denied and urge everyone to put up as many announcements as they want.

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*"No day is so bad that it cannot
be improved with a nap."
(Carrie Snow)*



The point you want to make is: if at the end of the day some participant finds him or herself saying, "But they didn't ever take a look at my issue," there is absolutely nobody to blame but oneself.

Once I have described the creation of the bulletin board in some detail, I move on to talk about the village marketplace. There is not much to say here because it is so intuitive. The essential action is that participants sign up for as many groups as they have interest in. I urge people to sign up for more groups than they can physically attend. It often turns out that groups are canceled or combined, or it is always possible to attend more than one group in a single time slot by leaving early or coming late. Some people actually make a practice of this behavior; I call them bumblebees. (See the Law of Two Feet on page 98.)

Questions?

At this point, you have described the basic mechanisms of Open Space Technology and some participants may have some questions. My advice is don't take any; keep on going.

The OST mechanisms are so intuitive that even when the language of the facilitator is not the participants' native tongue there has never been any problem in understanding what needs to be done. Furthermore, once the action starts, any possible confusion is resolved by simply watching those who do understand. The point is, answering questions is unnecessary. It may be polite, but it mainly slows things down, and it is most important to keep moving.

In addition, questions are often asked as a means of either covering up or dealing with anxiety. At worst, they open the way for lengthy discussions, and sometimes debates, about whether the process will really work, past experience, and the like. Inasmuch as

every group I have ever worked with is always sure that the process will *not* work with their group, I can safely say that the possibility of logically convincing anybody that success is near at hand is nil. The only useful proof will be the actual group performance. And the only way to get there is to keep moving.

But before the group can be cut loose to deal with their business, they need to know about the four principles and the one law, which are the subjects of the next chapter.