

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

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Introduction

Open Space Technology (OST) is the name given to a procedure for organising conferences developed over a period of 15 years by Harrison Owen, an American. His academic background and training centred on the nature and function of myth, ritual and culture, and the concept of the procedure arose from this. We got the information from his book: *'Open Space Technology, A User's Guide'* published by Berret-Koehler Publishers Inc. of San Francisco in 1997.

The weekend 1st - 3rd December 2000 had originally been programmed as a Network Weekend but later we decided to use it as a Research Weekend. George Giangrande and Andy Langford offered to run the weekend using OST, partly as a good way to organise the weekend and partly as a research experiment in its own right. This was accepted, though not without some dissent.

Those who had booked for the weekend were advised of the decision to use OST and some, including myself, had the opportunity of reading the book in advance. 21 people took part in the weekend.

The System

OST depends both on a group being focused on an issue of real concern to all those who choose to participate, and on individuals taking responsibility for creating the agenda and ensuring they are positively contributing at all times during the event. No one should attend an OST event without having a real passion about the question the group is focusing on. The focus, or theme of the conference, has therefore to be determined in advance. The precise details to be discussed concerning the issues arising from the theme of the conference are not decided in advance by the organisers but are proposed by the participants themselves. Everything about OST is arranged to create as much openness as possible to get the maximum creativity from the group.

The first meeting of the event is a process called 'Creating the Community Bulletin Board', and 'Opening the Village Market Place' (this is described in detail below). Groups are created by individuals agreeing to convene a session about a subject that they are passionate about. Each group meets according to a schedule that is created in advance and convenors then choose the space and time of their session. Furthermore, the system is such that each group produces written minutes and these minutes are collated into a conference report which is given to each participant during the conference. Not only that, but an action plan is decided upon before the conference closes.

With regard to the discussions, Owen puts forward four principles and one law. Also there are bumblebees and butterflies.

The four principles are:

- Whoever comes is the right people. (sic)
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
- Whenever it starts is the right time.
- When it's over, it's over.

The law is the Law of Two Feet, which says that *'If, during the course of the gathering, any person finds him or herself in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they must use their two feet and go to some more productive place'*.

Bumblebees are those people who take the freedom of the law very seriously and use their two feet, constantly flitting from meeting to meeting. The theory is that, like their counterparts in nature, they pollinate and cross-pollinate, lending richness and variety to the discussions.

Butterflies are those who choose not to go to the sessions but will talk to people in between times. Owen reckons that their contribution is to create centres of nonaction, where silence may be enjoyed or some new, unexplored topic of conversation be engaged.

Owen considers that both bumblebees and butterflies are an important part of the process and have a lot to contribute.

He also emphasises the importance of sitting in a circle and the use of a talking stick, of which he says that a microphone is a contemporary version. But these are established Braziers' techniques so we had no problem.

Preparation

We used the Inner Hall as the central meeting place, what Owen calls the 'Open Space'. Much of the furniture was taken out so as to provide more room. Sessions took place in the Drawing Room, the Study, the Small Sitting Room and the Library. Owen calls these 'Breakout Areas'. Four proved to be enough.

No doubt because of his background of myth and ritual, Owen says that he likes, before the conference begins, to place himself in the midst of the energy or Spirit that will fill the hall. George did a somewhat similar thing by cleansing or 'smudging' the rooms that we were going to use.

Various signs were placed round the Inner Hall. They were as follows: 'The four principles', 'The one law'; a sign saying 'Be Prepared to be Surprised'; the theme of the conference, 'Braziers' Research'; the schedule (or timetable); and a Space/Time Matrix (for planning when and where the sessions would take place).

A table was placed in the centre of the room with paper and marker pens on it.

Owen goes into some detail about the layout and arrangement of the room and considers it very important. The Inner Hall lent itself ideally to his requirements. He also says that the exact wording of the conference theme should be carefully worked out and that it should be in the form of a question. We produced a sign that said 'Braziers' Research' and a grid asking questions like who?, what?, when? etc. This was the agreed focus of the event. All reports are computer produced immediately after the sessions so we set up a computer in the Small Sitting Room. Lap top computers were also used and at one time I noticed four computers being used at once.

Deciding the Issues

The first session took place on the Friday night, planned from 8 to 10 o'clock. Everyone gathered in the Open Space. Being Braziers, we started with an introductory round and then an explanation was given by Andy and George covering what Open Space Technology was, what we were going to do, and how we were going to set about it.

Next, Andy held a brainstorming session on the theme of the conference. This was done to help people focus on research, and as a way to lower the anxiety that had been expressed over the preceding week about using OST.

Then we got down to deciding the issues to be discussed. People with an issue that they passionately wanted to discuss were invited to become the convenor of their theme and: Come to the table in the centre of the room. Take a piece of paper and write their name and a title for their issue. Hold it up and state loudly what they have written. Go to the space/time matrix and choose a time and place for their session. Stick their piece of paper to the wall.

Other people were then invited to sign up for attendance at their chosen sessions. Owen calls this process the Village Market Place. We found that many people preferred not to sign up until the next day, so as to allow time for reflection.

We had four rooms and four time slots, which allowed for 16 sessions in all. In fact we ended up with 10, since linked themes could be combined.

The whole session took an hour and a half so we stopped at 9.30. 'When it's over, it's over'.

The Sessions

These took place on the Saturday: two in the morning, one in the afternoon and one after tea. In the evening, as it happened, there was a special dinner and a party, not connected with the conference.

The sessions were much like any other Braziers' sessions, except for the bumblebees. Some people enjoyed being allowed to flit from session to session while some others found this procedure intensely irritating. 21 people were involved, including three of the foreign houseteam. Four went to only one session each but George and Sarah, by behaving as bumblebees, managed to attend six sessions each.

Reporting Back

Each convenor was made responsible for producing, or arranging for the production of, the minutes. These had to be computer produced (in one or two cases someone else kindly transcribed hand written notes), to record the title of the issue, the name of the convenor, the names of the participants (including bumblebees) and a record of the proceedings. This was required to be preferably one, but certainly not more than two, pages long.

We are used to taking minutes so I didn't notice any problem with this though, as I say, at one time no fewer than four computers were going. The printer was wired up to two of them.

The printed minutes were stuck on the wall of the Inner Hall so that they could be read as the conference proceeded.

The Report

All the minutes had to be ready by the Saturday evening and they were all filed in one folder on the computer. From this, all ten sets of minutes were printed and bound together.

A set was then photocopied for each participant and these sets were all available after breakfast on the Sunday. The photocopier ran out of toner.

Analysis

The group as a whole gathered in the Inner Hall on Sunday morning for the consideration of the report. Owen divides this into three steps: Reading time and Prioritisation, Convergence and Action Steps and Action Meetings.

Though everything went smoothly, I realised when writing this report that we had not followed the book very closely through these steps. The facilitators decided to risk telescoping the analysis process into a morning, when a whole day is usually allocated. This seems to have worked because we at Braziers are very experienced with working in groups Half an hour was allowed for reading the report. Then we were asked to identify topics for further action arising for the report. These turned out not to be the same issues that we had been debating so I have used a different word, *topics*, for them. Owen uses the same word, *issues*, for both and I suspect he meant them to be the same. We identified 14 topics which were written up on a flip chart.

Then we went on to prioritise the topics. Each topic was given a number and the numbers were written on a white board. Each person was given ten votes. They could use all ten votes on one topic, one vote on each of ten topics, or anything in between. This is not exactly the method Owen recommends but it seems to me to be simpler and just as effective. When we did it, everyone supported more than one topic. One person allocated six votes to one topic, two allocated five votes, and there were several fours.

The votes for each topic were added up and written on the white board. One topic, the appointment of the Research Committee, got 30 votes, six got between 15 and 18 votes, and the remaining 7 got 7 or fewer.



Maurice Roth, author of this paper, studying the OST session programme in the inner hall.

This pattern is much as Owen predicts. We also noted the number of people who had voted for each topic and highlighted all votes of 4 or more.

Owen then goes on to talk about convergence, ie associating the lower priority topics with those of higher priority. We didn't bother.

Further Action

The topics which were given the most votes Owen refers to as Hot Issues. He suggests that Champions be appointed to convene Action Meetings to look at these and determine the immediate next steps. We did this. The Hot Issues ultimately selected for further action were:

The creation of a Research Committee with agreement on the skills its members would require.

Clarification and re-evaluation of Norman Glaister's ideas.

Research into 'Critical Incidents'.

Land use at Braziers.

Making as a way of thinking.

He also regards as *Critical Issues* those which were given a large number of votes by a single individual and should not be lost sight of even though they are not Hot Issues. They mean a lot to someone. As I said, we highlighted these.

Conclusion

The conference ended with the usual Braziers round and many congratulations to Andy and George who had done all the hard work for organising it. Everyone enjoyed it and even the doubters had to admit, even if grudgingly, that the system worked very well. I have no doubt that we shall do it again, and two possible occasions have already been suggested.

Names of participants and convenors with their chosen issues, a full list of topics initially suggested for further action and the reactions of the two organisers are available on request.

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