

OPEN SPACE DISCUSSION TECHNIQUE

WHAT IS IT?

It is a self-organizing way of facilitating communication, commitment, and action supporting the inherent creativity and leadership in people.

The term “Open Space” literally refers to the central open space, marketplace, or town commons which serves in any community as the regular gathering place for ideas, event, festivals, markets, and other public networking and commerce. It is where the community continuously organizes itself around what it believes and gravitates toward whichever current leader stands to take responsibility for his or her particular offering.

WHEN TO USE IT:

- when conflict is holding back the ability to change
- when the situation is complex
- when there is a high degree of diversity
- when there is an urgent need to make speedy decisions
- when all stakeholders are needed for good decisions to be made
- when you have no preconceived notion of what the outcome should be

PROBABLE OUTCOMES:

- builds energy, commitment, and shared leadership
- participants accept responsibility for what does or doesn't happen
- action plans and recommendations emerge from discussions as appropriate
- you create a record of the entire proceedings as you go along

GROUP SIZE

To date, we know that Open Space accommodates groups from five to 1,500 people. It can be run for a couple of hours to three or more days, consecutively or over time; at one site or at multiple sites connected by computer, and/or phone and video. The longer it runs, the more learning and depth happens.

THE STEPS IN BRIEF

1. Select a focusing statement, issue, or theme for your gathering. It should frame the largest context for your discussion in a positive way.
2. Invite the people: All stakeholders or all the people who have an interest in the topic. Include the theme, and date, place, and time of gathering.
3. Create the space: Set up chairs in a circle or in concentric circles, leaving space in the center. Choose a blank wall for the agenda wall and label it AGENDA with the topic across the top.
4. To begin the gathering: Facilitator explains the theme and the process the group will follow to organize discussion and create a record.
5. People participate in discussions. The Facilitator takes care of the space. Reporters record discussion reports and post relevant information on the wall.
6. Closing: Reflect on highlights, “ahas,” and key learnings, passing a “talking stick” in a Dialogue format, simply listening to whatever people have to offer without discussion.
7. Mail out whatever record is created, plus an address list, to all who came.