

Open Space Technology – and Beyond

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Open Space Technology is a simple approach enabling groups of people to effectively deal with hugely complex and conflicted issues. It first appeared in 1985 and has subsequently been used 100's of thousands of times in 136 countries to good effect. But the real significance of Open Space is not its place in the lineup of Large Group Methods, but rather as a natural experiment and training environment for life and work in self organizing systems.

In the fall of 1995 AT&T was busily engaged in designing their pavilion for the Summer Olympics in Atlanta. An all star team of 23 had labored for 10 months, to produce the concept, however when it was submitted the Olympic Committee made an offer that could not be refused. Would AT&T consider moving its pavilion from the previously designated space at the edge of the Global Village to the very center? Since AT&T was about to commit \$200,000,000 for a single (corporate) purpose, *exposure*, such a suggestion was a gift from the Gods. But it came at considerable cost. On the edge of the village, one could anticipate 5000 visitors a day. In the center, the estimate rose to 75,000 visitors. It did not take an advanced degree in Architecture to understand that a structure built for 5000 would not accommodate 75,000. Back to the drawing boards.

Doing a new design was certainly possible, after all the team had done it before, but the time available put a whole new slant on things. The decision to move was taken in December and the building had to be ready in June. The previous design effort had taken 10 months and now there were a little more than 6 months, with further time taken off the clock for Christmas and

New Years. Actual time available was more like 4 months, and they still had to build the building!

Everybody agreed they had to give it a try, but when they assembled in early December the faces told a less than optimistic story – made even worse by the strange appearance of the conference room. Twenty three chairs were set in a circle, with a blank wall designated “The Market Place,” and several nondescript, hand written signs listing 4 Principles and a Law. The facilitator of the gathering was a gentleman nobody knew. In the center of the room was a small stack of papers and magic markers.

When everyone had found a seat, the facilitator stood at the edge of the circle and said, “Welcome to Open Space.” Before anybody could raise a question, he reminded them of why they were there, and moved on with an invitation to identify all the issues and opportunities they felt real passion for, and were willing to take responsibility. Then, with issues in mind, just grab a piece of paper from the center of the room, write a short statement of the issue, and post it on the empty wall.

After a brief, one might say shocked silence, the ordered circle dissolved as virtually everybody left their chairs and headed to the center of the room. Within moments the first issues had been inscribed and the participants stood, paper in hand, to announce them. There were no explanatory speeches, just issues announced, after which the participant headed to the wall, posted the paper and designated a time and place of meeting. In twenty minutes flat, the wall was covered with all the issues anybody cared to raise relating to their task. The facilitator then invited everybody to go to the wall and sign up for any issue they wished to work on – and

everything dissolved into a marvelous, chaotic hubbub as people made their choices, enjoyed a cup of coffee, and talked to their colleagues.

An hour and a half from start, the room reconfigured again as multiple groups congregated in the corners, and in any open space. There was a buzz, but it was the buzz of hard thinking and good conversation. As each group finished its business, the convener made a short trip to a bank of laptops to report the conclusions and recommendations, which were immediately printed out so that everyone could see what had transpired. The other participants went in search of their next group. And so it continued through out the day, interrupted only by the arrival of a bag-lunch. There were no signals, bells or otherwise, to mark time, and the facilitator was most evident by his absence. It is even said that he went for long walks and took a nap.

The group gathered again briefly in the circle at 5:00 pm to make plans for the evening, and the next morning it all began again with a brief invitation for more issues (there were a few). The notable difference between the 1st and 2nd day was that any casual visitor would have found it impossible to distinguish between one group and another. They all seemed to flow together, but the ambient energy was totally palpable. And if there was somebody “in charge,” that person was not evident.

At 5 pm on the second day, everything stopped. Not because it was 5 pm, but because the task had been completed. The new design existed, down to the level of working architectural drawings. Everybody agreed it was a vast improvement aesthetically over the prior effort. In terms of implementation, they were actually ahead of where they had been with the previous design, for as they worked, they were also on their mobiles ordering materials and finding subcontractors. And perhaps the most interesting thing – everybody seemed to be happy and

enjoying their colleagues. Whatever stress there may have been (and there was a lot) was overwhelmed by the satisfaction of accomplishment. Rus Natoce, the AT&T executive responsible for the pavilion, expressed his feelings in a quiet mumble, “It’s magic. It’s magic.”

Rus Natoce may be forgiven for his hyperbole, but it is surely fair to ask: What on earth is going on? By any reasonable standard it would seem that virtually every single principle and practice of meeting management, and perhaps management itself, had been violated. There was no carefully prepared agenda, indeed no advance agenda of any sort. Meeting structure was evident by its absence. There was no advance training for the participants and overt facilitation was minimal to non-existent. Perhaps most interesting was the total lack of formal leadership. It seemed that nobody was “in charge” – not a management (conference) committee, and certainly not “The Leader.”

One might suspect freakish good luck except for the fact that the experience described is one of many that have taken place over the 27 year history of Open Space. Nobody has counted exactly, but a reasonable estimate would be somewhere between 100,000 and 300,000 Open Spaces in 136 countries. Group sizes have ranged from 5 to 3000 involving virtually every sort and condition of humanity, and concerned with all the problems and opportunities of human kind. Boeing engineers redesigning the way they make doors on their planes, Tibetan Monks seeking to resolve their issues with the Chinese Government, Students in Tahrir Square hoping to create a new Egypt, polymer chemists at Dupont re-imagining an old product line, and many, many more.

In all cases the process was the same: sit in a circle, create a bulletin board for the issues under consideration, open a market place to negotiate time and place of meeting – and go to

work. That is it. Nothing more, but in every situation that I have witnessed or heard about, it always worked – provided the process followed and the conditions were right¹ .

The essential conditions for Open Space are as follows: 1) A genuine “business issue” that people really care about. 2) Lots of complexity 3) High levels of diversity in terms of opinions, professions, ethnicity – or however else diversity can be measured. 4) Large amounts of passion and conflict. 5) A real sense of urgency. One might say, a decision time of yesterday.

To be sure there are reports of Open Spaces that somehow fizzled, and were either ineffective or produced results that were less than one might expect. However, in every situation where I have had the opportunity to check, it turned out that either the essential conditions were not present and/or the process was not followed. For example, some people have tried to “demonstrate Open Space” with an arbitrary theme (focus) chosen for the occasion. The usual result is that even though the process is followed (sit in circle, etc) what happened next was totally uninspiring, often eliciting the comment, “Is that all there is?” And the problem, of course is that nobody really cared about the issue.

Other instances of “failure” have occurred when the process was either not followed or short circuited. Most of these may be characterized as “doing a little bit of Open Space,” or what probably amounts to the same thing, doing “modified Open Space.” Doing “a little bit” usually meant that the time allocated was minimal, perhaps an hour or two, and no seriously complex issue can be dealt with in that time frame, even with the “magic” of Open Space. A variant of this would be when the facilitator or sponsor sought to “hedge their bet” (and maintain control) by

¹ I feel somewhat remiss in providing what amounts to anecdotal evidence and personal testimony, if only because my potential bias as the “originator” is obvious. However, it is a strange fact that up to this present date no serious academic study of Open Space has ever been done. Retrospective data is available in abundance, and since Open Space sets up very nicely as an experiment with experimental conditions and a defined process, it is easy to replicate. How or why the academic community has missed all of this I don’t have a clue.

specifying certain issue groups in advance or banning other issues from discussion. Other than these exceptions the experience has been, at least my experience, Open Space always works.

How could this be so?

How could something so simple, to say nothing of counterintuitive, as Open Space not only work, but often work in spectacular ways, productive of results that at least one sponsor characterized as “magic?” The jury is still out, at least at the level of genuine proof, but at this point the best, and in fact the only explanation I have found comes from what we have all been learning about Self Organizing Systems.

Starting in the 1960's with the work of Ilya Prigogine, a chemist, scientists noted a most curious phenomenon. It appeared that order appeared out of chaos – all by itself. Stuart Kaufmann (a biologist), 20 years later coined the phrase, “Order for free.” Given certain very simple preconditions complex order manifests out of randomly associated (chaotic) elements, no help needed. It just happens. Over the years the power of self organization was seen to be working in just about everything from ant colonies (E.O. Wilson) up to and including the Cosmos from the moment of the Big Bang. It would seem that birds do it, bees do it, galaxies do it – but do humans do it?

To what extent do complex human organizations arise due to the power of self-organization? On one level it would seem pretty odd should humanity be shielded from a basic process that had been in operation for some 13.7 billion years – the current age of the universe. Such an exclusion would appear about as likely as freedom from gravity. That said, there has been an obvious reluctance to take the leap. Self organization is a wonderful thing with bees, ants, birds, and asteroids – but never with human organizations. After all we created our

organizations, structured and control them – which is what Scientific Management is all about. Is that true? I don't think so.

After 50 years of working in, running, consulting to, and thinking about human systems, I have come to two conclusions. Heretical they may be, but I am stuck with them. Conclusion #1 – *All systems are Open*, which means that all systems, human systems included, are open to, and affected by, the changing environment, over which we have little, if any meaningful control. In a word, the notion of control as many of us have been taught to believe is simply false. We don't have it, never did, never will.

Conclusion #2 is actually a corollary to the first – *All systems, including Human Systems, are self organizing*. To the extent that all systems are open to the environment (no closed systems!) they must constantly adapt to new circumstances, and adaptation is a key feature of the process of self-organization. It is true that we organize all sorts of systems, at least on paper, but once those systems hit the real world, all signals are off and it is self organization beginning, middle and end. To be sure we may do our best to “stem the tide,” but to little avail. This analogy is pretty close to reality should we ever try and tell the waves of change what to do. As all surfers know all too well – if you ever think you are in charge of The Wave, you are in deep trouble. A similar sentiment from a different perspective comes from Generals under battlefield conditions. They will tell you that The Plan goes out the window the moment a first bullet flies. From there on out – it is self-organizing!

Are these conclusions right? I don't know, and for sure I would need several more life times to prove them, if I ever could. But in the meantime, they make sense to me, and provide a

basis for understanding what might be happening with Open Space. So why does Open Space work? It works because Self Organization works, as it has for 13.7 billion years.

If Self Organization provides the theoretical basis, and underlying motive power for Open Space, one might expect that the actual design of Open Space emerged after careful study of that fundamental process. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. Open Space appeared in 1985 as the product of two martinis. As it happened, I had agreed to re-convene a gathering on Organization Transformation (OT) which I had previously convened several years precedently. For that first conference I had worked hard for a full year, along with friends and colleagues, to create a conference design complete with multiple speakers and panels. The conference was a seeming success, but I along with just about everybody else found that the most interesting and useful parts all took place in the coffee breaks. I agreed to do it again, but said that I simply did not have a year available, and further more I had no clear idea how we should proceed.

In early April of 1985 I was enjoying my first “outdoor” martini warmed by the pleasant Washington Spring. With my first sips a disturbing thought came to mind. I was totally unprepared for the up coming conference. With my second martini I found myself in rather a reverie – thinking of time I spent in West Africa where I had noticed that when the people of a village had something serious to deal with, they always sat in a circle. It occurred to me that sitting in a circle might be an appropriate way to begin the conference. But then, what would we talk about? The image of a bulletin board came to mind. All over the world when people had something of importance to announce they posted a notice on a bulletin board. Might we not do the same? And last but not least, how to deal with the logistics – who meets where, and when? Unasked, the image of an indigenous market appeared. These marvels of human interaction pop

up like mushrooms whenever people have something to exchange, whether that be goods, services, or information. Nobody is in charge, they just happen.

And that was it. Sit in a circle, create a bulletin board, open a market place and go to work. Open Space had been born, and the gin ran out. The conference occurred in July of 1985 in Monterey California, and the basic process has remained unchanged. For the first 3-4 years Open Space was used but once a year for the so called OT Conferences. Without exception, they were fun, exciting and productive, but I seriously doubt that anybody thought too much about what was going on and why it worked. After all, those were the days of The New Age, and strange things happened.

All of this changed quite markedly in the early 90's when I had several clients who found themselves in dire predicaments. They needed to do an impossible amount of work in a ridiculously short period of time, and I didn't have a clue how to help. One of these clients was the Dacron Division of Dupont. The patents were off and the product line was besieged by foreign competitors. The corporate officers had decreed that unless a way could be found to make Dacron™ competitive and profitable, it would be dropped from the Dupont product line, and the deadline was something like 3 months. And how to do that?

I told my client that the only thing I could think of that might work in the time frame available was this funny thing we had been doing with friends and colleagues. But I hastened to add that I never tried it in a “real world” situation. Actually I told them that I had never tried it with Human Beings before – only some New Agers! I strongly suggested that they seriously search for alternatives, but if they ran out of options, we were good to go. They ran out of options, and we went.

Something like 175 Polymer chemists and their support staff sat in a circle and quickly went to work. I don't have a clue what they talked about, for Polymer Chemistry is a foreign language so far as I am concerned. I do know that by the end of the Open Space they all appeared energized and ready to work out the details of their new approaches. Since Dacron remains in the product line, now some 20 years later, I would guess they were successful.

If Dacron's problems had been solved, mine were just beginning. Immediately there was the fact that my client had just done in a very short period of time what I might have predicted would take months, if not longer. For a consultant dependant upon billable hours, that was not a happy circumstance. Even worse, I didn't have a clue as to why or how it had all worked. For sure we were not operating within what might be called "the standard paradigm" of meeting management and practice. It was almost embarrassing, but the good news was that I was definitely forced into a search for answers, which eventually led to the new (at the time) world of self organizing systems and my, perhaps heretical, conclusions.

Open Space is often spoken of in the context of the other "Large Group Processes" (Future Search, Appreciative Inquiry, etc), all of which emerged out of a strong theory base and careful research. Open Space was just the opposite – it was an approach in search of a theory. And as a method, it almost seemed like something of a fraud. How could something so simple ever possibly achieve the results that it did? Actually, if an Open Space gathering is in fact the manifestation of self organization at work – a process which has been operational for 13.7 billion years undergirding all aspects of the creation, including us, then it would clearly be false advertizing to suggest that we (I, or some facilitator) *did* the process. The reality is – the process *does us!*

At the end of the day, I believe that the real significance of Open Space has less to do with its effectiveness as a Large Group Intervention, although clearly it has offered much in that arena. For me, Open Space has become a marvelous natural experiment, as well as a superb training environment, introducing us as practitioners to the strange new world of self organizing systems. The strangeness comes in part from the fact that much, if not all, of the current methods and procedures of Organizational Practitioners (by whatever denomination) are no longer needed, and in fact may be counter productive. It would seem that a major part of the learning in this new world is actually unlearning. For example, within the natural experiment/training environment of Open Space, a critical element of practice is *not doing*. At the simplest level this is coming to understand that in a self organizing world – organizing a self-organizing system is not only an oxymoron, it is actually a waste of time and often destructive. This is a hard lesson for those of us who may have spent a professional lifetime working out the details of organizational process, structure and control.

A common reaction to such statements is to assume that if true (a doubtful proposition for many), the only possible response is to throw our hands in the air and our fate to the winds. But in fact the experience in Open Space has been just the opposite. There are many ways in which we can enhance the effectiveness of self organization and thereby the productivity of the organizations. Some are quite simple, such as seeing the circle as the basic organizational form, or at least the starting point for any activity. This would contrast with the common image of organization as a hierarchy (organizations chart) – or sitting in rows with the speaker/leader placed prominently in the front. In a circle the total dynamics of a group changes massively, and I believe, positively. And it is very simple to test. Try it.

There are many other lessons from the Open Space experiment, but it is clearly only a beginning and for sure we are some distance from the possibility of defining a “Best Practice.” That said, there is 27 years of global experience and a large band of experienced “facilitators” who are most happy to share². Second hand knowledge is of course no substitute for actual experience. And in the case of Open Space, that experience is very easy to come by: Just do it. We have found that anybody with a good head and a good heart can take the step. After all this is a process that is internalized in each one of us. We only have to remember what we already know. Truthfully, having read this chapter you have all the information you really need. Just start with a real business issue for the people who care. Sit in a circle, create a bulletin board displaying the sub issues to be discussed, open a market place to settle on time, place and people – And Go to work. That is all there is. There isn’t any more. But of course it may take you a lifetime to learn to do it well, if only because there seems to be a lot of un-learning required.

² The easiest access to such people is through the online list serve known as OSLIST, now some 15 years old with 1000's of entries which are all searchable. My contribution is my last book, “Wave Rider: Leadership for High Performance in a Self Organizing World” Berrett-Koehler, 2008.