

A Fool's Errand

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This is a note to my friends, colleagues and anybody else who cares to follow the Open Space experience. I have made no effort to prove anything, and indeed such proof as might exist will come only with your own experience. Be careful. You could get hooked

Attempting to sell OST is a fool's errand. The reason is simple. Any well trained manager knows intuitively that the proffered package must be a fraud. Purportedly, Open Space enables human performance at eye popping levels. Increases in productivity on the order of 15,000% have been claimed (doing in 2 days what was impossible over 2 years), and numbers like that should excite any CEO. However, for the well trained executive, the touted capabilities and mechanisms of OS violate every single principle and practice of meeting management, and indeed management itself. Purchasing such a package is clearly an act of insanity. Who would do that?

However, should the organizational situation becomes sufficiently desperate, interesting things can happen. Desperation has the capacity to focus the mind, often leading to the adoption of approaches heretofore considered unthinkable. For most organizations desperate conditions happen not infrequently, but are commonly met by denial. However, every so often, reality breaks through and the mind is focused. As the old certainties dissolve, space is opened for new possibilities. To be of assistance in such a moment does not require the skills of the salesman. Compassionate, and very often silent presence is the key.

In all the years that I have been privileged to live with Open Space, I have never tried to sell it. I have no problem describing what OS is, and what I've seen it do – but nothing beyond that. On occasion, I have actually done my best to dissuade people from jumping into the pond when it became clear to me that they were following a fad and really just wanted to try a "little bit of open space." I suggested to them that they spend some time thinking about any other way they could achieve their objective. However, if they ran out of options, to please come back and talk to me.

I can appreciate that this approach may seem odd and cavalier, but it is based on my conviction that Open Space is the common property of every human being and therefore not a gift to be given or a product to be sold. Nor is it something to be taken lightly as a new fad. Open Space has the unfortunate quality of always working – which inevitably introduces participants into a reality they may not be ready for... or want.

At this point confusion clearly becomes confounding. Not only does OS appear as a fraud but it is also the common possession of all *Homo sapiens* which can powerfully introduce new

and perhaps unwanted experiences. Very strange indeed – and who would have the gall to sell something like that? Who would buy it? And of equal, although perhaps more academic concern, what could lead to such outlandish and contradictory conclusions?

The path has been a long and winding one. From the very earliest days with Open Space curious and disturbing clues showed up. For example, all groups, including very large groups, went from passive presence in a circle to active engagement in a very short time with minimal instructions – usually 10 to 15 minutes – all without prior training or explanation. In every other “large group method” heavy facilitation before, during and afterwards is the rule. It would appear that either something very potent was in the water, or the groups already knew what to do. I believe we may eliminate the water born accelerate which leaves us with *the odd proposal that human groups are inherently at home in open space. In short, they already know what to do. They just have to be invited to take the plunge.*

A further step on the journey As the number of OST gatherings increased around the world, it became apparent that all the usual human discriminates of usage and effect did not apply. Open Space happened the same way everywhere regardless of education, economics, sexual identity, geography, group numbers, culture, or ethnicity. Only language marked a difference, and that difference proved to be a small one -- Even in situations where multiple languages were being spoken, people appeared to communicate with subtle precision and great power. *Whatever the operative force at play in Open Space it obviously lay behind, below, beneath, before all of the more superficial characteristics of humankind. The Germans might call it an "Ur" mechanism -- totally fundamental, primal, – primitive in the root sense of the word.*

Another clue was the commonly expressed sentiment at the conclusion of an OST that participants felt like they had “**come home.**” What an odd thing to say at the conclusion of a highly technical system design meeting! And yet it happens again and again in groups, large and small, all over the world – where the subjects under discussion ranged from the creation of the Internet Cloud to the construction of roads on tribal lands. *Common sentiment declares that “Home is where the heart is,” but what strange alchemy could convert a serious technical meeting into a warm fuzzy encounter?*

So ...What to do? One thing is very clear. This is not your Grand Father’s OD Intervention with tools to learn, and billable hours to accrue. A different world, different reality and a different level of commitment and approach. My friend Birgitt might call it, “whole person” engagement. No matter the name – THIS IS DIFFERENT!

The extent of the difference is often difficult to describe... observably the practitioner/facilitator **does** little if anything. His/her role has been defined as being “totally present and absolutely invisibles.” Preparation for this role usually involves meditation, preparing the “facilitator” for a quiet place where deep listening occurs. This could be very scary stuff for all those assuming that productive activity can only be accomplished by brandishing every available tool, racing about in a firestorm of activity, only to collapse into a puddle of exhaustion. For myself I take a nap.

Although it is true that the role of the facilitator is usually limited to a 15 minute introduction followed by the assumption of the exalted status of human microphone stand for participants lined up to announce their issues, the duties do not end there. Indeed, presence after the event may be the most critical.

A case in point involved a large agency of the US Government. Their situation was well into the “disaster” stage. The agency had been rated 5th from the bottom in a recent government survey identifying the best places to work. And the agency had also just taken on a new director, who was clearly in confused despair. How he got to me, I don’t know but one day an unknown voice on the phone explained he was the director of said agency which was in such disarray that he didn’t think the staff, “could find their a...s (rear-ends) with both hands.” He was at a loss, but he’d heard of “this Open Space” about which he knew nothing – and could I help? I offered to talk, and we did.

I told him about Open Space, what it typically did and indicated that should he wish to proceed, there were certain conditions. 1) The gathering had to be two days long because, as effective as OST was, it did need time to cook properly. 2) Attendance must be voluntary in response to a real invitation – meaning one that could be refused.

Interestingly enough the only part of my explanation he took exception to was the last point, telling me that if it was voluntary nobody would come. My reply was perhaps a little short... I said that if nobody came, he did not have a problem – he had a revolution. That seemed to settle things and three weeks later 269 out of 270 staff members showed up. One lady couldn’t make it as she went to the hospital to deliver her daughter.

On the day, everything happened as usual. Sit in a circle, create bulletin board, open a market place, go to work – which everybody did with a vengeance. By the middle of the morning multiple groups had engaged intensely, energy was high, and the noise level impressive. In the midst of it all, the Director and his deputy wandered about with shocked, bemused expressions on their faces. The Director asked, “What happened? I couldn’t resist, “Open Space” I replied.

When it was all over, I invited the Director for a drink, because there was a question I needed to ask him which might require a little anesthesia. At the time appointed, and after the second drink, I asked my question, prefaced by a brief review of our common experience. Truthfully, I can’t remember the words, but it went something like... On the day we sat in a circle, and everybody but one was there. There was a moment of nervous expectation – which almost seemed like eternity – until it exploded into a maelstrom of activity. Ideas were generated, connections made, policies debated – and these were the same people who, “couldn’t find their behind with both hands?”

And the question? What is this agency doing as regular course of business that converts 269 bright, engaged, responsible people into bumbling idiots? Pointed perhaps – and certainly unfair to the brand new Director. BUT when space is opened, and new realities are perceived the moment of clarity must be acknowledged. I do believe.