



# OPEN SPACE

## Bringing life back to organizations and organizations back to life

### Contents

Participation	2
What it achieves	2
Who applied it?	3
Experience	3
When and why?	3
Why it works?	4
Who participates?	4
How to get started?	5
References	5

Open space enables groups of 25-500 people, in any kind of organization, to create inspired meetings. Meetings without a predetermined programme, just a central theme of importance. Starting from an empty agenda, the group generates its own topics of parallel working sessions at the start. This creates ownership and ensures that the meeting is filled with issues that are of real concern to the participants.

Imagine 50 people with an average of 20 years working experience in one room. Imagine we mobilise the brains and passions of all these people simultaneously. We would be tapping a potential of 1.000 years of experience to achieve a goal. Imagine 100 people in one room, or 200 hundred people.... It is all possible in Open Space.

Open Space allows everybody with an interest to get involved. It contributes to sustainable change, thanks to broad ownership, better understanding, more diversity, creative and fitting solutions, faster and longer-lasting implementation and decisions that are supported by the largest possible number of stakeholders.

Likewise any team of 15, department of 100, community of 1.000 people or more

can make a difference. Any complex task can be addressed, once people access their innate need for meaning and dignity. What a pity if that same group would apathically be wasting its time in boredom.

Using such innovative planning approaches naturally makes a difference in innovating products, processes, services, strategies or structures.

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**Open Space lets go of control in favour of self-organisation.**

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## Imagine Wholehearted Participation

Open Space enables groups of 25 – 500 people, in any kind of organization, to create inspired meetings, from half-day workshops to three-day conferences. These meetings have no predetermined programme, just a central theme of importance. Starting from an empty agenda, the group generates its own topics of parallel working sessions at the start. This creates ownership and ensures that the agenda is filled with issues that are of real concern to the participants.

The common result is a powerful and effective connecting, which leads to planning and action, learning and doing, passion and responsibility, participation and performance.

Open space has been described as the energy of a good coffee break, intentional self-organization, spirit at work, chaos and

creativity, evolution in organization, and as a simple, powerful way to get people and organizations moving -- when and where it's needed most.

In short, Open Space brings life back to organization and organizations back to life.



Open Space for Dutch higher education

## WHAT IT ACHIEVES

We never know exactly what will happen when we open the space for people to do their most important work, but we can guarantee these results when any group gets into an Open Space....

1. All of the issues that are MOST important to the participants will be raised.
2. All issues raised will be addressed by those most passionate of getting something done on each of them.
3. In a time as short as one or two days, all of the most important ideas, discussion, data, recommendations, conclusions, questions for further study, and plans for immediate action will be captured.
4. When appropriate, and when time permits, the total contents

of all sessions can be focused and prioritized in a matter of a few hours, even with very large groups (100's).

5. After an event, all results can be made available to an entire organization or community within days of the event, so the conversation can invite every stakeholder into implementation.
6. AND... results like these can be planned and implemented faster than any other kind of traditional meeting. It is literally possible to accomplish in days and weeks what some other approaches take months or more to do.

The good news, and the bad news, is that it works. Good news because it gets people and work moving, bad news because that may mean lots of things are going to be different than before. Wanted things can appear, unwanted things disappear, and sometimes vice versa -- but that's how life is.

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## Who applied it?

At this point in time, the experience described above has been replicated numerous times on all continents. Participants have come from Fortune 500's, third world villages, religious communities, governmental agencies, and whole towns. They have been rich, poor, educated and not, labor and management, politicians and people... and all of the above.

## OPEN SPACE EXPERIENCE

Perspectivity has conducted some 100 open space events with, among others:

- Agro Eco (Ghana / Netherlands)
- BRAC (Bangladesh)
- CUSAT (India)
- Gelderse Vallei (Netherlands)
- Confederation of Health Service Organisations (Northern Ireland)
- Dutch National Platform for Professional Education - HPBO, (Netherlands)
- Makerere University (Uganda)
- Small and Medium Enterprise (MKB) Netherlands
- Solvay Pharmaceuticals (Netherlands)
- UCC Ltc (ICT organisation) (Tanzania)

## When and why?

Open Space works best when the work to be done is a real business issue to be solved, marked by higher levels of complexity, in terms of the issues to be resolved. High levels of diversity, in terms of the people (and ideas) needed to solve it. High passion for resolution (and potential for conflict) are high, and a sense of urgency (the time to get it done was yesterday).

Open Space is suitable for:

- Cross-functional issues, that cut across multiple departments or even multiple organisations
- Organisational matters, including strategic planning, policy making, reorganisations, fusions, understood and owned by all involved
- Design and development initiatives, looking for new or improved markets, products, services, procedures, standards, or other sorts of improvements
- Exploring and tackling diverse cultural matters, including diversity, learning, support, orientation, quality, and so on
- Networking and learning by exchanging knowledge and experience
- Planning, monitoring or evaluating projects or programmes; Staying on track, through regular check-ups
- Generating a quick response to shock effects.



Open Space Yemen

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## Why it works

We have been taught that the essence of management is control, and if you are out of control, you are out of a job. Not terribly long ago, the function of management was described as making the plan, managing to the plan, and meeting the targets. All of that adds up to control. It now turns out that we can make any plan we want to, but managing to that plan is an act of frustration, and meeting the targets is not only impossible, but probably inadvisable. It turns out that the systems we are supposed to control are so horribly complex as to defy comprehension (to say nothing of the environment in which they exist). And what you can't comprehend is very difficult to control. Open Space lets go of control in favour of self-organisation.

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**Anybody who has a stake in the theme is invited; from 25 up to more than 1.000 people can participate.**

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## Who participates?

Anybody who has a stake in the theme is invited, i.e. a broad selection of interested parties and individuals. The flexibility of the method allows for groups of 25 but is equally applicable to groups of around 100 people or more. It has been done with over 2000 participants.

## WHAT'S THE SECRET

Some have suggested that the Four Principles and One Law which guide behavior in Open Space provide the clues.

The four principles which underpin the process are:

- 1) Whoever comes is the right people - which reminds people that getting something done is not a matter of having 1000 people and the chairman of the board. The fundamental requirement is people who care to do something. And by showing up, that essential care is demonstrated.
- 2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have - keeps people focused on the here and now, and eliminates all of the could-have-beens, should-have-beens or might-have-beens. What is the only thing there is at the moment.
- 3) Whenever it starts is the right time - alerts people to the fact that inspired performance and genuine creativity rarely, if ever, pay attention to the clock. They happen when they happen.
- 4) When it's over it's over. In a word, don't waste time. Do what you have to do, and when its done, move on to something more useful.

There is also The Law of Two Feet which indicates that if anyone finds her or himself in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they can use their two feet to go to a more productive place. Such a place might be another group, or even outside into the sunshine. No matter what, don't sit there feeling miserable. This law emphasises that everyone is present voluntarily.

One of the most profound impacts of the law is to make it exquisitely clear precisely who is responsible for the quality of a participant's learning. If any situation is not learning rich, it is incumbent upon the individual participant to make it so. There is no point in blaming the conference committee, for none exists. Responsibility resides with the individual.

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## How to get started?

Nearly always a planning group of key people plans the process. They should be people who, together, can get the “right people” to the meeting. The planning typically takes no more than a few days up to 3 months. Key decisions are selecting and specifying the task, and selecting the right stakeholders FOR THAT TASK. The planners must also address the schedule, invitations, venue/site, documentation, communicating results and other logistics.

In case you are interested, please contact us. We can provide presentations, a short experiential orientation or do a mini open space. Besides facilitating open space events we also conduct training for facilitators or managers.

There is a rich resources of information about Open Space available, including books, articles and DVDs.

## REFERENCES

Open Space Technology, A user’s guide 3rd ed., Harrison Owen (Berrett-Koehler, 2008)

Open Space Technology: [openspaceworld.org](http://openspaceworld.org)

## ABOUT PERSPECTIVITY

Perspectivity builds inspiring collaborations for sustainable growth. We work with groups and individuals to address complex realities in organisations and communities. In current times of increasing complexity, blue prints have become obsolete. As Perspectivity, we dare to look at the world upside down. We bring a fresh perspective!

We engage people from all walks of life, people with differing interests and perceptions. We help them to find common ground to work productively together towards shared goals, even when differences seem impossible to bridge. We help people and organisations to match values to purpose.

Perspectivity  
For the love of complexity

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