

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY (OST)

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WHAT IS OST?

Open Space Technology (OST) is an effective approach to better meetings driven by self-management of the participants.

It has proven to be an effective method in situations where a diverse group of people are gathered around a certain business or community theme.

OST works best when different people with different views must deal with complex and potentially conflicting material.

OST offers the best results in a relative short time, within an innovative and productive context.



OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY (OST)

Does your organization lack a shared idea of a new strategy or are you in the dark of what new products and services to launch? Does this go hand in hand with different views or even with conflict among your staff and stakeholders? Do you feel the urgency to act quickly because you are losing money and motivation of your staff?

Then Open Space Technology might be just that tool:

- to reach clarity on what should be your next steps
- to start creating new business
- to build a coherent and motivated team
- to stimulate leadership
- to have big results in a short span of time
- to appease conflicts

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OST

OST is a great way to build teams and to transact a great deal of business in a short period. Numerous organizations have used OST to break out of the mold and consider issues they never could quite get onto the agenda.

- OST is fit for heterogeneous groups of 5 up to 2000 people.
- The participants can be diverse regarding their education, ethnicity, economics, job positions, politics, social position etc.
- There is no agenda. Participants come up with their own agenda, related to the theme of the open space.
- Participants self-manage themselves into workshops, which they lead themselves.

OST taps into people's passions and gives them an opportunity to take responsibility, based on equality. It doesn't matter if you are the janitor or the managing director. Everybody's input is valued equally in an OST-setting. If the unspeakable remains unspoken, important business may be neglected. However, OST enables everybody to place items on the agenda, which allows the unspeakable to be spoken ultimately.

HOW DID OST START?

OST was started by an American called Harrison Owen in the 1980s.

After he spent a whole year of organising a big conference with guest speakers and numerous workshops, the feedback he got was that the best conversations people had were during the coffee breaks.

In the coffee breaks people felt free to share what they were passionate about, to meet new people and to organise themselves.

Harrison Owen set about to create a process that captured the freedom, spontaneity and the high energy of the coffee breaks and their effective outcomes.

His research led him to develop OST. A process that creates the safety for people to meet on equal footing and share ideas that are truly important to them.



WHAT THEMES CAN BE HANDLED WITH OST?

Themes handled with OST can vary from:

- Product design
- Strategic planning
- Community organization
- Organizational renewal
- Environmental planning
- Professional development
- Etc.

WHEN TO USE AND WHEN NOT TO USE OST?

When to use Open Space Technology (OST)?

- **When pre-determined outcomes are not at hand.**
- **There is a sense of urgency.**
- **People are passionate about the theme at hand.**
- **The issues are complex.**
- **There is a diversity of experiences and views.**
- **When the organization wants to encourage participation and responsibility.**
- **When there is conflict and confusion.**

When not to use OST?

- When the answers are already known.
- When somebody at a high level in the organization thinks he or she already knows the answer.
- When somebody at a high level decides he or she needs to be in charge and drive an answer – i.e. control, control, control.
- It is destructive to run an OST with staff, unless the senior management is willing to back the outcomes of the OST.

OST can only be effective if everyone is willing to let go of control and trust.

THE 4 PRINCIPLES OF OST AND THE LAW OF THE TWO FEET

Principle 1: Whoever comes are the right people

This principle is about the importance of the quality of the interaction and conversation.

Principle 2: Whatever happens is the only thing that could have

This principle is a call to cherish the moment and honour what happens.

Principle 3: Whenever it starts is the right time

This principle honours that creativity does not run by a clock.

Principle 4: Whenever it's over it's over

If the discussion feels complete before the session time, move away from it onto something else.

Law – The law of 2 feet

OST runs on passion and responsibility. If you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning or contributing, it is your responsibility to use your 2 feet and go to some more productive place. It is the law of mobility.



SET-UP OF OST

During Open Space, people put together their own agenda by identifying issues, related to the theme. These are issues they feel passionate about. Identifying issues is voluntary. During Open Space, there is no pressure.

Next, the participants write their issues down on a piece of paper; then post them on a designated wall; thus, creating an agenda. In doing so, they accept the responsibility for convening a session on their issue and to make a written report of the results afterwards.

Other people are then free to choose from those posted issues; to attend the ones they also feel passionate about. In this way, the agenda issues weigh themselves in terms of importance.

Because of this set-up, people during OST-workshops feel listened to and part of the discussions.

UNEXPECTED GIFTS: LEADERSHIP, PERFORMANCE AND PEACE

1. LEADERSHIP

In terms of a traditional understanding of leadership there is no one in charge during Open Space. However, the obvious functions of leadership are clearly fulfilled: objectives are established and people work towards them in a meaningful and productive fashion. This suggests a new form of leadership.

2. HIGH PERFORMANCE

Numerous examples of high productivity during Open Space can be brought up. In a short span of time people will come up with a vast amount of information enabling the organization to take the next productive steps.

3. PEACE

In Open Space, people come together for a common purpose. In a lot of cases people never met before. In Open Space, ultimately people will start to treat each other as friends. A sense of community appears.

When the participants in the assembled group have a long history of conflict and misunderstanding, the same characteristics of a shared community will surface.

CIRCLES



OST starts and ends with people grouped in a big circle. Circles are the fundamental geometry of open human communication. It has no head or foot, no high, no low. People can simply be with each other, face-to-face. Circles create communication.

In the beginning the open space described by the circle will be perceived as uncomfortable at the least and threatening at the worst. However, by the conclusion of the meeting, the dynamics of the circle will have changed markedly.

No longer a threatening place, the circle has now become a place of safety. Words like creativity, openness, surprise, inspiration and energy will be used by most people, when asked how they feel about OST.

Want to know more about facilitation of Open Space Sessions by Echteled Consult?

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