Open space style

What this involves

Open Space is a way of holding a meeting focused on a specific and important purpose or task but beginning without any formal agenda, beyond the overall purpose or theme.

Typically, an "open space" meeting will begin with an introduction of the purpose and an explanation of "self-organising" process called "open space." Then the group creates the working agenda, as individuals post their issues in bulletin board style. Each individual "convener" of a breakout session takes responsibility for naming the issue, posting it on the bulletin board, assigning it a space and time to meet, and then later showing up at that space and time, kicking off the conversation, and taking notes. Sometimes one or more additional approaches are used to sort through the notes, assign priorities, and identify what actions should be taken next.

What are the benefits of using the open space style?

- All of the issues that are most important to those attending will be raised and included in the agenda.

- All of the issues raised will be addressed by the participants best capable of getting something done about them.

- All of the most important ideas, recommendations, discussions, and next steps will be documented in a report.

- When the purpose requires, and time is allowed for it, the group can prioritize the issues addressed in the report.

- When the purpose requires, and time is allowed for it, the group can draft action plans for the highest priority issues.

When this might be a useful/appropriate approach?:

Open Space works best when these conditions are present;

- Complexity, in terms of the tasks to be done or outcomes achieved;

- Diversity, in terms of the people involved and/or needed to make any solution work;

- Conflict, real or potential, meaning people really care about the central issue or purpose;

- Urgency, meaning that the time to act was "yesterday".

The recognition of these conditions suggests to some extent that leaders convening Open Space

How can you work in an open space style?

The facilitator will greet the people and briefly re-state the theme of their gathering, without giving a lengthy speech. Then the facilitator will invite all participants to spend the next ten minutes, say, in thinking through and identifying any issue or opportunity related to the theme. When the facilitator announces time is up, any participants willing to raise a topic will come to the centre of the circle, write a short description (typically up to 7 words) on a sheet of paper and announce it to the group. The person who has called out this issue or opportunity then posts the paper in an area of the space designated for the agenda. If the meeting takes place in a room, that space is often a wall on which are mapped out pre-determined time slots and meeting locations. That wall becomes the agenda for the meeting. The only limit on the number of issues that get posted is the number of people who take responsibility for the topic getting discussed.

When all issues have been identified and posted, participants sign up and attend those individual sessions. Sessions typically last for 1.5 hours; the whole gathering usually lasts from a half day up to about two days. The opening and agenda creation lasts about an hour, even with a very large group. The facilitator can explain the rules before sessions begin. Open Space has Four Rules and One Law (the Law of Two Feet):

1)   Whoever come are the right people.

2)   Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.

3)   Whenever it starts is the right time.

4)   When it's over, it's over.

The Law of Two Feet states that: "If, during the course of the gathering, any person finds themselves in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they must use their feet and go to some more productive place."

After the opening and agenda creation, the individual groups go to work. The attendees organize each session as they go—in other words, are free to decide which session they want to attend, and may switch to another one at any time. This supports different styles of participation as many people like to sample before landing, others may be looking for the most productive sessions, while yet others are hoping to pinpoint discussion on an issue. Networking can occur before, during, after, so discussions can continue seamlessly. All discussion reports are compiled in a document on site and sent to participants, unedited, shortly after.

The topic announcers should be given something that reminds them of these key principles:

1)   Let participants' contributions count. They should write down all major points made, not just a favoured subset.

2)   Foster creativity by recommending unconventional note taking, such as mindmaps, mood boards, post it cards, which result in a more organic and metaphorical dynamic.

3)   Grow connections. At the end of a session, nurture the opportunity for ongoing collaboration by making time for and encouraging synergistic participants to connect with each other.

If only the topic announcer shows up for a session, that person has several options: use the session as free time to think the issue through and record their thoughts as a contribution to the

Equally some people choose not to be fixed on a single theme and would rather visit many different groups, collaborating in a more punctual way; these people have a very important role in the dynamics, because they represent the space of freedom of the process and perform the task of cross-fertilisation, helping groups to overcome creative blocks, inspiring them with fresh views or sharing solutions they already saw in another group.

What are the drawbacks of this approach?

Tackling a topic using Open Space is inappropriate and simply won't work when

1) There is no real question/uncertainty about how to do the work,

2) Leaders believe they already know the answer(s) and are looking for ways to sell or impose those ideas on the rest of the organisation

3) Leaders believe that they are the only ones responsible for, or really necessary for, the organisation to do its best work.

Resources:

- Colleagues in South London CLAHRC held an 'Active Involvement in Research Day 2017' one day event and made part of it open space. You can read about this on page 7 of the report.

- Short films about running Open Space: youtu.be/M_jhcvCYBbg and youtu.be/a3jVOKQYm6E

- Harrison Owen invented Open Space Technology: He has written a user's guide, Berrett Koehler Books (1993).