



Open Space Technology

“If it isn’t fun, it isn’t working!”

WHAT IS IT?

Open Space Technology (OST) is a methodological approach best fitted for meetings, conferences, symposium, corporate retreat or similar events. It has been developed as a response to ever-present feedback from these types of events: “the best deals/discussions are happening at the coffee breaks”. It is driven by passion and responsibility of participants, and starts rather with theme only, than the fully developed agenda. It works with groups of 5 up to 500, and has been applied even for groups of 2000 participants. It is based on several different principles, rules and mechanisms.

OST mechanisms:

- stated theme/purpose: the event is described with simple description of the theme/purpose and expected results. It informs participants of the topic/issue that gathered them and what they are to produce. The main idea is to inspire and not to tell people what to do;
- circle arrangement: the room is arranged in a circle format, so that there is no hierarchy amongst participants, it sends the message of equality, belonging, and safety. It is advised to have all rooms/break out spaces arrange in that way, while it is possible to have some spaces arrange in a more traditional way (theatre style, or with tables). The circle arrangement has been recognized as the best format for achieving effective and open communication;
- a community bulleting board and village market place: the main conference room should have a big empty space on one of the walls (without curtains, pictures, windows, etc) that is divided in 3 parts. The left of the centre is print outs with main OST’s principles and brief main points of OST, the right of the centre is the chart matrix (timeslots and available rooms), and in the centre is an empty spaces for participants’ proposed sessions. All participants are invited to propose the session with “My issue is... My name is” and stick it to the central part of the wall. Once all suggestion are up, the market is open and participants create the agenda through negotiation and agreements.

- breathing/pulsation: is a flow in between sessions, plenary and small groups work that adds to the dynamic and atmosphere.

Best conditions for using OST:

1. Complexity - OST works best if the group deals with complex material, in terms of both, the expected tasks and outcomes achieved;
2. Diversity - when participants are diverse in terms of their knowledge, experience, and representation;
3. Conflict: real or potential - when participants really care about the topics and feel passionately about the work, and where there is more than one way of doing things;
4. Urgency - when topics discussed are relevant and decisions were needed yesterday.

OST's 4 principles:

- a) Whoever comes is the right people - reminds people, particularly the conveners of groups, that it is not how many people come, or even who comes (in the sense of status or position) that counts, rather it is the quality of the interaction and conversation that make the difference. For good conversation you only need one other person who shares your passion.
- b) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have - is a reminder that real learning and real progress will only take place when we all move beyond our original agendas and convention-bound expectations. If everything turned out just the way everybody expected, life would be exceedingly dull, and learning in any useful sense simply would not occur. It is precisely in moments of surprise, large and small, that we grow. It is important to cherish such moments and realize that whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
- c) Whenever it starts is the right time - it highlights the nature of creativity and spirit. Both are essential to the process and do not pay any attention to the clock. Although the session is scheduled for e.g. 3pm it does not mean that something will happen at that exact time. The group may gather and talk but the creativity may kick in at later time, or not.
- d) When it is over, it is over - it offers the way to save time and aggravation. The allocated time per session may be 2 hours, but the group may be very efficient and discuss the topic within first 30 minutes. At that point it is time to conclude that all that is there to be said has been said, all has been agreed and actions listed, and the session may be called to an end.

The Law of Two Feet

In a very simple wording, the law of two feet states: Everybody has them,

or in case of differently able people, the equivalent of them. If, during the session, persons find him/her/themselves in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they can use their two feet and go to some more productive place.

Bumblebees and Butterflies

Aside of saving participants of wasting time and getting aggravated, the Law of two feet produces bumblebees and butterflies.

Bumblebees take the freedom of the law very serious and they move from session to the other, contributing and learning as they go. Their contribution is usually very direct, they add to the variety and richness of discussions.

Butterflies are those who often do not go to the sessions, but stay in some common area by the pool, patio or bar, are one may ask him/her/themselves why they even bother to come. However, their role turns out to be also very contributing, as they are creating a centres of non-action, and now or then someone stops by and initiate conversation and very often it turns out to be a significant exchange of ideas or experiences.

PREPARATION, PROCESS AND RESULTS

Things and factors to consider prior to using OST:

- Appropriateness
 - o Should we even take this trip? Is OST right for our purpose?
- Theme
 - o Is it clear, focused, but with sufficient room to let the imagination grow?
- Invitation
 - o Is there sufficient information to insure that our guests arrive at the right place, at the right time, ready to go to work? Does our description of the task evoke participation without prescribing the detailed outcome?
- Time
 - o Have we allotted sufficient time for what we want to do? One day for a good discussion. Two days for a written record. Three days for reflection and correction of all of the above.
- Main space
 - o Is our main meeting room large enough so that all of our participants may sit comfortably in a circle, or two or three concentric circles, with room to spare?

- The Wall
 - o Do we have a relatively unobstructed wall in our main meeting room long enough so that when all of our participants stand in front of it, they are never more than 2-3 persons deep? Will masking tape stick? Will the management object if the tape does stick?
- Other spaces
 - o Do we have sufficient break out rooms for those who like a formal setting (10 rooms per 200 participants)? Will other people with other tastes find something to their liking? Have we advised the management that our participants are very likely to be working all over the facility? Are there any areas where our people should not go?
- Food and drinks
 - o Have we made arrangements for the maximum possible flexibility for meals and snacks? Plenty of variety available most of the time.
- Supplies
 - o Do we have the necessary supplies ready to go?
 - (Ink Markers Dark, primary colors (50 per 100 participants).
 - (Masking Tape Five rolls (1/2 inch) per 100 participants.
 - (Flip Charts One chart with stand per break-out room with 5 extra pads per 200 participants.
 - (Post-Its Two packages, 3X5 inches.
- Consultation with Management
 - o Have we spent some good, quality time with the facility management? They need to know that an Open Space event is quite unlike anything they probably have experienced before. Because of the simplicity of arrangements and responsibility of the participants, management's job is always a lot easier, and may actually be quite fun. If you feel free to do so, invite the staff to participate at whatever level seems appropriate.

Starting point

OST is one of the rare methodologies that does not require any serious preparations in terms of having working groups on the programme and agenda, organizing panelists and facilitators, and similar. It needs clearly stated theme or purpose of the conference, one facilitator for the first couple of hours, and participants.

The Invitation

The invitation is designed in respect to the principle of “less is more”. It should contain:

- title, date, location of the venue
- description of the theme/purpose/expected results in a very brief and inspiring way, up to one page. It is important for the description to be motivational and inspirational, not to say all and kill the imagination.
- brief and simple description of the process and OST in a plain language with focus on explaining how the agenda will be created (individual proposals of sessions and the wall and village market, highlighting that full participation based on passion and personal responsibility are crucial to successfulness of the conference)
- practicalities and logistics.

In the process

The Wall and Village Market place

The first session is agenda making session. The facilitator opens the floor with 15 minute, and not longer than 30 minutes introduction on the OST methodology, and explanation on how the agenda will be created. Then invites participants to step in the circle and propose the topic with using the formula of “My topic is...My name is...”. The group of 20 to 50 participants usually generates 30 topics, while the group of 100 and more generates about 75 topics.

The Wall has a chart with time slots and available spaces, and the person proposing the session, also chooses the time slot and room.

Once all that wanted to propose have proposed, the village market is open. Participants are asked to go to the wall and sign their name under the topic of their interest. At this point several things are happening:

- conflicts: when one person wants to go to more sessions that are happening at the same time, and can be resolved by a person convincing those who proposed session to combine it in one, to change the time slot and sequence the session, or simple to choose which to attend.
- combining session: although proposals are made publicly, some participants may still propose sessions with similar if not the same general focus and may discuss possibility to combine it. Of course, they can do whatever they wish, as long as they respect their original idea. However, the experience has shown that it is better to have two sessions with 10 participants, than 1 with 20 or more, as many will not have time to participate in discussion.
- public safety: in case of the big groups, when the time comes for

approaching the wall, they just do that, all at once. It is important to ask participants to move chairs and their personal belongings and open the circle in order to clear the path towards the wall.

Morning announcement and evening news

This is a time slot for announcing any changes in schedule (change of time, combination of sessions, cancelation, etc.) and any interesting things that happened during the session that should be shared with all participants. It can be done by the facilitator, though the best is if it is done by those participants who are leading the session that has gone through changes, or was a leader/participant at the session that has news to share.

Bell ringing

Usual way of calling participants attention, or calling them back to work is with persons going around and actually calling them, or shouting and clapping hands, that all can be very disturbing ways, and certainly exhausted for those involved. One of suggestion is to use Tibetan bells as their sound is noticeable enough, though not disturbing. However, you can choose your own way, traditional or not.

Potholes on the road

- heavy weather - a person may find OST to invading, unstructured and overwhelming. The high participation results in holistic involvement of participants, which means emotions too. Discussion that our powered with interest and passion may question more than just knowledge and attitude, and before we learn something new, we have to admit that the current one is wrong, and being wrong is never easy to accept. All this may lead to people not feeling well, and so to say feeling under the weather. The first response is to leave the person to deal with it on his/her/their own, and just make space and time for person to do it.
- voluntary participation is very important as a person enters the process holistically, not just professionally.
- space invaders - sometimes there will be a person taking space and time, dominating it, and though he/she/they may have a good intention and the intervention may bring good result, often this domination is not given as an option but as a must. A person will start its intervention with "we must do...", "we should do now..." and these sentences are not giving the choice to others, but are orders, and it damages personal responsibility, disturbs the power distribution, and interrupts the process of democratic discussions.
- dealing with outrageous - working with people, even more within the setting of OST and other similar methodologies (high participation, interaction, and holistic involvement of persons) can provoke different things in different people. You should expect

anything and be ready to be surprised and baffled, and in shock. Some experience are from people having a breakdown in front of the entire group and telling them their life stories, or person taking off her clothes in front of everyone during evening news. The important thing is to empower people to act, not to take over the control, the responsibility is still with participants and not only with the facilitator.

Results

The expected results are connected with the introductory statement and purpose of the event. The convener is responsible for ensuring the report from his/her/their session is drafted and send to all, or to facilitator. It may be done by the convener or by one or group of other participants at the session.

There may be “a computer corner” where computers are available to participants in order to draft the report and distribute it. Or in case where participants are having their own laptops/computers, they can do it independently and distribute it. The best option is to have reports on “day for day” basis, which results in having reports from all sessions by the end of the event. If this is compiled at that time, the participants will have report of the event ready to take home with them.

The possible content of the report may include:

- title,
- time and place of the session,
- convener (name, and contact details),
- list of participants,
- discussion and recommendations,
- agreed actions.

POSSIBLE DEVIATION FROM THE ORIGINAL OST DESIGN

Creating agenda and ensuring results we need in relation to responsibilities and promises to donors and other stakeholders

Op1. The agenda may be combination of fixed sessions proposed by us (ERA), and other sessions proposed by participants. This may include opening plenary and space for politicians to speak and have their time.

Op2. Agenda can be created before the conference through on-line “village market”. A word form of the session can be distributed to all registered participants, so that they can propose the session. A Google form/table may be created so that all registered participants can register for each session individually. At the end of the process, we combine the agenda, based on the registered participants and their interests.

The session form can contain following info: title of the session, brief description, expected results and proposed methodology, needed supplies or space consideration, and preferable time slot.