

Open Space - self-organization as the principle for success

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Jutta Weimar and her colleagues have been successfully facilitate processes through Open Space for many years, from questions of organizational development and network formation to the involvement of children and young people and networking of executives at home and abroad. In this article, she describes the mechanisms underpinning Open Space and gives tips for its application.

Conference? Meeting? People think of lectures with endless slides, eternal sitting, boredom, a pre-set program that fits everyone a little bit, but doesn't really fit anyone, podium discussions that lead "smarter" people on stage, rooms cast in twilight and participants who dawdle away their time. What a person longs for are pleasant breaks and meetings and exchanges with the participants. Afterwards, you realize that you have talked about a lot of things, but nothing has changed.

Change of scenario:

At the end of a two-day event, all of around 200 participants sit in concentric circles in the room, creating a tense and attentive atmosphere. A microphone is passed around and everyone has the opportunity to

share his or her impressions and thoughts with the others. "After 34 years in the industry, I have the feeling of belonging together for the first time", "very concrete appointments", "a very healthy working atmosphere", "I go home with a bag full of ideas and contacts", "I was skeptical at the beginning and am now very convinced about this way of working". The day before, at the beginning of the event, everyone sat together in the same way, 180 executives who had a common question and worked together in Open Space.

What is the difference?

With today's complex issues, top-down decisions and sole reliance on expert know-how are not suitable means of advancing an important topic or promoting necessary changes. This requires people who are committed to your concerns, innovative thinking, self-organized work and willing to take responsibility for implementation. This is exactly what happens in Open Space. Open Space has been a tried and tested method since the mid-1980s and is always used successfully when: existential and potentially conflicting issues have to be addressed, nobody knows the answer, there are very different views on the problem, and

there's a burning need for an answer to the question.

How does Open Space work?

Open Space is more than a workshop – it is a process with different steps, including prework and follow-up. Once it has been clarified whether Open Space is the appropriate means, a preparatory meeting is held for people representing the expected participants. At this meeting, the goal and the exact question are worked out and it is determined who has to be present to make the event a success.

Then Open Space takes place. There is no agenda, but there is a central question. Everyone is present at the beginning of the event because planning for all of the work and time schedule take place in the first 1 to 1.5 hours. Then everyone follows what is interesting and important to them. Parallel and self-organized break-out groups take place over the course of 1-2 days that develop the dynamics of self-organization, self-responsibility, networking, learning and cooperation. The results are documented in real-time. After a thorough examination of the results and enough time for reflection, all projects and project ideas



At the beginning all the participants sit in a circle.

for implementation are gathered together, arranged and documented. A few weeks after the Open Space event, there is a follow-up meeting at which the progress of the projects and plans are jointly evaluated and new projects possibly agreed upon and the next steps coordinated.

How does an Open Space event work?

All participants sit in a circle, and at the beginning the sponsor greets all participants and opens the Open Space. Afterwards, the facilitator gives a brief introduction explaining the working methods. The special character of Open Space is created by the basic elements of the process:

The Circle

Everyone is in contact with each other in a circle, there is no "top" or "bottom". The circle is a primordial form of human coexistence. The Open Space begins and ends in the

circle. Each morning and evening everyone meets in a circle to exchange ideas, bring in new concerns and ultimately plan future projects.

The Principles:

Principle 1:

"Whoever comes is the right people."

I only turn to the people who are here with me and let myself be open to them. They are exactly the people with whom I can take my subject further.

Principle 2:

"Whatever happens is the only thing that could have"

Everything that could or should have happened is completely irrelevant. We work with what is available.

Principle 3:

"Whenever it starts is the right time"

New ideas and ground-breaking

thoughts usually do not come at a given time. I can calmly await the right moment for work to begin.

Principle 4:

"When it's over, it's over / when it's not over, it's not over"

I use my time productively. When a task is finished, I turn to other things. However, if the agreed time has already expired and it is only just beginning to get exciting, then we will meet again.

The Law of Mobility

Whenever I find myself in a situation where I can neither learn nor contribute, I am obliged (law!) to go where I can learn or contribute. So when I realize that my mind is wandering, my body follows.

The phenonema - bumblebees and butterflies

For the Law of Mobility to unfold its effectiveness, people need to "fly"



The bulletin board during the Open Space of EPRIE 2017 with the topic "Strengthening the Network".



Breakout sessions during the Open Space.

from workshop to workshop because a lot of things seem interesting to them or, like butterflies, are undecided and "just beautiful" and are not present in any workshop at first. Systemically, both phenomena contribute to productive work and are very welcome.

The Admonition:

Caution! Be ready to be surprised

This is an invitation to drop well-known assumptions and beliefs about the group, the theme or the setting and let yourself be surprised by the treasures to be found here and now.

The Bulletin Board

This is where the participants' issues are collected at the beginning. Even during running events, issues can still be posted.

The Marketplace

When the Issue-collecting phase is over, everyone comes to the front and signs up for the issues where

they want to go. This is not a registration list because the law of mobility makes it possible to be exactly where one's personal energy leads. In the marketplace, times and spaces can still be negotiated between the participants before the break-out sessions begin.

The non-stop break buffet

During the event, there is a non-stop buffet with drinks, fruit and vegetables incl. light dips where the participants can refresh themselves at any time during the event (which has virtually no pre-determined breaks).

Open Space events last between four hours and several days. The best take 16 hours, spread over three days. The break-out groups publish their results on the documentary wall which usually hangs near the non-stop buffet. In this way, each individual can understand what was discussed in the other break-out groups. After completion of all work,

the results are fully documented, including an updated contact list. Afterwards, the participants make appointments and make them available to everyone.

What works in Open Space?

The topic of self-organization is receiving new attention in the current management practice and has become a fixed working principle in some industries. In Open Space, this principle works in a pure and most natural form. Like in a marketplace, people can network, work on topics creatively and effectively and find solutions. Personal participation, a focus on important issues and a productive, healthy, lively community can emerge. Groups can produce an astonishing variety of concrete implementation steps in Open Space within a short period of time, and the number of participants is (almost) unlimited. Open Space events take place with groups of 5 to 2,000 people.



Participants refresh themselves at the non-stop buffet during the event.

In contrast to the conferences mentioned above and experienced many times, participants experience that it is possible to act on their own initiative and welcome to do so, to discuss essential tasks, to exercise leadership together, to deal with differences in an appreciative and resource-oriented manner, and to develop and agree action plans. The motivation

to tackle things in a self-organized and self-directed manner is supported by the synergy that arises in Open Space and can enter everyday working life.

Open Space continues to work: In the minds, in the actions at work, in the district, in corporate management, in public life, in social

discourse, in the daily formation of opinions...



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