

An Introduction to Open Space Meetings

Scott C. Paine, Ph.D.

In most large meetings, most elements of the meeting are controlled by some small, preselected group of people. Whether we are talking about a city council meeting or a student government meeting, this small group usually controls or at least profoundly influences:

- The subject matter(s) covered in the meeting
- The order in which subjects are covered
- How much time is allotted to each subject
- How much time is allotted to each speaker
- What form of action (if any) results

There are good reasons for giving this control to selected individuals or small groups, especially when they have earned that role through a process of election or appointment.

But it's not the only way to have a meeting. And, in some cases, it's far from the best way.

What if . . .

- Anyone could introduce a subject
- Anyone could decide when to discuss the subject he/she wanted to introduce
- Everyone could decide, by individual action, how much time they chose to allot to a subject
- Everyone could decide, by individual action, how much time they chose to allocate to each speaker
- Everyone could decide, by individual action, what form of action (if any) would result

Impossible, right? Or, if not impossible, guaranteed to be utter chaos.

It's neither impossible nor chaos. It's an open space meeting.

An open space meeting is a set of conversations taking place at the instigation of meeting participants around a common question. Sometimes, multiple conversations are going on simultaneously in different parts of the 'space'. Sometimes, everyone is involved in one conversation. It all depends on the participants' choices.

Conversations start when one or more participants call for a conversation about a subject. They end when the one(s) who called for that conversation decide they want to stop. And each conversation leads to the creation of a short summary of the conversation to be shared with all meeting participants, whether or not they were a part of the conversation.

There are **four principles** that underlie effective open space meetings:

- 1. Whoever comes (to the conversation), they are the right people.**
- 2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.**
- 3. Whenever the conversation starts is the right time.**
- 4. When the conversation is over, it is over.**

There also is one law or overarching rule to which all open space meeting participants must commit if the meeting is to be productive. It's called **The Law of Two Feet**:

**Use your feet
to get to the place
where you can make a difference**

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Here are some tips for getting the most out of our open space meeting:

Remember the principles

- Even if you are the only one present for a conversation, if that conversation is important to you, have it with yourself, then write up your thoughts as your report.
- Times are flexible. Use your start time as a guide, and, when it seems like the conversation is over, that's the end time.
- Since whoever is there is part of the group that should be there, give space for each person to participate and treat each person with respect, whether you agree with them or not.
- Be open to what happens. Don't come to a conversation with a pre-determined outcome in mind (even if you are the one who called for the conversation).

Remember the law

- If you do not feel you can make a useful contribution to the conversation, thank everyone in the group, get up on your two feet, and find a conversation where you can make a difference.
- You are free to leave and join conversations at any time, not just at the specified start or end times.
- Making a difference doesn't mean you have to be an expert, or that your ideas have to persuade others. If you can enrich the conversation, that's making a difference.

If you call for a conversation, remember three things:

- **Be flexible.** People may ask you to combine with another group or change your time or location. You are free to decide what to do but be open to the possibility that change is good.
- **Be facilitative.** Calling for a conversation doesn't mean that you should dominate the conversation. Your job is to facilitate the conversation. Invite everyone who attends to contribute and give them space to do so. Feel free to speak; feel a special obligation to listen.
- **Be attentive.** When the conversation you called for ends, you'll need to type up a short summary to share with all open space meeting attendees. So be attentive to what is said and take good notes.

One more thing: since everything about this meeting (other than the framing question) is subject to your influence, that means your experience will be profoundly influenced by . . . you. If you wish a topic was being discussed that isn't being discussed, call for a conversation about that topic. If you believe that important perspectives aren't being heard in a conversation, call for another conversation and facilitate so that all perspectives can be heard.

And if you feel like you're the only one who thinks a certain way about something, then call for a conversation to discuss it. If you're the only one who attends that conversation, organize your thoughts and write up your report to be shared with all attendees.