

Tool 39: Open Space

Aim of the tool

High energy approach to deal with urgent complex issues, involving a diverse group of stakeholders, allowing participants to self-organize.

When to use it?

This tool is useful at the early stages of an MSP, where exploration, problem solving and planning are central. It can help to generate in-depth information about a selected topic.

What is an Open Space?

Open Space is a highly flexible methodology, which builds on the diverse talents and ideas of a heterogeneous group of stakeholders. It allows groups to self-organize around a complex issue, as participants are invited to create the agenda and take responsibility to explore issues they feel passionate about. The underlying structure of an open space is focused on enhanced learning and creativity to enable participants to develop innovative input.

An open space workshop can run from a couple of hours to several days; Reserving plenty of time to foster transformative outcomes is important. The methodology can accommodate both small to very large groups.

Before the workshop, an overarching question or statement is formulated, which will serve as the focus of the workshop.



Source: Art of Hosting

Open space setting

Set up chairs in a circle, leaving space in the middle. This chair arrangement shows all participants are equal, and by facing each other, they are invited to work together.

Select a blank wall where the overarching theme of the workshop can be published. Also an Agenda wall and News wall need to be created.

Opening the session

The facilitator invites people to reflect in silence upon the theme of the workshop, and come up with ideas and issues that resonate strongly with them. Any idea participants feel passionate about, and that they want to take responsibility for, can be published on the blank wall, which will act as a 'market-place'. Later, participants are asked to step up and host a small group conversation on an issue that has meaning for them.

The facilitator also explains the basic principles behind the open space workshop:

Principles:

- Whoever comes are the right people
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have occurred
- Whenever it starts is the right time
- Whenever it ends is the right time

The law of two feet

Participants are encouraged at any time to change position and walk to the session they feel passionate about and want to take responsibility for.

Bumblebees and butterflies

Bumblebees and butterflies are the metaphors for participants travelling from one group discussion to another. By using the law of two feet, they can 'pollinate' and 'cross fertilize' as changing positions allows for new input, new links and broader perspectives to arise.

Opening the market place

The facilitator invites everyone who has selected an issue to step into the middle of the circle and announce their choice. They write their topic, name, as well as a suggested time and place for a meeting, and post the invitation on the Agenda Wall.

When all invitations are published, participants can sign up for a session of their choice and contribute to the workshop by using the law of two feet.

The small group discussions can start simultaneously. A facilitator is appointed for each session, who also makes sure that a report is made for the News wall. Plenty of flip chart paper and coloured pens are provided for each group.

Ideally, once the workshop has started, the general facilitator is "neither seen nor heard". As a self-organizing event, participants need space and the facilitator's role is to keep this space open.

He or she needs to ensure that participants can engage in a safe and open way to take full advantage of their creative and problem solving skills.

Closing circle

30-60 minutes before the end of the workshop, the facilitator invites all participants to share their key learning points or highlights. This is a moment to share without discussion and harvest the output from the various conversations. A talking stick could be used.

When multiple days are reserved for the workshop, the same steps can be repeated to get a deeper understanding and commitment.

Learn more

<http://openspaceworld.org/wp2/>

Essential Elements of Open Space Technology:

<http://www.michaelherman.com/cgi/wiki.cgi?OpenSpaceTechnology/EssentialElements>

Planning an Open Space Technology Meeting:

<http://www.chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/planning-an-open-space-technology-meeting/>

Three minute video on Open Space (courtesy of Art of Hosting):

www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3jVOKQYm6E