

## FORMING THE OPEN SPACE INSTITUTE

Open Space Technology came into being in 1985. Since that time, it has spawned several books, many training classes, and attracted somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 practitioners (and who knows how many participants) throughout the world. All this with the support of one man and the help of a handful of close friends and colleagues.

The Open Space Institutes of Canada and the United States began life not as a new idea but as a way to sustain and grow what has come before. The people involved with forming the institutes began with a challenge: to evolve around the essence of Open Space.

The purpose of this article is to share what I, as a co-creator of one of the Open Space Institutes (OSI), have learned about sustaining Open Space in a new venture. It includes some of the story of what we've begun and how we are approaching it. My secondary purpose is to interest you in joining us as we continue to invent the Open Space Institute.

So join me for a moment to imagine what's possible: think of a community dedicated to nurturing the growth of human spirit in action. Imagine having access to a global network of support; an expanse of knowledge, possibilities, experience, mentoring... a home which is always open to you... a safe space to exercise your wildest ideas. An Open Space Institute that holds many contradictions: unbridled energy and spirit and a supportive, safe space; the uniqueness of each individual and the alignment of a community working together. If this picture attracts you, then read on as the adventure unfolds...

### What have I learned about sustaining Open Space?

*Stay close to the essence: it keeps spirit and momentum alive*

What is the essence of the Open Space Institute? Our articles of incorporation put it this way:

*We believe that inspired (inspired) behavior can be an everyday experience and that humanity is limited largely by its perceptions of the possible. We intend to grow that sense of possibility and make it a reality by focusing on three fundamental areas: learning, research and practice:*

- *Expanding the learning and practice of self-organizing communities.*
- *Understanding and integrating what sustains self-organizing communities.*
- *Using Open Space principles in creating and sustaining the Open Space Institute.*

Perhaps my first and most vital learning is that staying close to the essence, the intention that inspires us, is vital. We find that every time we drift from what the Open Space Institute personally means to each of us, our desire to invest any time or energy in making it happen dissipates. We discovered this through our early meetings on incorporation. As a person schooled in "good meeting practices," I'd prepare an agenda full of things to discuss, decisions to make, and we'd "slog" our way through, leaving everyone exhausted by the end of the session. There had to be a better way! So I swallowed hard, let go of a pre-set agenda and asked, "What has real vitality and meaning to us?" Here is an excerpt from our reflections on that question:

*Let us make the primary purpose of our time together the renewal of our spirit and commitment to what OSI is about. This is a time of restoring energy by focusing on our relationship to our purpose and to each other.*

This has a variety of implications. It puts a great deal of responsibility on sub-teams to get things done. It means using a different vehicle for keeping everyone informed. Our thought is to heavily use e-mail for this purpose. It takes a "leap of faith" by each of us that things will get done. It also means trusting that those areas needing the whole group's attention will naturally emerge in our meetings since they are important to the people who are there.

The result? We are discovering that simple rituals of relationship, such as checking in and checking out, provide the form to "hold" the spirit of the community. We begin every session with a check-in on what

draws us here - what has heart and meaning to each of us right now. We end each session with a check-out on how we're feeling about the process and our progress. This has consistently led to conversations that not only cover more than we would have with a formal agenda, but leaves each of us energized and our connection to each other renewed.

*Pay attention to Basic principles: they define the character of the organization*

Open Space Technology makes four principles and one law explicit. These principles, coupled with the intention or theme of the session, form the boundary conditions that give an Open Space event its organization. Stating them is part of the ritual of beginning an Open Space meeting:

- Whoever comes is the right people;
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have;
- When it starts is the right time; and
- When its over, its over.

The law of two feet says to take responsibility for what you care about; if you are neither contributing nor adding value where you are, use your two feet and go somewhere else.

While these principles continue to shape the OSI, we are applying some other principles that are implicit in Open Space. By naming them, they help us hold the space claimed by the OSI across time and distance; beyond a single event. They are:

Inclusion is our lifeblood

Three stories illustrate different aspects of this principle.

*The Need for New Generations*

This year marked the fourth annual Open Space on Open Space (OSonOS). There were over 60 people in attendance, some of whom have worked with Open Space Technology since its beginning, some for a few years and some who were in Open Space for the first time. Many "old timers" hadn't come back this year. In several conversations, people reflected on why this was so. The year three OSONOS had few newcomers, so it was mostly the same people having the same conversations with each other. For many, it had very little life. What those who did return were noticing this year, was that a "new generation" had arrived. They brought "old questions," which gave new purpose to long time practitioners, who acted as mentors. The new comers also brought new ideas and perspectives into the mix. This served as a very graphic reminder of the obvious: without new generations, there is no continued life.

*Who Do We Think We Are?*

Here we were, a handful of relative new comers to Open Space, having formed an institute without the involvement of many who have been part of OS since its beginning. Our challenge: to make the institute theirs as much as it was ours. We held conversations on "What would an Open Space Institute mean to you?" and "Staying Connected: holding space for the Open Space Community" and other related topics.

Through these conversations, the purpose of the OSI became clearer:

- a space for mutual support and connection
- a space to mentor and be mentored
- a space for learning and research.

It also set the focus for the OSI's next step -- get the word out: broaden the community. Our challenge is to create ways for everyone who cares to participate. This led to two priorities:

get a Web site established and get a mass mailing out to invite the known community of Open Spacers in. Once again, it reminded us that Open Space is fundamentally about inclusion, we sustain ourselves by constantly inviting people in.

*A Tale of Two Institutes: Diversity is a blessing*

At the same time we were forming the OSI in Seattle, another group was forming the Open Space Institute of Canada. The seeds of competition were present as we compared notes on how differently we'd

approached our start-up. Yet, as we talked, we found we both had interest in answering many of the same questions: What did people want from the institute? How can we keep the OS community connected? How can we foster learning and research? How can we do a better job of training new facilitators? It became clear to us that starting with two affiliates was a blessing in disguise: there would never be a single "center." In the spirit of inclusion, our mutuality of intention would guide what we do together and where one or the other would take the lead.

### Giving is our legacy

Harrison Owen, the creator of Open Space managed to grow the practitioners of Open Space to approximately 3,000 people. That was a lesson to us on the value of generosity of spirit. When people spoke of the role of the OSI, many expressed the desire to pass on to others what they had learned, just as Harrison had supported them in learning about the power and use of Open Space. It was Harrison who suggested the formation of the OSI. It is now his challenge to "let go of his baby." He has figuratively stepped from the center of the circle to join his colleagues on the circle's perimeter. The tradition of giving is at the heart of our founding.

### Less is more is our work ethic

When the practice of Open Space first began, early practitioners, used to elaborating on a good idea, wanted to embellish it. Harrison Owen would always caution, "less is more; what can we take away and remain true to the spirit of what we are doing?" Thus, we strive to "keep it simple," by constantly reminding ourselves of the essence of whatever we do.

The genius of Open Space is that it puts no structure on the content; the form is entirely shaped by intention and principle. This is probably the most challenging part of forming the OSI. An institute implies stability and order. We seek to re-invent "institute" as an adaptive structure; a continually emerging community expanding itself through learning and action.

*Someone has to "hold the space:" otherwise its just another good idea before its time*

When an idea does not yet belong to everyone, it requires at least one person to keep investing time and energy. This includes the mundane stuff of setting meeting times, putting out meeting minutes to help those at a distance stay connected to the conversation. Ultimately, if the idea is viable, others "catch the spirit" and activity starts happening in many places.

I have learned that while many think the idea of an Open Space Institute is a good one, its only a few who have an interest in creating and holding the space. If one or two of us were distracted, its not clear that the OSI would continue. Open Space teaches us that organizations run on passion and responsibility. How this moves from one to many is a lesson we are still learning.

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*Holman, Peggy, (1997, March/April), "Sustaining Open Space", At Work, p. 31-32.*