

Are You Smart Enough To “Let Your People Go?”

Using Open Space as a meeting technology to get to the best your employees have to offer.

By Steve Epner and Ric Giardina

Your people know the answers to the big problems your organization is facing. So why aren't they telling you?

In general, there are three key reasons why members of top management don't get the data, knowledge, and yes, even wisdom that is locked in the minds of the company's most important assets—its employees:

- First, most never ask,
- Second, when they do ask, most never listen, and
- Third, even when they ask and do listen, most do not trust their employees' perceptions.

Why is this the case? Well, for one thing, too many executives and senior managers feel as though they should already know the answers—all the answers. For many, admitting that they need help is often perceived by the organizational culture as a sign of weakness or even incompetence. Instead of asking for help from others in the organization who might know the answers, they think, “If I read the right management book and go to enough seminars, I'll find out what I need to know. I'll find some new things to try. One of them is sure to work ... won't it?”

Worse, there are times when members of senior management do ask for help, but they are not sincere. Sometimes, they go through the motions just to get “buy in.” They may be trying a combination of the latest managerial fad with the desire for a quick and easy fix. They may even ask the right questions, but it is obvious they do not listen to the answers. If they do listen, they often miss the key points because of their preconceived notions of the way things are or the way things should be.

Another problem is that top managers often do not trust the answers that come from the staff. It is as though they are thinking: “How could you know what to do when I don't.” They may be afraid of failure or just the unknown. They do not have confidence in the staff—(or maybe themselves) and it shows.

There is a solution, but it is one that takes courage and belief in your people to even contemplate. If you are self-confident, willing to listen, and able to trust your people, it is possible to harvest the knowledge base within your organization. And, the benefits of that harvest will be both immediate and long lasting.

Here is the story: In 1983, Harrison Owen spent over a year organizing an international conference for 250 participants. He observed and documented an interesting phenomenon. When it was over, he was surprised to discover that everyone (including himself!) believed that the very best parts of the conference had been the coffee breaks—and this in an environment of accolades for having produced an overall outstanding event.

He realized that the real value of many meetings comes from the coffee breaks, informal discussions, and networking that take place between sessions. Open Space Technology is the name he gave to the process of setting up a self-organizing meeting environment where “passion bounded by responsibility” delivers answers. This is a coffee break on steroids!

Open Space is not difficult to set up. But—and it is a big BUT—the people in charge have to be willing to *let go*. Let go of formal structure. Let go of the outcome. Let go of their expectations. Let go of their people. They have to trust the process and be willing to commit to taking action on the results.

Facilitating Open Space is both easier and more difficult than it appears: it is an interesting dance of active participation and getting out of the way.

Without getting into too much detail, here is a short list that describes the process, its guiding principles, and its one law.

1. **Set a Powerful Theme.** Top management (or the organizer of the meeting) sets the theme and then gets out of the way. Themes for an Open Space may be just about anything: improving sales, fixing quality, responding to competition, preparing for a merger or acquisition, or resolving a community issue. Articulation of the theme is the most significant responsibility of senior management prior to the Open Space meeting. Once, the focus is set, the process itself takes over.
2. **Groom Your Invite List.** Success depends on getting all of the stakeholders together—including line staff and operations people. You want to ensure that there is sufficient representation from every level of every segment of the business that will be or could be affected by the results of the meeting. Invite the widest group possible. Remember, “No one knows as much as everyone.” And, by the way, this is an invitation, not a command. Those with passion for the theme will show up. You don’t want the others!
3. **Be Willing to Make the Time Investment.** Small issues and small groups may be able to do things in less than a day, but that is not the norm in Open Space. If this is a commitment to resolve a big issue, you have to give it time. A two-and-a-half-day, offsite program is often optimal, but much can be accomplished with a single full-day event.

4. **Allow the Process.** The group will define the topics and convene the sessions within the theme. Do not demand any specific topics, but be willing to convene a session on any topic that you personally are passionate about.
5. **The Four Principles.** Open Space operates on four straightforward, but still somewhat tongue-in-cheek principles as follows:
 - a. **“Whoever comes is the right people.”** Grammar aside, this principle means whatever group decides to work on any topic is the right group of people to do so. Remember, Open Space operates on passion bounded by responsibility; you don’t want people participating in areas where they do not have passion or if they are not willing to take responsibility.
 - b. **“Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.”** This is a reminder that real progress can only take place when we move beyond our preconceived notions, personal agendas, and convention-bound expectations.
 - c. **“Whenever it starts is the right time.”** Let go of the clock. Everyone will take responsibility for the time they take and the contributions they make.
 - d. **“When it’s over, it’s over.”** Creativity has its own rhythms. Accept them. When creativity, real listening, and learning are happening, limiting time can be a hindrance. Thus the corollary is that *when it’s not over, it’s not over.*
6. **The Law of Two Feet.** The only “law” in Open Space says that during the course of the gathering, any person who finds him- or herself in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they must use their two feet and go to some more productive place. Every person has the option (even the responsibility) to move between topics or discussions at any time. And, in conjunction with the Four Principles, that’s just perfect because it ensures that the right people are in the right place at all times.

Does all this sound a bit scary? That’s not unexpected, and it’s absolutely all right! New ideas and processes are always a bit on the scary side because they challenge the status quo. The question to ask is: “Are we willing to get outside our comfort zones, to take a risk, to find a breakthrough?” If the answer is no, then Open Space is definitely not for you.

But, if you have the self confidence to “let your people go,” if your ego can accept the concept that you do not have and need not have all the answers, if you are willing to trust your people and a new process, then you will find that Open Space unleashes the incredible power, knowledge, passion, enthusiasm, and caring that has been locked inside your people for far too long.

You just need to start the process and then get out of the way!

Be prepared to be surprised.