



Open space technology

An approach to workshop facilitation



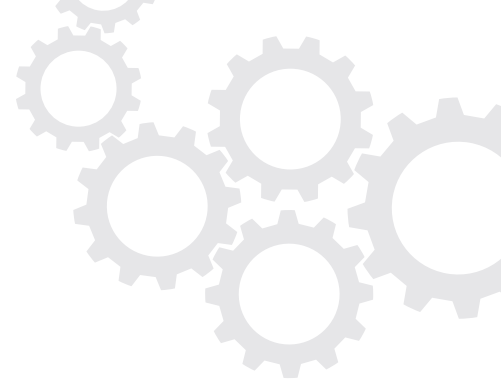
What does a conference have in common with traditional life in an African village? Lots if you use an open space technology approach.

Open space technology (OST) is a way to run workshops and conferences which leaves the agenda, session plans, and speakers entirely up to conference participants. Developed by organisational consultant Harrison Owen (who drew on his experience of life in an African village), open space technology workshops start with participants sitting in a circle and learning about how they are going to create their own workshop/conference. Participants then announce to the group what discussion or activity they'd like to cover, and selects a time and place for their session from a pre-established list. They then post their session on a wall, and other workshop attendees mill around (in what Owen calls the "village marketplace"), creating their own conference agenda by selecting the sessions they'll attend.

An OST approach can be anxiety-provoking for a workshop facilitator who is used to deep preparation and in-depth session plans, but here at Strategic Facilitators we have embraced OST for certain settings. While an OST workshop can seem chaotic, they are also productive and fun, particularly when all participants are passionate about the topic and willing to take responsibility for outputs. OST can be applied to workshops and conferences of up to a thousand participants, and is best suited to multi-day events where attendees have a chance to develop an idea over consecutive days.

A few other features of OST workshops:

- The objectives for the workshop are distributed prior to the event so that participants can reflect on the sessions which they'd like to see run to meet those objectives
- Participants gather at the start and end of each day to share insights and announce any new workshops or activities which they're adding to the schedule
- Seating is arranged in a circle to foster communication (rather than looking toward a projection screen)
- A bulletin board of issues is set up and participants can post questions, comments or things to follow up throughout any session
- Break-out spaces and alternative seating (bean bags, outside seating etc) are available so participants can move around and feel comfortable
- There are no scheduled breaks – people break when they need it



Open space technology: A workshop case study

Client	The Australian office of a global biopharmaceutical company
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review year one of the three year strategic plan • Gain clarity on the focus areas for year two • Identify capabilities required to deliver on the strategy and capability gaps
Workshop details	<p>Workshop: two and a half day facilitated workshop with senior leadership team</p> <p>Inputs to the workshops</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants asked to consider key strategic questions to be addressed on the day <p>Workshop approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No pre-work required of participants other than to think of topics they wanted to see covered • Agenda and approach developed by participants in first session rather than being set beforehand • Different session formats, locations and games are used by the facilitator to maintain energy throughout the day • Participants wore casual clothes, and room was set up with bean bags and chairs in a circle (no tables) to foster an informal feel • Group activities and brainstorms were conducted in the grounds of the venue to encourage creative thinking • Varied recording formats were used, including digital (live digital bulletin board projected onto a screen in the room), personal whiteboards, flip charts, post-it notes
Outcomes of the workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised strategic plan, with clarity around the focus areas and responsibilities for the upcoming year • Revised organisational structure to support delivery of strategic priorities • Sense of mutual responsibility and understanding about the priorities for the forthcoming year

Comments from the participants

‘I’m optimistic about the future, proud of our group, and enjoyed the open approach’



‘I really enjoyed it and feel a great camaraderie’

‘After two days, I’ll walk out of here with confidence in our ability to deliver.’

‘We have some tough times ahead, but I’m optimistic about the future, proud of our group, and enjoyed the open approach.’

want to know more?

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