OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY

A User's Guide

Harrison Owen

Preface

One thing must be made clear from the outset. Open Space Technology is not the proprietary product of H.H.Owen and Company. This is not a matter of altruism, or as some might sustpect, pure madness. It is rather a simple acknowledgement of the truth. Although my name is most closely associated wiht the approach, and its desing and development, it is a fact that the creation fo OST has been a collaborative project involving perhaps 1000 people on four continents over a period of eight years. Some were participants, some practitioners, and all were contributors. In addition, many of the basic ideas come from a small West African village, the Native American Tradition, and the Wisodom of the East. To this should also be added the work on group dynamics done in many places, and the special contributions of many friends and colleagues. This list could do on andon, but the reality is, Open Space Teachnology is a world product. There is also the pracical matter that a number of people, in a number of places, are already using Open Space Technology without my say-so or sanction - a situation in which I profoundly rejoice.

If I have a vision for Open Space Technology, it is that it become rather like accounting: something we all must do, because it works, and because it is useful. My concern is that we do it well. To this end I have written this book, not so much as the definitive statement of the right way to proceed, but rather as an invitation to join in the porcess and do it better.

So use this book as seems fitting, and please join me in what has been, and will continue to be, a marvelous co-creative adventure. Of course, there is one small responsibility that accompanies this invitation. Please, share what you discover and we will all be the richer.

Harrison Owen
Pontiac, Maryland
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Chapter I
Open Space Technology?

On the 21st of April 1992, 225 people or thereabouts gathered for a two-day meeting to develop cooperative arrangements for the effective expenditure of one and one-half billion dollars designated for highway construction on tribal and public lands. Roughly one-third of these people were Native Americans, one-third federal bureaucrats, and one-third from state and local governments. On the face of it, the prospects for a peaceful, let alone productive, meeting seemed less than bright. The participants were all natural, if not historical, enemies. As a matter of fact, the results were rather surprising.

In the course of the two-day meeting, that diverse group created, and totally self-managed, an agenda built around some 52 different task groups. The agenda was created in less than one hour, and the various task groups produced about 150 pages of proceedings in 36 hours. Thanks to the wonders of modern computers coupled with overnight printing, copies of the final proceedings rolled hot off the press in time for the departure of all participants on the morning of the third day. During the concluding session, one of the Native Americans said that never before had he felt so listened to and so much a part of the discussions. The feeling was shared by all parties.

It is also noteworthy that the decision to hold the meeting was made in March in the same year. Thus, the whole idea went from conception to delivery in about six weeks. There was one facilitator for the total event.

Stated in bald terms, these claims for the April meeting may sound extreme, if not outrageous. For the conventional wisdom says, and everybody knows, that creating a meeting of such size, complexity, and potential for conflict takes months of preparation and an army of planners and facilitators.

Furthermore, the notion that the proceedings not only could be completed but delivered to the participants prior to departure is going a little too far. Unfortunately for the conventional wisdom, the event took place exactly as described, and more than that, this was not the first such event. Over the past eight years dozens of gatherings have taken place with similar results. While the experience may not yet be common place, it is definitely not a fluke. It is repeatable. It is called Open Space Technology.

How Open Space Technology came to be was not a matter of careful planning and thoughtful design. It began out of frustration, almost as a joke.

The Genesis of Open Space Technology

In 1983, I had occasion to organize an international conference for 250 participants. It took me a full year of labor. By the time I had finished with all the details, frustrations and egos (mine and others), that go with such an event, I resolved never to do such a thing again. This resolution was confirmed at the conclusion of the conference, when it was agreed by one and all (including myself) that although the total event had been outstanding, the truly useful part had been the coffee breaks. So much for one year's

effort arranging papers, participants, and presenters. The only thing that everybody liked was the one thing I had nothing to do with: the coffee breaks. There had to be a message here.

My question was a simple one. Was it possible to combine the level of synergy and excitement present in a good coffee break, with the substantive activity and results characteristic of a good meeting? And most of all, could the whole thing be done in less than a year?'

The line of inquiry I choose to follow took some interesting turns, but essentially it started with the notion that if I could identify certain basic mechanisms of meeting, or human gathering, it might be possible to build them into an approach that would be so simple that it could not fail and so elemental that it might possess the natural power of a good coffee break.

With these thoughts in mind, I recalled an occasion in the late '60s when I was working as a photojournalist in a small West African village by the name of Balamah located in the interior of Liberia. One of the high points of my visit was participation in the rites of passage for the boys. As you might imagine, this was a major celebration. It occurred every seven years, and was the moment when the village inducted its male youth as full fledged citizens. No longer children, they were expected to assume adult roles and responsibilities. The actual celebration continued for four days with all sorts of rituals and other activities. Through it all there was amazingly nothing, so far as I could tell, that looked or acted like a planning committee, not during the event or prior to its occurrence. Nevertheless 500 people managed to manage themselves for four days in a highly organized, satisfactory, and I have to say, enjoyable fashion. How could that be?

Some of he material presented here already appears in Riding the Tiger (ABBOTT, 1991). I apologize for the redundancy, but in the interest of completeness, I feel compelled to tell part of the tale once more.

I do not claim to have the whole answer to the mystery of Balamah, but at least part of their secret lay in the fact that the village (like all West African villages) was laid out in a circle, with an open space in the middle. The chief's house, and the house of some of the important elders bordered what, in an American or European town, would have been the village square. But here it was a circle, and I think that difference is important.

My experience tells me that the circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication. There is no head or foot, higher or lower, simply people being with people - face to face. After all, we do not have a square of friends and on a cold winter's night it is nice to be part of the family circle. Place people in rows (classroom or theater-style) and they all face the source of power and authority, and it is clear who will talk and who must listen. In squares and rectangles, there is separation which may be useful to keep combative parties apart as in negotiation, but genuine, open, free communication tends to be at a minimum. Circles create communication.

The celebration in Balamah occurred as an ordered progression from the periphery of the town to the center of the circle, and back again. Dancers, drummers, horn players, religious and political leaders, all gathered in the outlying sections of the town, and then swirled to the center in a kaleidoscope of color, rhythm and song. The circle came alive with ceremony, speeches, and above all, dance. Intensity rose to peak, and then peaked again, until at last it ebbed as villagers flowed outward to their homes. It was as if the

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village were breathing, and just as no planning committee is required for respiration, none was needed in Balamah either. It seemed to me that in the geometry of the circle and the rhythm of breath I had found two of my basic mechanisms of meeting.

If the circle and breath provide the fundamental shape and dynamics, then we need only some way of establishing content and determining periodicity (time table) in order to create our conference in the coffee-break mode. Effective meetings, after all, deal with some issues in a certain order. The alternative is noise and confusion.

Two additional mechanisms suggested themselves from the life of Balamah. The community bulletin board and the village market place. The bulletin board provides a convenient, low-tech means for identifying what people are interested in. The market place provides the mechanism for bringing interests together in an orderly way. Both mechanisms are so ancient and ingrained in the human experience that explaining the rules is quite unnecessary. And of course if the village market place has not been a part of your experience, a shopping mall will do. In theory, given a circle, breath, the bulletin board, and the market place, we should have the effective ingredients for high levels of productive meeting, without the interminable planning sessions and an army of on-site facilitators, to say nothing of a resident meeting management team. The question remained: Would theory translate into reality?

Experience to Date

We have been testing the theory for the past eight years, and the experiment continues, but the answer to date has been a resounding yes. The folks in Balamah were correct. You could do incredible things without a planning committee, facilitators and conference management team.

A brief sampling of the experience to date with Open Space gatherings may make the point. For example, the National Education Association gathered 420 teachers, school board members, and administrators from all over the United States for one day around the theme, "Education for America." In that time they created, and self-managed, some 85 workshops. When they were through, they evaluated their effort on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being highly successful and I the opposite. The average score was 9.3. The total preconference planning time for agenda creation was zero.

At the other end of the size spectrum, groups of 5 have found the approach quite effective, and intact management teams of 12 to 20 have discovered that OST is an excellent way to build their teams and transact a great deal of business in a remarkably short time. The United States Forest Service's senior management team (known as Chief and Staff), which consists of the 17 people who manage that organization of 35,000 people, have used OST to break out of the mold and consider issues they never could quite get on the agenda.

As in many senior management groups, the agenda for the weekly Chief and Staff meetings was guarded as closely as Fort Knox, all in the name of efficiency. The gain in efficiency, however, was often balanced by a loss in effectiveness, as only those things officially on the agenda could be discussed. The rest remained unspoken, and possibly unspeakable.

The Forest Service is by no means alone in this shortcoming, but when the "unspeakable" remains unspoken, important business may be neglected. Worse yet,

everybody knows, but nobody can do anything, for the issues never come up officially. Open Space can change all that. Everybody has the right and responsibility to place items on the agenda, which allows the unspeakable to be spoken.

In South Africa, the 12 members of a totally new management group, which had been created when several corporations merged, used OST with great success to fashion a new organizational structure, reporting relationships and product management procedures, all in two days. More important than the completion of a number of essential organizational tasks was the fact that they had become a team.

A strong point of Open Space Technology is its ability to unite groups of enormous diversity in terms of education, ethnicity, economics, politics, culture, social position, or all of the above. In one meeting sponsored by the Together Foundation to promote global unity, 178 people from 28 countries speaking 17 languages addressed their task for five days. Participants ranged from presidents of countries to ordinary planetary citizens, and in just about one hour this group created 82 workshops which they self-managed for the duration of the conference. There was no simultaneous translation, one facilitator, and preconference planning was limited exclusively to logistical details.

Open Space Technology thrives in areas of conflict and confusion. In the early summer of 1992, OST was used in one of the South African townships to promote useful discussion among the several political groups. The focus of conversation was improving communications in the area. For a full day representatives of the various political parties along with nearby industry (largely white) worked together. It would be a supreme overstatement to say that all issues were resolved, or that love and light broke out in full abundance. But the discussions were intense, productive, without rancor, and contrasted sharply with conditions in a neighboring township where conversations had ceased and bloodshed commenced. There was also a continuing benefit. Several days after this particular gathering, one of the participants called to say that for two years as president of a local school organization, he had been attempting to get the people involved in creating their future. Nothing had worked. They sat like bumps on a log. Then he tried Open Space Technology, and his problem was reversed. The people became involved, and he had but one option. Get out of the way.

In Venezuela, the new cellular phone company, TELCEL, has been growing at a phenomenal rate in the midst of sometimes incredible confusion. Its American partner, Bell South, predicted that by the end of TELCEL's first year of operation, TELCEL might sell 15,000 units. The fact of the matter is that TELCEL sold 50,000 units in less than a year, to become the fastest growing cellular phone company in the world. That was the good news. But there was some bad news as well.

The growth was so rapid that people scarcely had time to breathe, talk, or solve organizational problems. The whole venture was about to be overwhelmed by waves of confusion and fatigue. A major mid-course correction was required, without any reduction of speed, for slowing down, or stopping, would mean the loss of their major objective, market dominance.

On a Saturday, every employee of the corporation was invited to an Open Space event focused on the future of their company. No additional compensation was offered. People were going to do this on their own time or not at all. Of the 263 people then employed by TELCEL, 252 showed up. In less than an hour some 32 issues were identified, which then formed the basis of a similar number of task groups. For one full day, the discussion raged. Technical people talked to sales, who talked to marketing, who talked

to finance, who talked to computernics, who talked to senior management. And around it went one more time. Interestingly enough, only one of the 32 working groups was led by a member of senior management. All the leadership came from the trenches.

When evening rolled around, and the final report-out had been completed, a most remarkable thing occurred. Somebody put a catchy dance tape on the sound system, and for the next three hours, the party rolled on, stopping only when the buses had to leave. And this was a corporation at the edge of destruction!

Six months later, virtually everybody in the corporation looked at the day in Open Space as the turnaround point.

Obviously not all the issues were solved on that day, but the critical element necessary for their resolution was set in place: communication. People found they could talk and work together.

Open Space Technology has now successfully been utilized in India, South America, Africa, Europe, the United States and Canada with groups of 5 to 500. The purposes have ranged from corporate redesign in the face of intense competition, to national redesign in the face of massive transformational forces as in South Africa. The technology is not magic, nor does it solve all problems. However, in those situations where highly complex and conflicted issues must be dealt with, and solved, by very diverse groups of people, OST can make a major contribution.

In what follows, I have attempted to lay out an approach to the utilization of Open Space Technology. This is by no means a step-by-step manual, and I strongly suggest that you read the appropriate parts several times and then throw away the book. In the final analysis, what is right will be what works for you. It must be appropriate to your style, circumstances, and way of doing things. Experience has shown that any individual with a good head and a good heart can achieve satisfactory results.

OST by design and intention is simple. It will work equally in third world village environments and sophisticated board rooms. As with most simple things, it is true that almost anybody can do it. It is also true that doing it well may require a lifetime of practice.

Chapter II

Preparation

So you want to try Open Space. The fact is, it is very simple and easy to get started. Nevertheless some careful preparation is necessary. Not the sort of preparation you may be used to, with months of committee meetings devoted to agenda development and participant selection. But preparation nonetheless.

Appropriateness

The first item is the basic decision to use Open Space Technology or not. In the wrong situation, OST may create more problems than it solves.
Open Space Technology is effective in situations where a diverse group of people must deal with complex, and potentially conflicting material, in innovative and productive ways. It is particularly powerful when nobody knows the answer, and the ongoing participation of a number of people is required to deal with the questions. Conversely, Open Space Technology will not work, and therefore should not be used, in any situation where the answer is already known where sombody at a high level *thinks* he or she has the answer, or where that some body is the sort that *must* know the answer, and therefore must always be in charge, otherwise known as control, control, control.
To take some obvious examples, Open Space Technology would not be the method of choice for installing a new corporate filing system. Presumably the system has been designed, tested and packaged. At the point of installation, there is little room and less need for argument, discussion, or change. Simply issue the manuals and allow the folks to get on with the business.
Conversely, OST will work superbly if the issue is the future of the corporation and the people (all sorts of people including the top brass) are quite willing to admit that they just do not know the answer, but nevertheless believe that collectively they have a shot at creating a viable solution.

Always Works

In a curious way, Open Space Technology always seems to work. It is just that sometimes people are not totally pleased with the result. Not to be mysterious, but in the Open Space environment, people tend to be creative, synergistic (they work together) and self-motivated. If this is not the desired behaviour, it will cause problems. For example, a Fortune 25 corporation considered OST as a possible component for a new, world-wide, orientation program for employees. The idea was that if the new folks could be brought into the fold feeling that they really had an exciting part to play, what this would be a positive and useful first experience in their new corporate home. Accordingly, a program was designed in which old and new employees were brought together to work on the issues and opportunities for building a better corporation. One might wonder what the new hires actually had to contribute in such a situation, but the

truth of the mater was, a lot. If nothing else, they had all the questions presumably long since answered by those with more tenure. By visiting the old questions and finding some new ones, it was thought that everybody might collectively build an effective team which looked to the future.

On the appointed day, a test of the approach was initiated. Sixty-five people, two-thirds of whom had been with the company for less than a year, met with their colleagues. From my point of view, the day was everything it was supposed to be. People talked, worked, energized, synergized, and seemed to have fun. When it was all over, I thought it useful to make a quick assessment of how things had gone. So I asked each person to think of a word that described the day for them. Since the program was designed for the newcomers, it seemed appropriate to ask them for their words first. I was not disappointed, for the words included: "exciting," "energizing," "stimulating," "liberating," and "collegial." Just as I was beginning to feel pleased and proud, I turned to the more senior people and received a nasty shock. Their words: "terrible," "unsettling," "out of control," "confusing," "worst day I have ever spent."

There was no doubting the intensity of feeling displayed by both groups, and I found myself shaking my head in confusion at the obvious difference. Then one of the very senior members said that he had to agree with his colleagues. The day had been awful, and if not the worst, then certainly on a very short list. But in all fairness, he went on to say, Open Space Technology had done everything exactly as advertised. The problem for him was that he felt out of control, and he did not like that at all. As you might gather, this corporation did not use Open Space Technology in its orientation program, but not because it had failed to work.

Focus and Intent

Although Open Space Technology is powerful and effective, never use it for the sake of the process alone, only for the potential results. OST is designed to do a job, to work a real business issue, no matter how you define "business" or "issue." So a first act of preparation is accomplish, to determine in concrete terms what you want to accomplish, best stated in a question.

For example, it might be your intent to plot the future of your organization (which some call strategic planning). Your initial question might be: What are the future issues and opportunities for Oxymoron Corporation? That may seem rather broad, but at least the potential participants would understand that Oxymoron Corporation was on the table and not some other, and further that the whole future was up for consideration, as opposed to simply the compensation scale or new products. As we will discover, Open Space Technology runs on two fundamentals, passion and responsibility. Without passion, nobody is interested. Without responsibility, nothing will get done.

Obviously different people feel passionate about different things (different strokes for different folks). And it is quite unlikely that anybody will take responsibility for something they do not care about. It is therefore extremely important to declare, right up front, what the focus is.

To utilize the example from Chapter I the 225 people who gathered in Denver felt some real concern about roads on public and tribal lands. The fact that $1,500,000,000 was at stake raised their interest, and all of that was sufficient to draw them to the gathering,

and keep them engaged until it was over. It is unlikely, however, that the same group of people would assemble for two days to consider the future of the hardware business.

All of this may appear obvious. But it is amazing how we often find ourselves in solemn assembly with little if any idea as to why we are there, or indeed, who called the meeting. Little wonder that nothing gets done and we leave frustrated. Fuzziness of intention may be tolerated in dictatorial organizations where the word of the Boss is sufficient to provide the rationale, but in the world of Open Space, where passion and responsibility are the essential ingredients, the word of the boss doesn't go very far. There is a more important word: volunteer. Being a volunteer is the prime prerequisite for the full expression of passion and responsibility. Only fools volunteer for something they neither understand nor care about.

Under the heading of comprehension and concern, it has been my experience that few people in working organizations care about such abstractions as team building, empowerment, let alone an "Open Space experience." They do care about making a profit, providing a service, creating a product, winning a customer, market share, or even an election. Everything else tends to be viewed as a buzz word, or "warm fuzzie," drawn from the special vocabulary of strange people who inhabit training departments and the human resource area. As it happens, I think that team building and empowerment are very important, and some of my best friends work in the human resource area. But the point remains. Most of the world could care less, which does not make them "bad people," just different.

OST is designed to deal with real business issues - no matter how the nature of the business may be defined. If your business happens to be training or human resources, then you may indeed be passionately concerned about what other people may view as "soft stuff." So be it. But never inflict your concerns on others and expect them to care as your do. For Open Space Technology to work, it must focus on a real business issue which is of passionate concern to those who will be involved.

The Group

Who should come, and how do you get them there? The answer is: whoever cares, and the fact of their caring will be sufficient to insure their attendance. The process of invitation becomes extraordinarily simple. Given the business issue of choice, run it up the flagpole.

I can understand that all of this sounds neither scientific nor orderly. After all, if we only did what we cared to do, not much would get done. Or would it? Isn't it true that jobs done by people who don't care are not worth a whole lot? Is it not also true that people who care greatly accomplish incredible things? And fortunately, there are a lot of different people, who care about a lot of different things, which means that there is a high likelihood that the majority of things that need to get taken care of will be - by someone who cares.

The conventional wisdom in many organisations says that until the boss issues the order, not much is going to happen. And further, when the order is issued, people in general are not going to like it, because after all, the order requires work. We all know that work is unpleasant, or what is a retirement for?

Very quickly, the conventional wisdom creates a negative self fulfilling prophesy in which

the only way anything gets done is when we don't care enough to do it. And that does not make a great deal of sense. The fact is that the best way to get something done well is to give it to somebody who cares enough to do it. Even in those situations where a number of folks are assigned a task, the usual experience is that the actual work gets done by a precious few: those who care to do it. So why not avoid all the frustration, guilt, and anger? Assign work only to those who care to do it.

This revolutionary suggestion apparently would not work in what we take to be a standard organization dominated by the conventional wisdom. However, the suggestion points to the heart and soul of Open Space Technology, and the conventional wisdom may well be wrong. For OST to work the people must work because (and only because) they care. Put in slightly different terms, voluntary self-selection is the absolute sine qua non for participation in an Open Space event.

At this juncture you may justifiably be wondering about all those people presumed necessary to the task, who for one reason or another, do not show up. The answer is painfully simple. If those people are truly essential to the task, the task will not get done until they are ready to do it. Alternatively, it may turn out that those folks were not nearly as essential as previously presumed.

In my experience, the latter is most often the case. But the principle remains, the right people for an Open Space Event are the ones who want to come. Voluntary self-selection is the rule.

None of this is to suggest, however, that maximum best effort is not required to insure that all the appropriate people know about the event and are given every opportunity to see participation to be in their best interest. In select cases, a personal invitation can be very effective. It is also important that people truly understand the implications of their absence. I have found, for example, that when the issue is the future of the organization (as in strategic planning) people will often find it advantageous to attend lest they not be part of the organizational future.

In the final analysis, the issue is quality and not quantity. It is infinitely better to have a small, select group that truly cares, than a cast of thousands whose minds and hearts are elsewhere.

How Many? - OST has worked effectively with groups from 5 to 500. The real question is how many you need to get the job done.

There is no reason to believe that fewer than 5 would make any difference, nor that 500 is a sort of "sound barrier." I can tell you that 500 people is a lot of people, and while the energy and excitement is palpable, it scarcely qualifies as an intimate group. At the other end of the numbers scale, there is nothing to suggest that it will not work with less than 5. It should be remembered, however, that the total resource available to the group is its membership, which in most cases is more than sufficient. With a group of 5, one person represents 20 percent of the total resource. If that person is feeling a little down, or out of sorts, the impact upon the group can be immense. On the other hand if the same person were feeling a little down in a group of 100, the effect of the 1 percent diminution would probably be minimal.

The Invitation - At some point it is usual to issue an invitation. For small groups, that may be verbal, but more often than not something in writing is appropriate. A natural temptation (which must be resisted) is to try to explain everything that will happen during the event, including how and why it will work. After all, we are used to sending out a full agenda in advance with a complete rationalization. Open Space makes that

unnecessary. The group will prepare the agenda upon arrival. Thus, providing the agenda is not only unnecessary, it is impossible. So what do you say in the invitation? As little as possible.

The objective is to stimulate the imagination of potential guests to the point that they perceive the pertinence and attractiveness of the issue. In a day of information overload, when it is presumed that more is better, a parsimonious approach may seem strange. Remember, however, that when you give out all possible information, there is no room for imagination. I am not suggesting obfuscation or deceit - just say only as much as you need to, and allow the creative concern of those who attend to do the rest.

A useful model might be the first paragraph of a really good story. If you tell the whole tale at the outset, nobody would bother reading on. On the other hand, if you say nothing, or little that makes any sense, the reader will not be hooked. The art lies is saying just enough to catch attention, while leaving sufficient open space for the imagination to run wild.

There is, of course, some practical information to be included in the invitation such as location, time, and logistics. By way of example, I have included below the invitation to one of our Symposia on Organization Transformation. You would make an enormous mistake to simply copy this for your own use, but as a guide it may be helpful. You will also note the basic elements of an Open Space Event. Although they are few in number, each one is important, and their function will be explained in the following chapters.

In the process of developing OST, I practiced what may seem a rather strange discipline which I called "Less is more." Each time I had an opportunity to run an Open Space Event, I attempted to identify one more thing NOT to do. Over eight years, I think I have now gotten the whole process down to the bare-bones essentials.

The Eleventh Annual
International Symposium on
Organization Transformation
July 5 - 9, 1993
Coolfont Conference Center
Berkeley Springs, West Virginia
USA
Outrageous
Diversity

You are invited to the 11th Annual International Symposium on Organization Transformation. As usual this conference is not for everybody, especially those who expect, or require, a tightly structured, carefully controlled event. We will enter into Open Space, without prepared agenda or clear-cut knowledge as to where we will end up. We will only know the theme, who is coming, and what they are interested in. Be prepared to be surprised.

OUR THEME - Outrageous Diversity

The bloody events in used-to-be Yugoslavia remind us that the world has yet to reach perfection, no matter how many New Ages have been proclaimed. And the cry for Ethnic

Cleansing, which appears to drive those events, makes it quite clear that diversity, at some very basic levels, is outrageous. The Serbian battle cry is only the latest iteration of a war chant which has had many forms: Racial purity, Segregation, Apartheid, and more. Diversity for some people is outrageous.

Other people, however, find the outrage of diversity to be a positive value. Consider some of our younger citizens, for example. Their clothing tends toward black, ears are pierced for multiple earrings, and the hair is long and sometimes colored in ways unknown in nature. When everything is done to perfection, the highest praise is OUTRAGEOUS! To be outrageously different is what it's all about. There is a lesson here. As our world transforms and our organizations struggle to transform in response, the fact of diversity becomes ever more inescapable. Those who seek to eliminate, or manage (usually another word for eliminate), the emergent diversity not only will fail, but miss out on a wonderful opportunity. The outrageous diversity of life is what gives it spice, meaning, and richness. Diversity creates opportunities for learning and growth. Never comfortable, always challenging. Definitely OUTRAGEOUS!

And so our theme, what are the issues and opportunities present in the outrageous diversity of our planet, and how do we make them available to our organizations?
If we are on a Journey, it is a journey without maps except as we make them. This means, among other things, that there are no simple answers, only a lot of questions in the great experiment. Those who expect and require a tightly packed and controlled agenda will be frustrated, and probably should not attend. This is not to suggest that there will be neither content nor outcomes, for indeed there will be both. The experience of content and the achievement of outcomes, however, will be maximally dependent upon the exercise of individual and collective responsibility to see that both occur. The content will be what each person brings, and the outcomes, what we all create.

WHATS GOING TO HAPPEN?

The honest answer is that we just don't know, except that we propose to create an Open Space in which good thinking, creating, celebrating, and just being together, can occur. Beyond that we have only the expectations we bring from our several lives and the common tradition of the ten previous Symposia on Organizational Transformation. Somehow, we will honor the past, acknowledge the present, and anticipate the future. None of this can be accomplished with only dull seriousness. Through it all there will be a sense of High Play in which we can take the difficulties of the moment as the opening to new possibility, joyfully creating useful forms appropriate to an emerging world. The Symposium Design is simple and open. Given the talent that will be there, the design is provided not so much to tell folks what to do and when, but rather to provide a supportive environment in which everyone will be able to do what needs to get done, with a minimum of hassle. OPEN SPACE - Just what the words imply.., time and space for participants to meet in whatever configuration seems appropriate in order to pursue the business at hand. Open Space can be rather unsettling, but it also produces that fecund environment in which good things happen. MORNING NEWS/EVENING NEWS - Short periods to bring people up to date on what has been happening and what lies ahead. CELEBRATION - A time to boogie, if that feels good - or whatever else might

come to mind as a way celebrating our time together. If you have a musical instrument, bring it. CLOSING CEREMONY - Nothing too formal, but a simple time to honor the spirit we have shared and to reflect on what we have done together with whatever words any or all participants might feel appropriate.

SO WHAT DO WE DO? ... AND HOW DO WE KEEP IT ALL TOGETHER?

Basically what we do is follow our noses and each other in order to explore the thematic elements we have laid out prior to the symposium and such others as we may have invented along the way. How well and productively all this works will depend on two factors - the talents/resources of the folks who come.., which will be superb. AND our willingness to seek out new ideas and people and put them all together in useful ways. This will involve some little bit of chaos, but it turns out that chaos, more often than not, is the seed bed of opportunity - if we choose to make it so. But too much Chaos is not a good thing. On the ORDERING side, several things will be present to help out...

THE COMMUNITY BULLETIN BOARD AND VILLAGE MARKET
PLACE –
When participants decide that they want to pursue a particular theme, they give it a short title and post it on the board. Any other participant who would like to join in that particular exploration just signs up. After a little negotiation in the Village Market Place, time and place are arranged, and after that it is up to you.

FACILITIES/LOGISTICS AND PRACTICALITIES

FULL PARTICIPATION - The conference simply will not work with DROP-INs. So PLEASE plan to come for the whole thing. That is the only way you can possibly take advantage of all the other good folks, and for sure that is the only way they can really take advantage of you. Registration will be limited to 150 people.

THE PLACE AND COSTS - The conference will take place at the Coolfont Conference Center, a rustic, comfortable, spirit filled place in the mountains of West Virginia 2 hours from Washington DC. Rates are...

Space and Time

Open Space Technology happens in time and space, and although the requirements are minimal, they are important. Even more important is an understanding that there is no "perfect","ideal," or generically optimal space and time for Open Space. Almost anything will work (with some important exceptions). The real question is one of appropriateness to the people and the task.

How Long - How much time do you need for Open Space Technology? Within rather broad limits, the answer is, that all depends on your intention. On the short end of the scale, less that one full day is usually frustrating. However, some colleagues, who utilize OST in school systems, have managed to fit the approach into a 50 minute school hour.

Be that as it may, the groups that I work with, which tend to be businesses, bureaucracies, and other organizations, take one full day to really get into the spirit of things. Anything less, and they find it is time to stop just when they are really having fun. One day will allow for a very intense, meaningful, and productive discussion.

If your intention is to produce a set of proceedings, as was the case with the billion dollar event described in Chapter I, a second day is almost essential. The actual proceedings are done with a very simple computer system which will be described in Chapter IX. For reasons that I do not fully understand, if there is only one day groups become so engrossed in their discussions that they will have little, or no time for recording the results. With the knowledge that there will be a second day though, the discussions tend to pace themselves in such a fashion that time appears for the computers. If you say that doesn't make any sense, I must agree with you, but that has been the experience.

Given a third day, the group's interactions take on a wholly different quality. If the first day allows for intense discussion, and the second day for the recording of results, a third day permits a degree of reflection and revision that does not seem to occur in a shorter time-frame. It may be noteworthy that each succeeding day is not dedicated to a separate activity in a linear sequence (discussion, recording and reflection). Rather the group develops a rhythm, or sense for itself, which takes up the new activities as time allows.

The choice therefore, between a one-, two-, or three-day event depends entirely on the results required. In one day the conversation will be stimulating and intense. In two days that conversation may be recorded for posterity. With three days, reflection is possible. After Three Days. . . My mother used to say that after three days guests and fish leave something to be desired. I think the same is true with Open Space Technology. The reasons have something to do with fatigue levels, which begin to climb, and a natural ebb and flow of group activities, which hit a low point after three days. By the end of three days the energy output has been such that disengagement is the only option. How long groups would have to stay in "neutral" I don't know, but some respite is absolutely essential. After another day or so, I suspect that the cycle would repeat. However, enough is generally enough after three days.

OST in Combination - It is sometimes necessary to use OST in combination with other approaches to meetings. There is nothing the matter with this so long as certain principles are kept in mind. The fundamental one is, Never interrupt Open Space with something else. When you are doing Open Space, do it. When it is over, it is over. Specifically this means that if you have a series of speakers you want the group to hear, or other programmatic activities you want everybody to be a part of, do all of that before Open Space. The reason is quite simple, and relates to the essential precondition of voluntary self-selection, without which Open Space Technology will not work. There will be no problem, however, if the command performance takes place before the Open Space.

Theoretically such mandated group events might also follow the Open Space, although experience has shown that the results are less than optimal. The level of synergy and creativity is typically so high in Open Space that it is usually very difficult to sit still and listen to a speaker at the conclusion, even a very exciting speaker.

Open Space Technology requires one room, large enough to allow all the participants to

sit in a circle, or at the very least, two or three concentric circles, without crowding. When estimating the necessary size of the room, it usually works to divide the rated capacity by two. Thus if the room is rated for 200 people theater style, it will comfortably handle 100 people in Open Space.

One wall of this room must be free and unobstructed by doors, curtains, windows, or pictures. This wall will become the Community Bulletin Board, where people will be taping up notices indicating their areas of interest. Should masking tape not adhere to the wall, all will be lost. If the hotel management throws a fit when material is taped to the wall, get a new management, or hotel, or both. Given a comfortable room and a wall that works, virtually everything else is negotiable, but not unimportant.

Under the heading of negotiable items, please find break-out spaces. Note that I said break-out spaces, and not necessarily rooms. Some people require four walls, a table, chairs, and chalkboard (windows optional) before they feel well situated to do anything that looks like work or discussion. For such people, break-out rooms are essential. Other people experience that sort of environment as claustrophobic and greatly appreciate the great outdoors directly, or at the very least mediated through a window. The point is that a variety of meeting spaces is in order.

A great deal of time and effort have been devoted to the understanding of differences in learning styles and pacing (speeds), and there is no doubt that each one of us has our own peculiar requirements which must be met if we are to achieve our optimum performance. Less attention has been given to what might be called learning spacing. Each one of us has a set of physical conditions in which we perform best and learn most comfortably. These conditions change with time, subject, and temperament. We all want an environment conducive to our learning, but that can mean many different things to different people, or even the same people at different times. Effective circumstances for an Open Space event not only include a sufficient number of formal break-out rooms for those who feel the need of such things, but also a healthy array of other kinds of spaces. Big ones, small ones, by water, in the woods, adjacent to the bar, quiet, noisy, open, closed. I am convinced that the depth and rapidity of learning are directly proportional to the variety of available spaces.

When it comes to formal break-out rooms a workable rule of thumb is 5 per 100 participants. This presumes that there are some additional public spaces in the facility such as the lobby, gardens, hallways, and of course, the more the better. It also presumes that some people will find it comfortable and convenient to meet in the large main room.

Other Considerations - Like When Do We Eat?

Humankind does not live by discussions alone. Sooner or later snacks or meals are not only nice, but necessary for reasons of physical survival as well as providing a very important occasion for the ongoing process of dialogue. Unfortunately, most conference coffee breaks and meals are arranged for the convenience of the management, with little regard for the feelings and needs of the participants.

When it comes to eating, voluntary self-selection applies as it does in all other areas of the Open Space experience. To the extent possible, people should be able to refresh themselves when they need and want to, congruent with their other activities. If the discussion has suddenly heated up, no meal bell should be allowed to interrupt. By the

same token, when there is a break in the action it is nice to take a pause that refreshes. All that should happen according to the participants' choice.

Pushed to extremes, this philosophy could well create revolt in the kitchen, which would be a disaster in itself There are, however, a number of ways to avoid this. For example, all meals can be served as buffets over a several-hour period, allowing people to come and go as they please. For coffee breaks, try replacing the 15 minute mad dash, which nobody observes anyhow, with a more leisurely approach. The world will not come to an end if the beverages and snacks are left out for an hour or longer. Of course, things do get cold, or warm, given time, but that problem can be solved by serving fresh fruit, which seems to do quite well at room temperature over extended periods of time. Another strategy is to hold the meeting in a place with easy access to a number of restaurants, all of which have different hours and cuisines. In this way the fate of the total population is not solely in the hands of one kitchen staff. With virtually no effort, it is possible to insure that there is never a time when something good to eat or drink is not available. This may be somewhat difficult on the waistline, but it has definite advantages for a methodology which took its original inspiration from the coffee break.

The easy availability of food and drink over time, and with variety, becomes especially important when multiple cultures are present at a single conference. Should these people also have traveled some distance, the variety of times zones will compound differences of cultures. It is very difficult to participate effectively when the belly is unhappy and growling.

Supplies - Supplies for Open Space are simple by design, but they are essential. I will describe in detail how all these items are used several chapters later, but under the heading of preparation, the following materials need to be secured. Masking Tape (5 rolls for 100 participants); Ink Markers (Preferably washable and in a variety of dark colors - red, blue, green, and black will do. 50 per 100 participants.); Flip Charts (One per break-out room plus 5 additional pads per 100 participants.);

POST-ITS (3x5 size. Two packages of 100). These quantities are not precise, and if your group is very artistic, loquacious, or wasteful, you may need more.

Consultation with the Management

The management of your conference facility is a most important part of your team. If they have never supported an Open Space event, it is essential that you spend as much time as is necessary to make them feel comfortable and part of the action. They will find that OST is much easier to host, but because it is different, it may seem a little strange.

I find it useful to talk about the total concept, how it got started, and what the experience has been, in addition to the standard details that are usually covered in preconference meetings. They need to know, for example, not only that you need meals on a flexible schedule and refreshments available at all times, but why this is important. As professionals whose business it is to support various sorts of gatherings, I think you will find that their interest will be strong.

If you are fortunate to be the only guests in the facility, a condition I strongly recommend, there will be no problems with other guests. However, if you are sharing a facility, it is quite possible that the apparently random coming and going of the Open Space group may be a little disconcerting to others whose approach to meetings is more in the traditional mode. All of these problems can be avoided if it is clear in advance where your people should not go. If you find there are too many prohibitions, it may be well to seek an alternative facility.

Under ideal circumstances the facility staff will feel free to join in the festivities as appropriate. Obviously if proprietary information, or other sensitive matter, is being discussed, outsiders will not be useful. But where and when that is not the case, a welcome mat for your hosts is always a plus.

OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY
Check List

o   Appropriateness

Should we even take this trip? Is OST right for our purposes?

o   Theme

Is it clear, focused, but with sufficient room to let the imagination grow?

o   Invitation

Is there sufficient information to insure that our guests arrive at the right place, at the right time, ready to go to work? Does our description of the task evoke participation without prescribing the detailed outcome?

o   Time

Have we allotted sufficient time for what we want to do? One day for a good discussion. Two days for a written record. Three days for reflection and correction of all of the above.

Main Space
Is our main meeting room large enough so that all of our participants may sit comfortably in a circle, or two or three concentric circles, with room to spare?

The Wall

Do we have a relatively unobstructed wall in our main meeting room long enough so that when all of our participants stand in front of it, they are never more than 2-3 persons deep? Will masking tape stick? Will the management object if the tape does stick?

o   Other Spaces
Do we have sufficient break out rooms for those who like a formal setting (10 rooms per 200 participants)? Will other people with other tastes find something to their liking? Have we advised the management that our participants are very likely to be working all over the facility? Are there any areas where our people should not go?

0   Food and Drink
Have we made arrangements for the maximum possible flexibility for meals and snacks? Plenty of variety available most of the time.
Supplies
Do we have the necessary supplies ready to go?
(Ink Markers Dark, primary colors (50 per 100 participants).
(Masking Tape Five rolls (1/2 inch) per 100 participants.
(Flip Charts One chart with stand per break-out room with 5 extra pads per 200 participants.
(Post-Its Two packages, 3X5 inches.
(Consultation with the Management
Have we spent some good, quality time with the facility management? They need to know that an Open Space event is quite unlike anything they probably have experienced before.
Because of the simplicity of arrangements and responsibility of the participants, management's job is always a lot easier, and may actually be quite fun. If you feel free to do so, invite the staff to participate at whatever level seems appropriate. After all, they are a very important part of the team.

Have a great time!
If it isn't fun, it isn't working.

Chapter III

Personal Preparation
for
Open Space

The unique and critical role of the facilitator in an Open Space Event involves two functions: to create space/time and to hold space/time. Observably in performance, this means doing less rather than more. Under the best of circumstances, the facilitator will be totally present and absolutely invisible.

If this assertion appears paradoxical, even contradictory, and rather like the sound of one hand clapping, I have to confess that the line of thinking and practice has more to do with Zen and the Eastern martial arts than a straight, linear application of a cookbook technology. Two stories may serve to compound the contradiction, or possibly make things a little clearer.

On one occasion during the course of an Open Space Event, I overheard my client remarking to a friend that while everything seemed to be working quite well, he could not see that I actually did anything. Inasmuch as he was paying me a rather large amount of money, this was a matter of some concern.

On a second occasion, and actually with the same client, I was facilitating an Open Space Event.for 250 individuals. With the exception of the opening moments of the conference, virtually all conversations were in Spanish. That may seem unremarkable, but I do not speak Spanish. One might wonder how you could facilitate an event without understanding a word.

The conclusion, I believe, is that the whole process is operating at a level, and in a fashion, that is rather different than the conventional wisdom might anticipate. You, of course, will have to draw your own conclusion.

I confess to a certain uneasiness in writing this chapter. On the one hand I believe it drives to the heart and soul of Open Space Technology, and therefore must be said. I can also understand that for some people it will represent one enormous frustration. It is very difficult to speak intelligently about "doing nothing." Under the best of circumstances one can only point in some useful directions and hope that the hints are sufficient to carry the message. At the very least it may become clear that Open Space Technology is somehow more than four primal mechanisms (the circle, breath, bulletin board and market place) and a series of procedures.

Creating and Holding Time/Space

The notion of creating and holding time and space will appear at some variance with the normal perception that time and space are universal "givens," over which we have little, if any, control. To suggest that we can create either is to talk strangely. Perhaps.
At the same time we will often say in colloquial speech that we must "make time or make space" for something or someone. All of which suggests that in addition to time and space appearing as universal abstractions, they also have a personal, human dimension as in: "my time/space" "your time/space" or "our time/space."
It is not my intention, nor is there the necessity, to solve the riddles of time and space. Many have tried and few have been successful. St. Augustine may have been among the best, and also most honest, when he remarked that he understood time perfectly, until he tried to explain it? But if a full explanation is impossible, it is also unnecessary, and my purpose will be served if it is acknowledged that time and space are at least partially human artifacts.
Creating time and space is a uniquely human and humanizing activity. In some way, I become me, you become you, and they become they - when each and all of us create our time and space. It is the way we create our identities. Without our peculiar time and space, we just aren't.
Travelers to different cultures become acutely aware of the role of time and space in the identity creation of the hosts. More often than not, this identity is experienced as uncomfortable, and sometimes becomes the object of (offensive) jokes. From the perspective of white Americans, Latins and Black Africans are always late. Italians and other southern Europeans get too close, and men even kiss and hold hands in public. Of course, the Americans in turn are perceived as pushy and distant. The real point is that very different notions of time and space are operative, which are neither right nor wrong, just definitive of the people who hold them.
What is true with large bodies of people seems also to be true of smaller ones. We all know families who have the reputation of always being late. Different corporations are also known by their operative sense of time and space: some are "laid-back" and some are "uptight."
So if a group of people wish to get together and accomplish something they must have time and space. Not just in the sense that they have blocked out four days (or whatever) in their busy schedule in order to meet at some hotel. They must create a unique sense of time and space peculiar to themselves and their task. Failing that, they will never be a group, and they will never (therefore) get the job done.
Ultimately the group (to the extent that it ever becomes a group) will create and preserve its own (sense) of time and space, but the act of creation must start somewhere, and the sooner the better. Which brings us back to the fundamental role of the facilitator: creating and holding time and space quickly and expeditiously, so that the job at hand may be accomplished.
But please note. It is not just any time and space, but rather a special time and space, unique to that group. In addition it is a safe time and space in which the group will feel free to explore new options, and even be a little bit foolish.
The specifications immediately preceding preclude the simple imposition of the

facilitator's time and space. Thus, for example, should the facilitator come from North America, while the participants all reside in the South, it would be wrong, indeed ridiculous, to impose his or her sense of time and space. Such an imposition will not work, and will only cause antagonism. Just imagine the reaction should the American stand up before his Latin participants and loudly proclaim, "All sessions will start on time - My time." Unfortunately, this scenario is quite imaginable, and happens all too often, and the results are quite predictable. For the meeting to be effective, the indigenous sense of time and space must be allowed to emerge. That will only occur if the facilitator creates an environment of safety.

Creating this safe environment requires the suspension of the facilitator's normal judgmental activity which may be manifest in apparently inconsequential and innocent ways. Thus, furtive glances to one's watch on the part of a North American facilitator operating in a Latin environment communicate that not only are things "late," but lateness is bad. It is much better, albeit painful, to put the watch in your pocket, and understand that when it starts, it will start.

The job of the facilitator is not to keep things on time, but rather to enable the creation of safe time. It is up to the participants to make their peace with the time they create, and to render judgment on themselves regarding tardiness and punctuality.

We now come to the critical question. How does the facilitator manage all of that? It turns out to be less a question of doing than being. To be sure, there are a number of tasks to be done, both in preparation and during the course of the event: things to say, furniture to move, signs to make, and people to talk to. We have already enumerated many of the preparatory activities, and in the following chapters we will look in detail at what else needs to be done as the event moves along. But for the moment, I want to concentrate on being as opposed to doing. Here is the heart of the matter. Unless the facilitator is truly and authentically present, nothing that is done, or not done, will make any difference.

Being Present Authentically

My use of the phrase "authentic presence" may have created more problems than illumination. To shed a little light on the subject, I would like to borrow some thoughts from my friend and colleague, Angeles Arrien. When living fully on the planet or facilitating Open Space, Angie suggests that four things are necessary. 1) Show up, 2) Be present, 3) Tell the Truth, 4) Let it all go.

To begin, you have to Show Up. This is not very complicated, meaning simply - be physically on hand. Of course, mere physical presence does not guarantee authentic presence, but it is certain that if the body is not there, not much else will be available either.

Being Present sounds like another version of showing up, but it goes a lot deeper. We all know those times when we are "here but not all there." Call it woolgathering, distraction or something else, but it is clear to anybody around us that no-one is home. Being present is just the opposite. It means providing those around us with a profound sense of grounding, reality, solidity, which translates to security, peace, and strength. Being in the presence of one who is truly present is comfortable - in the root meaning of that word, "with strength."

Telling the Truth creates the quality of our presence. It is a hard job indeed. Actually it is even worse than it sounds, for the issue is not so much faithfully reporting the facts of the case (which is certainly useful) but rather, being the truth. That is to say, reflecting in the way one is, an essential, powerful, good humanity.

When in the presence of one who tells the truth, there is no separation between saying and doing. Word and act do not go in opposite directions. And to the extent that judgment is present as the truth is told, it is a self-administered judgment, manifesting itself in the eye of the beholder. To stand in the presence of the truth is to understand, in very immediate terms, one's strengths and weaknesses. Not a word of external judgment need be spoken.

Last, we have to Let It All Go. Actually, Angie says, "Have no attachment to fixed outcomes." Her way or mine, the point is, we have no permanent claim on anything that is, and the sooner we get that through our heads the better things will be. It is not that we have gone out of control, it is quite simply that we had no control to begin with. Obviously this phrase is anathema to those folks who have spent their whole lives trying to keep or gain control. Which turns out to be most of us. Letting go is also essential for the effective facilitation of Open Space. To the best of my knowledge, there is exactly one way to absolutely guarantee the failure of an Open Space Event, and that is to try and control it. It won't work. Things will either shut down or blow up, but in either case the results will be less than optimal. Guaranteed.

Creating Time and Space With Help from Angie

The job of the facilitator is to create time and space in which the group can realize its potential, whether that potential be a new product, a strategic plan, or a redesigned organization. It is a curious role indeed, for to the extent that the facilitator becomes prescriptive, imposing time, space, and solutions, he or she will fail. The more that is done, the less that will be accomplished. It is necessary to be physically on hand, be fully present, be the truth, and then get out of the way. As the world would see it, the ultimate facilitator will do nothing and remain invisible.

Preparing oneself to assume this role is not done in a moment, nor can it be left to chance. On the contrary, preparation is an ongoing act which. must become a part of the life of the would be facilitator. This statement must seem at huge variance with my previous suggestions that Open Space Technology is simple, and may be initiated by anybody with a good head and a good heart. My point is that virtually anybody with reasonably pure intentions can, from time to time, create the necessary time and space for Open Space. But to do it again and again, with groups large and small, which are split by controversy, and divided by language and culture, is a different matter. Doing that, takes constant, ongoing preparation. It takes practice in order to make a better head and a better heart.

The nature of the practice of preparation is so specific to the individual that what I do may well be nonproductive, or indeed counterproductive, for another person. In short there is no one right way, there are only ways that work, and every person must determine that individually. Whatever the procedure, the objective is to achieve clarity of self and purpose, combined with openness to the environment and others. There are innumerable paths, practices, and techniques which historically have proven to be

effective. They may be found in all of the great religious traditions or their secularized versions.

To say it again: there is no one right way, there are only ways that are appropriate to you and the job you propose to do. My way involves no small amount of meditation and reflection, done daily, and then more intensively immediately prior to an Open Space Event. What will work for you I cannot say, but if you intend to operate in Open Space on any regular basis you owe the groups you will be working with, and yourself, a careful job of preparation. The alternative will be failure, burnout, or worse.

Chapter IV

Getting Started
(Creating Space/Time)

The preparations have been made and the people are assembled, everybody is sitting in a circle. One wall is completely blank except for three signs placed at the left, center, and right. On the left, the sign says something about Four Immutable Principles. The center sign advises people that surprising things will take place, and on the right are a few words about the Law of Two Feet. The middle of the circle is open space except for a small pile of ink markers, masking tape, and quarter sheets of flip chart paper. You walk to the center. Conversation dies .

INITIATION

The purpose of the initial activities of an Open Space Event is to move the people as quickly as possible into active, synergistic, co-creation. This is not the time for speeches, lengthy explanations, or acknowledgments. What transpires is the absolute minimum necessary to get the show on the road.

Over the years operating under the principle that less is more, I have found it possible to reduce the opening ceremonies to something less than an hour. Slightly more time is required with very large groups *(150* plus), or where multiple languages are involved.

By the end of that hour, people will know what they are doing, will have created their agenda (task groups, discussion groups, and the like), and will be heading off to work. Initiation has four stages:

State the theme;
 Describe the process;
 Create the bulletin board;
 Open the Market Place.

What follows is my usual approach, but please note, there is no one right way. My way works for me, and is dependent on my style, chemistry, relationships with the groups, along with a host of other individual factors of which I am not aware. What you do will have to be tailored to your idiosyncrasies and those of your group. Having said this, I also believe there is a logic to what I do, and as minimal as each stage along the way may appear, there is a reason for its shape and form. I suggest, therefore, that you try it according to the book once or twice, and then throw caution to the winds. There are certain principles which I think you will be well advised to keep in mind, and I will do my best to point them out as we go along, as for the details, this is a strictly "do your own thing" party.

State the Theme

The first order of business is to make clear the business of the meeting. Why are we here, and what do we propose to do? Avoid long histories or detailed presentations, for people will have received invitations which presumably gave them the necessary details. This is simply a destination check. The plane is leaving for Chicago, and if that is not what you had in mind, now would be a good time to get off

The statement of the theme, purpose, objective should be done in such a way that the juices start to flow ⎯more evocative and provocative than descriptive or prescriptive. Do not haul out the Mission and Goals Statement that everybody worked so hard on a year ago, and which has subsequently put group after group soundly to sleep. Now is the time to inspire. *Open Space Technology runs on passion bounded by responsibility.* If passion isn't aroused, not much is going to happen, and responsibility will never have a chance.

This is also a good time to outline any specific expectations in terms of the end product of the event, the form of the product, or what will be done with it. If all you anticipate is a good airing of general issues, say that, but if the expectation is more precise, that expectation should be articulated. So, for example, if you expect to write up a set of proceedings, as was the case with the Native Americans and the Billion Dollar Meeting, it wouldn't hurt to say something like ⎯

By the end of our time together we will have written our Proceedings. I have here in my hands the front cover and the back cover As you can see there is nothing in between. That empty space will remain so unless, or until, we all get to work But I am sure that we will rise to the occasion, and I can assure you that by the time we leave, you will have your own personal copy in hand. How all of that is going to happen, we will talk about in a moment, but just know ⎯it will get done.

Notice the up-beat flavor. The intent is to set positive expectations ("it will get done.") which is entirely different from ordering people to do something. I also make the point of using "we" as opposed to "you" whenever that fits. As the facilitator, it is not my job to tell anybody to do anything. It is my job to help "all of us" understand that we are truly in this together, and that togetherness is a tremendous resource. Now if these words, or these kinds of words, don't come easily from your mouth, don't worry about it. Find different ones that work for you and do the same thing.

By the end of Stage I the group should know where it is going and be excited to get there. Don't take any more time than is necessary for the task. Indeed, if the group is already charged up when they convene, skip all the above and go with something like ⎯ We all know why we are here, so let's get on with the business.

Describe the Process

By now the people should be charged up and more than a little curious as to what happens next. If your written invitation was parsimonious, as suggested, participants will have only the barest details, and a few of them may be wondering how they ever let themselves be talked into attending such a strange event. In a word, the troops may be more than a little restless and anxious. All of that is to the good, for both the restlessness and the anxiety can be turned and focused, providing the power for lift-off. Of course, you will have to deal carefully with the possibility that either anxiety or restlessness may

go too far, and I will suggest some means to limit that liability in a moment. But please note, I didn't say *out of control,* for if you ever think things can be under control, particularly your control, think again. It will never happen, and should you succeed, the whole enterprise would come to a screeching halt.

I usually start this stage with a comment made as casually as I am able, which also briefly provides something of the history of Open Space Technology.

In case you are curious about how we are going to get from here to there. ˙˙well, it is called Open Space Technology. OST has been developed over a period of time, starting in 1985. It is has been used in America, Europe, India, South America, and Africa with groups of S to 500. The results have been outstanding. For example, can you imagine 225 people self-organizing a 53-workshop conference in less than one hour, self-managing it over a two-day period, and walking out with 150 pages of proceedings in their hands 48 hours after they started? It happened. It can happen here.

I make no effort to give a full accounting of the approach. The objective, after all, is not to prove that it can work on the basis of prior experience, but rather to plant the idea that it really has been done before and set some expectations that this group will join the others in a positive and successful experience.

There are also some other things going on with these words. By citing the numbers and accomplishments of past participants and then asking if people can imagine such a situation, I am intentionally stretching the credibility of the group, possibly to the point of breaking. For the truth of the matter is, unless the members have already participated in an Open Space Event, they will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to imagine anything like what is described. The conventional wisdom says you just do not (cannot) do things like that, and most people are bounded by the dictates of the conventional wisdom. Were one to ask the group, at precisely this moment, what degree of success they might predict for the whole enterprise, it is quite likely that the consensus would be: None!

You may be questioning the wisdom and utility of raising the group's awareness regarding the apparent impossibility of their task. The reasons are twofold. First, as they acknowledge their anxiety they will effectively be able own it, and thereby make it available down the road as a source of energy. Of course, I don't want them to become too anxious or they will freeze, but we will deal with the balance as we go along. The second reason, however, is the major one. When a group does the impossible within the first hour of its meeting, it is very hard to stop them after that This is called empowerment.

Once the adrenalin is running it is time to put some content into the notion of Open Space Technology. The approach here is fairly straightforward.

You may be wondering how we are going to do all of this. Actually, it is quite simple. In just a little while, I am going to ask each one of you who cares to, and nobody has to ˛ to identify some issue or opportunity related to our theme, for which you have genuine passion, and for which you will take real responsibility. Don't just consider good ideas that somebody else might do, or be interested in. Think of powerful ideas that really grab you to the point that you will take personal responsibility to make sure that something

gets done.

If nothing occurs to you, that is OK, and if you have more than one issue or opportunity, that is fine too. Once you have your issue or opportunity in mind, come out into the center of the circle, grab a piece of paper and a magic marker. Write down a short title and sign your name. Then stand in front of the group and say My issue is ... my name is. After you have announced your theme, take your piece of paper and tape it up on that blank wall.

Note particularly the introduction of the twin power points of passion and responsibility, all in the context of the ritual act of walking to the center of the circle in order to announce the theme and name. If the circle is large, and particularly if the assembled group is an intact work group, the journey to the center is a long one indeed, and not to be entered upon lightly. When a person says, "My issue is ...and my name is ... out there in front of everybody, a commitment has been made.

Some people have wondered whether the very rigor of the journey to the center of the circle might not discourage a few folks and eliminate some good ideas. The answer is obviously yes. But my experience has been that no good ideas, supported by passion, disappear (by definition). The world is full of good ideas, but without passionate commitment, they are worth little, and go nowhere. In an Open Space environment, where the fundamental condition for success is self-management, passionless, good ideas are not only useless, they are a liability. They consume precious space and further suggest that somebody (usually the unnamed great THEY) should be taking responsibility. The point is THEY do not exist, and nothing will get done until I, you, or we get on with the business.

Just about here you may begin to notice many pairs of eyes beginning to fixate on the large, blank wall reserved for the Community Bulletin Board. At this moment people feel, and sometimes express, some degree of apprehension. After all, most people sitting in a large body with their peers, colleagues, or perfect strangers, will feel nervousness looking at a blank wall supposedly representative of their agenda for the next day, or God forbid, three days. What are they going to do? And how did they get into this mess anyhow? Picking up on this point, I say

Just out of curiosity, how many of you have ever been to a one (two, three) day meeting where the total agenda was represented by a blank wall? I suspect that more than a few of you are beginning to wonder how you ever got into all this, and more importantly, how you are going to get out. Well, I have a promise for you. If at the moment you are looking at that wall and wondering what on earth we are going to do for the rest of our time together, I promise that within an hour you will be looking at the same wall and wondering how we are going to get it all done.

Then, back to explaining the process. Point out that proposing an area of discussion, and taking responsibility for it, does not require that the proposer be an expert or that a formal presentation must be given. Either or both of those could be true, but it could be equally true that the proposer was virtually ignorant on a particular subject and was looking for some people with whom to share the ignorance and develop some knowledge. Taking responsibility means that the proposer will designate a time and place and then convene the session.

Finding time and place may be as simple as indicating the swimming pool at 3:00 pm.

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The time can be anytime during the conference, and the place anywhere that people feel comfortable. For some this will be the public areas of the facility, others may choose to go off the site. I even had a group meeting in a seaside conference center that decided on a boat in the middle of the bay.

For those individuals who prefer the security of four walls and a formal meeting setting, a break-out room is probably the setting of choice. Here we come to a small problem regarding scheduling. Whereas the swimming pool areas and other public spaces are expandable, breakout rooms seem not to work that way. The situation is easily handled with a simple device which I explain at this point. The device is a matrix chart displaying available times and dates for the breakout rooms. For more days, just add more columns. I find that two hours is a useful time for a session. Some go longer, most are shorter, but with that kind of time, there is plenty of room for flexibility. To use this wall chart put Post-its in each of the cells with the day, time and room appropriate to that cell written thereupon. After people have stood to announce their sessions, ask them to pass by the chart on the way to the wall and take the Post-it of their choice. Affixing that Post-it to their paper accomplishes two things. Everyone now will be able to tell where and when the session will be, and simultaneously, all following session leaders will know by the absence of the Post-it on the chart that the room is taken for that particular time and day.

You may have noted the two-hour lunch period and thought it excessive, but after all, lunch is a time for further conversation, and nobody said that meetings could not be held during that time. And with two hours, you can also work in a siesta which is a marvelous way to revive sagging energy in the middle of the day. And of course, if you have southern European or Latin American participants, they will appreciate the thought. They know what some of their faster paced colleagues to the north tend to forget. No day is so bad that it cannot be improved with a nap. (Carrie Snow)

Assure the assembled group that no area of interest will be denied, and urge everyone to put up as many announcements as they want. The point is made: if at the end of the day some participant finds him or herself saying, "But they didn't ever take a look at my issue," there is absolutely nobody to blame but oneself

Once the creation of the Bulletin Board is described in some detail, I then move on to talk about the Village Market Place. There really is not much to say here because the whole thing is so intuitive. The essential action is for participants to sign up for as many groups as they have interest in. I even urge them to sign up for more groups than they can physically attend. It often turns out that groups are cancelled or combined, or it is always possible to attend more than one group in a single time slot by leaving early or coming late. Some people actually make a practice of this behavior, and they are called BumbleBees (see below, The Law of Two Feet).

Questions?

At this point the basic mechanisms of Open Space Technology have been described, and there may be some questions. My advice is don't take any. Keep on going.

The OST mechanisms are so intuitive that even when the language of the facilitator is not the participants' native tongue there never has been any problem of understanding what needs to be done. Furthermore, once the action starts, any possible confusion is

resolved simply by watching those who do understand. The point is, answering questions is unnecessary. It may be polite, but it mainly slows things down, and it is most important to keep moving. In addition, questions are often asked as a means of either covering or dealing with anxiety. At worst they open the way for lengthy discussions, and sometimes debates, about whether the process will really work, past experience, and the like. In as much as every group I have ever worked with always is sure that the process will *not* work with their group, I can safely say that the possibility of convincing anybody logically that success is near at hand is nil. The only useful proof will be the actual group performance. And the only way to get there is to keep moving.

But before the group can be cut loose to deal with their own business they need to know about the Four Principles and the Law of Two Feet, which are the subjects of the next chapter.

Chapter V

The Four Principles
and
The Law of Two Feet

The Four Principles

The Four Principles are: I) Whoever comes is the right people. 2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have. 3) Whenever it starts is the right time. 4) When it is over it is over. These principles are simple statements of the way things work. The fact that they may appear counter-intuitive to some, and downright wrong to others, doesn't change my opinion, but it does influence strongly the way the principles are offered to the group. As nearly as possible, without seeming trite or cute, I present the principles in an off-handed way, as something that people might find helpful to keep in mind. For ease of reference, they are printed, along with the Law of Two Feet, on large poster boards for prominent display in the meeting room.

The first principle, *Whoever comes is the right people,* reminds people, particularly the conveners of groups, that it is not how many people come, or even who comes (in the sense of status or position) that counts, rather it is the quality of the interaction and conversation that make the difference. For good conversation you only need one other person who shares your passion.

When talking about the First Principle, it is usually a good time to deal with the possibility that nobody will come to a particular group. Even though this doesn't happen often, it can be distressing to the person who gave the party and nobody showed up. The following statement, or variant, seems to put the issue in context.

So what happens if nobody comes to your group? You could sit there and feel very hurt and angry. Or you might look at it this way. First, it is just possible that it wasn't a very good idea to begin with. Then again it may have been a great idea, but at the wrong time. In either case, you are getting some useful information. There is, however, another possibility. It was a great idea, at precisely the right time, and you are the only person competent to deal with it.

There is nothing in the rule book that says a "group" must be composed of more than one. By the way, when was the last time that you had a large piece of time free to work on a major idea for which you had passion?

The second principle, *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have,* is a reminder that real learning and real progress will only take place when we all move beyond our original agendas and convention-bound expectations. If everything turned out just the way everybody expected, life would be exceedingly dull, and learning in any useful sense

simply would not occur. It is precisely in moments of surprise, large and small, that we grow. It is important to cherish such moments and realize that whatever happens is the only thing that could have.

The third principle drives all western managers crazy, but that doesn't make it any less true. Besides, all the rest of the world understands that: *Whenever it starts is the right time.* The real impact of this principle is to serve important notice about the nature of creativity and spirit. Both are essential and neither pay much attention to the clock. They appear (or not) in their own time, which by definition means it is the right time. So all parties need to be advised that just because a meeting is scheduled for 3:00 pm is absolutely no guarantee that anything useful will take place at that moment. Whenever it starts will be the right time.

The final principle, *When it is over, it is over,* offers a marvelous way to save time and aggravation. Supposing, for example that you have scheduled a meeting at 2:00 pm with the expectation that it should take about two hours, ending therefore at 4:00 pm. As it turns out, all of the useful business is conducted in the first 20 minutes. Common sense would dictate that it was time to move on. However, there is some strange mechanism in most of us that ties us to predetermined forms. If we walk into a room and the chairs are set in a fashion nonconducive to the performance of our task, it typically does not occur to us that we might rearrange the furniture. The same is true with time. If the meeting is supposed to take two hours, we will stretch it out to fill the full allotted time. In the process of doing this we don't do a number of things we could have done. Worse still, we rehash things that already have been done, to the point that they get undone. We then can have a good argument and leave with less done than when we started. All of this creates the conditions and necessity for having another meeting. Wouldn't it be so much easier just to say, "When it is over, it is over," and be on our way?

The Law of Two Feet

Simply stated, the Law of Two Feet says, Everybody has them, or in the case of the "differently-abled" ‗the equivalent. If, during the course of the gathering any person finds him or herself in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they can use their two feet and go to some more productive place. This law may seem blunt, but it has three major, useful effects. First, it is death to egotists, those who are sure that they alone possess the truth, and further, that it is their divine mission to impart it, regardless of anybody's feelings or desires. Such people rapidly get a new and sobering message when half the room applies The Law of Two Feet and leaves.

All too often we sit politely, getting angrier and angrier, while our time is being wasted. The lost time will not be redeemed, and the anger pollutes the environment with negative energy. How much better it would be simply to get on our way and do something useful. The Law of Two Feet allows for that. The law also puts responsibility for our own actions directly on our shoulders. Should we choose to remain in a situation where we are miserable and nonproductive, that is our option.

Bumblebees and Butterflies

In addition to curbing egos, the Law of Two Feet makes very two positive contributions to the world of Open Space. It creates Bumblebees and Butterflies. Bumblebees are those people who take the freedom of the law very seriously and use their two feet, constantly flitting from meeting to meeting. Conference managers, and other people who think they are in control, become exasperated, but the contribution of the Bumblebees is large and direct. Like their counterparts in nature, they pollinate and cross pollinate, lending richness and variety to the discussions.

Butterflies are a rather different sort. These people often never get into any meeting. They may be found at the pool, on the patio, sitting in the bar. At first glance it is a little difficult to see what, if anything, they contribute, indeed one might wonder why they even bother to come. The truth is that Butterflies do very little, and in that lies their contribution. They create centers of non-action where silence may be enjoyed or some new, unexplored topic of conversation engaged. If you watch a Butterfly over time, you will notice that every so often somebody will stop by. Maybe conversation will occur, maybe not, but if it does, it almost inevitably ends up being significant. I am not sure why this is so, but perhaps significance emerges precisely because nobody is looking for it.

Time to Go to Work

Just about now in the process of describing the process, people will become a bit restless, and shortly it will be the moment for movement. As a matter of principle (less is more), I always attempt to take as little time describing things as possible. Fifteen minutes seems to be about right and half an hour is definitely on the long side. There is no right time in the abstract. Obviously certain minimal information must be communicated in order for the group to function effectively. But in most cases, people really know the rules already. After all, how much do you need to say about the operation of a community bulletin board and a village market place?

The important function of these moments has much less to do with the communication of information and technique than the creation of a safe time and space for the group to work in. Essentially, you want to take enough time for folks to feel secure in their environment, but not so much that they feel too secure. Some sense of anxiety and adventure is essential. In the theater this would be known as warming up the crowd or "vamping until ready." Unfortunately it is more a matter of feel than hard numbers, but a little practice will help.

Chapter VI

Time to Go to Work

Now it is time to go to work. The change in pace and task may be introduced with words like -

Open Space is rather like swimming. You can read all the books and talk until you are hoarse, but to do the job, you've just got to get in the water. So let's jump in. I now invite each and every one of you who so desires - identify some issue or opportunity related to our theme for which you have real passion. Think of a short title, and come here into the center of the circle. Take a piece of paper, inscribe the title, sign your name, and announce your offering to the group:
"My issue is. . .My name is. . ." and then go post it on the wall.

You can never tell how fast people will respond, but they always do. A few may be hesitating because they can't believe that somebody hasn't got The Agenda somewhere. To jump too soon will make them appear out of place. It helps to make it super clear that the agenda is really what can be seen: nothing, until they make it something. Occasionally I will say, "I really have no Plan B," and for whatever it is worth, I am quite prepared to stand here all day until something happens."

A more normal experience is to feel like you are at the wrong end of a cattle stampede. I don't know exactly why people charge out as they do, but it is infinitely more likely that you will have a small mob scene than dead silence and no players. Part of the reason for the immediate, positive response to the invitation is that, at some significant level, all people want to contribute and be recognized. The fact that they rarely get the opportunity makes them jump at the chance when it finally comes. Never, in all of the times that I have created Open Space, in various corners of the globe, has the group failed to respond. I know there could always be a first time, but I really don't expect it.

A little confusion adds to the excitement, but it will be important to keep the ambient noise level down to a dull roar. People need to hear the issues and the names as they are spoken. There are several important things taking place here. First, as the group listens to the issues, there is an automatic editing process going on. If participants hear that their issue has already been posted, they will not feel called on to do it again. This editing process is one of the reasons why there is not an infinity of issues posted. As a rule, the number of issues relates most directly to the number of people in the total group. Groups of 25 to 50 will have about 30 issues, groups of 100 to 200 will have about 75 issues. Groups of over 300 participants will not generate a substantial increase in the number of issues.

It is also important that the group hear the names of those posting the issues, and further that the names be written on the papers. Part of this is a matter of identification; who is doing what. But of equal importance is the matter of commitment. When you announce an issue and call out your name, you are much more likely to follow through than with some more anonymous arrangement. Going on record, publicly, is critical in order to confirm commitment.

As people go to the wall posting their papers, they may need a little help with the placement of their signs on the wall, which is the way a schedule is built. For a one-day event, all those sessions taking place in the morning should be on the left side, those at noon in the center, and those later on are placed on the right side. In the case of a multi-day event, I find it helpful to indicate the several days either by utilizing natural breaks (posts, doors,etc.) or by creating demarcation with tape.

During the process of posting, it is important to remind people that nothing will appear on the wall unless they put it there, for they, and they alone, are responsible for the agenda. If someone does not find their favorite issue, only oneself is to blame. Towards the end, it is important to take special pains to make sure that, for whatever reason, somebody didn't hang back and was about to be left out. More often than not, just as you are almost sure that nobody has anything more, somebody will make a break for the center. It is extremely important that everybody have their chance, even if it means holding the group up for a few moments. After all, every person publicly declaring an issue is another person committed to the process, which is obviously the way support and buy-in are created.

As an increasing number of issues are posted on the wall, the interest level from the crowd will go up as well. They now have something they have created, and it is natural for folks to hang around the wall and see what goes up. There is no way to stop this entirely, and in fact a little buzz at the wall is good for the spirit. However, when you start getting a milling throng, it will become difficult. You may also notice that people are beginning to sign up for sessions and make suggestions for combining similar areas. You can deal with all problems simultaneously by suggesting that people sit down so that others can see, and further, that sign-up be held in abeyance until the full menu has been posted. I use the example of going to a good Swedish smorgasbord and filling yourself up on the first dish. It may taste wonderful but look at all you will miss. And the worst of it is, you will never really know. So patience, just a little patience, is a virtue.

Eventually, all good things have to come to an end and it is time to move on to the Village Market Place. By this point the level of excitement is markedly higher, as is the noise level. There is not too much you can do about either and you shouldn't even try. The one thing you can do is turn the folks loose and get out of the way.

The Village Market Place

When the Village Market Place is opened, everybody is invited to enter the exchange of issues and ideas by leaving their seats and making the journey to the wall where they may sign up for as many sessions as they want. More often than not, this part of the process is more like acknowledging a revolution already under way than starting one. Folks are definitely ready to move, and they want you out of the way. Before you go, however, there are a few last-minute ideas to get across. Don't take long because you don't have long.

Conflicts - First is the issue of conflicts. These occur when one individual wants to go to two sessions which are scheduled at the same time. The rules are simple. The conflicted person must find the two conveners, and convince them either to combine their sessions, sequence the sessions, or a choice must be made.

Combining Sessions - Almost inevitably the automatic editing process will not

have worked completely, leaving several sessions with the same general focus. The temptation will be to combine these sessions. Of course, the people can do exactly what they want to, but I always suggest that it is better to have two sessions on the same subject with ten people each all having a good conversation, than one session with twenty folks frustrated because few have a chance to talk.

Public Safety - The last item concerns public safety. In the case of a large group, when it comes time to move to the wall, they do just that. Everything, and anything, on the way gets trampled. So in the interest of avoiding carnage and mayhem, request that all people sitting directly in front of what has now become the Community Bulletin Board pick up their chairs, other belongings, and move them out of the way. When all, or most, have reached the high ground, I say something like, "People, the Village Market Place is Open. Enjoy yourselves. As soon as you have your groups together, go to work. Don't forget you are in charge." And I leave.

In the early days, I used to preface my departure with some words like, I am going now, but if you need me I will be just down the hall. As it happened, those comments were totally gratuitous. The participants didn't need me, and didn't care. I was the only one who was even aware that I had left.

People really take Open Space seriously. If you help create it, and they make it their own, there is nothing to do but get out of the way. That doesn't mean disappearing altogether, for there are still some things needing to be done, as we will explore in the next chapter. But the "out front," public role of the facilitator is essentially over.

Chapter VII

On the Road
(Holding Space)

From the moment the Village Market place opens a new role appears for the facilitator. It is no longer a question of creating space and time, but rather of holding it in trust for the group as they journey down the particular road they have chosen. The role of holding space and time does not fit neatly within a precise job description or linear specification of tasks. It is an opportunistic role, depending upon a close reading of the meeting environment, a clear sense of self and purpose, and a capacity for sensitive and innovative response. Well done, the role manifests what I take to be the essential qualities of a good facilitator: totally present and absolutely invisible. Some examples follow.

Collecting Coffee Cups and Trash

Another word for holding, as in holding space, might be caring, to which we might add, cleaning, clearing, or even honoring. I suppose there are big things that can, and should, get done under this heading, but for the most part I find it is the little things that count. Like picking up coffee cups and trash.

Any large group of people, no matter how well behaved or careful, inevitably leaves behind mountains of detritus. For the most part the hotel staff takes care of the mess, for after all it is their job. But it is really our job, all of our jobs, and most especially the job of the facilitator. It is also the kind of job that allows you to go anywhere, and just sort of watch. People are not worried by what you are doing, or actually, not doing. Holding space and time requires that you be in that space and time as fully present, available, open, truthful, and having no agenda of your own, except that the time and space be held and honored. Picking up coffee cups and clearing trash allows you to do all of that.

Morning Announcements and Evening News

If you will turn back to the schedule for Open Space, you will notice that the community assembles twice a day. In the morning for announcements, and in the evening for the news. Both of these gatherings present good opportunities to practice holding space and time, in addition to fulfilling the more practical functions of the meetings.

Practically, the intent of announcements and news is just what their names imply. In the morning there is a brief opportunity to announce changes in meetings (additions, cancellations, and mergers) along with lost cats, dogs, and articles of clothing. The news is more of the same, with the added opportunity to tell a few of the amusing stories about what happened on the way to the future. At a more fundamental level, morning announcements and the news provide the occasion for the community to assemble in order to focus the spirit of the people. What gets done in specific terms makes little difference.

In fact, what takes place is only an excuse for being together. Taking all of this to the deeper level is the function of the facilitator, and is the essence of holding or honoring space and time. The act of holding space/time is done by progressive withdrawal and diminution of the facilitator's activity. As opposed to standing up and claiming the time and space, it is actually accomplished most effectively by sitting quietly and simply being there. Letting go, as it were.

The art of facilitation in Open Space is to create the time and space and then give it all away. Honestly turn your back on control, or the semblance of control. However, you cannot let go of that which you never had, or at least appear to have had. Thus in the beginning of an event, when the facilitator first stands in the center of the circle, he or she is virtually all there is holding everything together. To leave the meeting at that moment would almost certainly produce confusion or worse. Not having any structure, plan of action, or agenda, the group would inevitably dissolve. It is a heavy trust indeed that the facilitator assumes. Put in mythic terms, it is almost a god-like role, creating something out of nothing. It is certainly the classic, priestly role. But the Achilles' heel of

facilitation, as also the Achilles' heel of the priestly role, is to assume that the power exercised is yours by right, and in perpetuity. In fact, it is only on loan and must be given away as quickly as possible.

Announcements and evening news provide an excellent opportunity to give it all away and, simultaneously, put the group as a whole progressively more in charge. It has been my practice on a multi-day program to act as master of ceremonies for the first iteration of news and the announcements, pass the job along to somebody else for the second, and then, if I think I can get away with it, give the role to nobody for the third iteration. I just let it happen. Concretely, this means placing the microphone in the middle of what will become the circle of people, sitting down, and waiting. Sooner or later, the participants will notice the microphone, and they have only to walk over and pick it up. Someone will do just that, and from then on, the mike is passed from hand to hand as need requires. It couldn't be simpler or more empowering. It cannot it be done in every situation, but that is my ideal.

Bell Ringing

One of my pet peeves, and I don't think I am alone on this matter, is the way meetings are started with loud shouts, much hand clapping, or strident clanging of bells. By the time all the noise is over I feel rather like going back to bed, or at the least having several aspirin and hoping for a better day. But the thought of doing something constructive and creative right then is almost impossible. My energy is scattered, and psyche so shattered, I simply want to go out and eat worms.

I believe there is a better way in the form of Tibetan temple bells. These bells are quite small, usually made from bronze or brass, look like cymbals, come in pairs, and are played by striking one against the other. The resulting sound is like no other I know in the world. It has a breathtaking purity, and resonant overtones that provide complexity and richness. In a word, it is beautiful. It is also extraordinarily functional. The Tibetans knew what they were doing.

If the bells are struck together with some vigor, the resulting tone is not so much loud, as carrying. It goes anywhere, above anything. Give me a mob of 500 in loud conversation, and two bell strikes will typically reduce them to silence, not because they are overpowered, but simply entranced.

Instead of several hard strikes, you may begin more gently with a dignified, slow pattern of strikes. This pattern provides a ground rhythm which, in some subtle way, aligns the cacophonous conversation and the random activity. It almost seems that the group begins to breath in unison. If you then attenuate both the intensity and periodicity of your strike, ending with a single, clear note, you will find that the group has come down to a moment of cathedralesque silence. The feeling is one of intense expectation. And not a word has been spoken.

Of course, you may feel that temple bells have no place at your next annual meeting (or wherever you choose to use Open Space Technology), but I have found that they work their magic with all kinds of groups all over the world. You don't have to be Tibetan to hear the music. Neither do you have to use only Tibetan temple bells. After all, the grand experiment continues, and doubtless you will discover some wonderful new ways of manifesting order without beating the group over the head.

Empowering the People

In a curious way the act of empowerment is best accomplished by saying little and doing less. In the traditional meeting environment, the roll of the facilitator often turns into a mad frenzy of seeking to be all things to all people at every moment. Beyond the fact that this role is totally exhausting and ultimately impossible to maintain, it is the very antithesis of what an Open Space facilitator should be engaged in. In the Open Space environment the facilitator must constantly turn the freedom and the responsibility back to the participants.

As with most enterprises, it is the little things that count. For example, if participants come with the apparently reasonable question regarding what they should do, an appropriate response would be: What would they like to do? More often than not, they already know, or if not they will benefit greatly from taking a little time to figure it out

If the question is more of a suggestion which, in a traditional conference, might have been made to the management planning committee, I have found it effective to ask the questioners why they don't take care of that. The point is made: we are all the management.

At an early Open Space gathering, the supplies department, namely me, had forgotten name tags. Actually, I hadn't forgotten them, for the truth of the matter is that I don't like them. It probably has something to do with my eyes which are sufficiently bad that close up I can't focus, and far away I can't read the print. So I end up asking people their names anyhow, which has always seemed to me to be the civilized way to proceed in the first place.

However, this particular person was insistent, and nothing would do but we have name tags. I said, great idea, why don't you take care of it. After a momentary pause which looked a little like shock, the person went away and the results were magnificent. In a very short time a small group of people had answered the call of voluntary self-selection and begun to create a series of handpainted name tags which were simply outstanding. Bumblebees and butterflies in profusion with a little space for the name. These community artifacts were offered in the spirit of gifts, and soon a ritual evolved whereby each person pinned the name tag on a fellow participant. Nobody was exempt and shortly even the hotel staff could be seen sporting a colorful beastie of some sort.

Of course, genuine need must be dealt with immediately, which is the subject of the next section. But for the most part the identified needs represent a superb opportunity to underscore and develop the notion that Open Space runs on freedom and responsibility, both of which must be exercised by the participants.

Potholes in the Road

The road through Open Space is by and large very smooth. When people find that they are truly being treated as responsible and free, they tend to live up to those expectations. Of course, if you expect different or worse, you will likely get it. There are occasions, however, when no matter what you anticipate, reality goes in another direction. Sometimes unpleasantly, or uncomfortably so, but never without benefit to the group. At such times it is everybody's responsibility to deal with the situation and learn from the

result. But it is the special task of the facilitator to hold the space while that learning is going on.

Heavy Weather - Most people, most of the time, experience Open Space as stimulating, liberating, and a variety of other sensations related to creativity and synergy. It is exciting, but also to a certain extent unbalancing or off-putting. We find ourselves, both as individuals and as a group, travelling in some new directions, most of which were not on the standard road map. All of that is to the good if that is what you had in mind, or were at least ready for.

For some people, however, stimulation of this sort may be experienced as unwelcome, and unexpected heavy weather. Such people usually self-select out before the gathering ever begins - which, by the way, is the vitally important reason why participation in Open Space events must be totally voluntary. Forcing somebody to enter into an experience for which they are neither ready, nor willing, is tantamount to a criminal act. In other circumstances it is called rape.(3) Very occasionally, however, misunderstanding or subtle peer pressure will get somebody into an Open Space environment who should not have been there. Such people must be taken care of.

A case in point relates to a gentleman who not only had some emotional difficulties, but was also under treatment. Such people are very vulnerable and require more than the standard amount of limits and boundaries in order to keep things together. The power of Open Space resides, in part, in the elimination of boundaries, and therein lies the problem. On the third day of the meeting, this particular gentleman found himself in the center of the circle during Morning Announcements. I believe all he intended to do was to announce a small change in his session, his session, but one thing led to another, and the next thing we knew, he was telling us his whole life story with all the details.

To a point it is important to allow such things to take place, for it is in that kind of freedom that growth and creativity are born. There is also a point, however, when things have clearly gone a little too far. It is apparent that the person not only does not know what he or she is doing, but has less idea how to stop. This man was digging himself a very deep hole to the discomfort of everybody, and potential embarrassment of himself.

The solution was not difficult. I walked to the center of the circle, stood next to the him, and gave him a hug. A good, strong, supportive hug. We all need hugs, sometimes more than others. In this case the hug worked its usual magic. Indeed it felt so good that a number of our participants joined me in the center, and we ended up with what I can only describe as a group hug. And not a word was spoken.

3. My use of the word rape here is intentional and reflects very strong feelings. Several yean ago, a group of consultants sold a program to Pacific Bell which was presented to the employees in such a way that attendance appeared mandatory. In as much as the program sought to go quite deeply into the employees' private domains, I felt the whole thing was a never-to-be-repeated travesty. Fortunately the contact was terminated.

The effect of such a happening on a group is incredibly powerful and positive, for it demonstrates in a way that nothing else possibly could, that people do care for each other. Supported by that kind of caring, incredible feats are possible, which is one of the reasons Open Space is so effective.

Space Invaders - Sometimes an individual will seek to claim or dominate the space which belongs to everybody. It may well be that the intent is totally honorable, and the result would be positive. Alternatively, it may be a straight grab for power done by a rather badly deranged ego. It is usually rather difficult to tell which is which, although you do develop a certain feeling about the situations. In any event the treatment is identical for both cases. It must be remembered that the fundamental job of the facilitator is to honor (hold) the space and the people. This means that nobody can, or should, be forced to engage in an activity for which they are not ready and willing. The Law of Two Feet must be taken seriously. The point is not that the whole group should never do anything together, but rather that it always be done on a consensual basis. The space invader, whether for good reasons or ill, effectively violates the consensual base by saying or doing something which indicates that right now "everybody must ... do such and such."

The first thought of the facilitator must be to protect the space and the people's right to choose. This may usually be done easily and inoffensively by saying something like, "I think what is proposed is probably a very good idea, but since we have all been sitting here for sometime, I suggest that we take a break, and then those who would like to pursue this idea may come back and do so. As for the rest, they can get on with whatever they had in mind."

Typically, it is precisely at this point that you can tell the difference between the mad egotist and an individual who had something else in mind. The egotist will see the moment of power slipping away and engage in all sorts of words and strategies to hang on. Such as, "Well, we haven't really been sitting here for so long," or "Let's take a vote." Another tactic is pure confrontation. While looking you in the eyes with undisguised fury, the words come out something like, "I think you are just a power-mad control freak. Why don't you walk your talk."

There is no point in arguing with such a person, and the only vote that should be taken is with the feet. Failing everything else, it is simply time for the facilitator to walk out of the room. In most cases the group will follow, or if they don't it is their choice to remain. The facilitator cannot make choices for people, but must give them the opportunity to choose. As you read this, it may seem facile, and one might wonder what the situation would be like were the mad egotist the chairman of the board, president, or department head. It doesn't matter. You have to do exactly the same, regardless of the space invader's identity, or else give up on Open Space. If you are being paid for the job as facilitator, it is precisely at that moment you will know you are earning your money.

Not all space invaders represent the powers of darkness, of course. More often than not they are simply people with good ideas, a slight excess of enthusiasm, and lack of timing. They will immediately see the proposed pause that refreshes to be a splendid idea, and more often than not will be the first out the door. The return rate is not predictable, but you can be sure that the right people will come back.

Dealing with the Outrageous - Every now and again, something happens in the context of an Open Space event that goes beyond the ordinary, challenges whatever skills and

techniques you thought you possessed, and makes it quite clear nobody is in charge, least of all you. Under those circumstances you can only hold the space, trust the process, and believe in the group. In a totally amazing way, everything works.

Some time ago, at the event dedicated to building global unity (see Chapter I), such an outrageous occurrence took place. There were 175 of us sitting in a circle. Included in the group were people from all over the world, Arabs, Israelis, Russians, Latin Americans. It was the third day of the meeting and time for morning announcements. Things had been going on for a bit when suddenly a woman walked to the center. She picked up the microphone, looking a little strange. Her opening words were something to the effect that she had been struggling with the necessity to make a statement to the group. Every time she tried to understand how she would make that statement, her mind kept going back to something that was so outrageous she just couldn't think about it. But she couldn't think about anything else either. And so there she stood in the center of the circle with the mike in one hand and the other hand poised on the top button of her blouse. Before I could even shape the words "Oh no," in my mind, she was naked as the day she was born, and sitting on the floor.

My options were fairly limited, but one thing I was sure of: if I moved at all there was a high likelihood that the group would panic, or at least somebody might do something that would later be regretted. I resolved to do the only thing I could do, hold the space.

After what seemed to be an eternity, a most wonderful thing started to happen. The group, out of its own deep consciousness, began to respond in a totally appropriate fashion. Obviously nothing had been planned. (How could it have been?) And while people made individual responses, it was as if the total group, all 175, was intensely involved.

One by one, four or five people who happened to have articles of clothing that they could spare, an extra sweater or coat, took them off, walked to the seated woman, and laid them gently upon her. And then they sat down next to her, eventually forming a small circle in the center of the room.

Next a lady from South Africa, I believe, stood up and walked to the center, taking her place at one edge of the small circle. In measured tones she addressed the whole group. "We are here to deal with global unity. But we will never deal with unity until we first deal with diversity. And diversity, more often than not, is outrageous."

Then a man from some other part of the globe walked to the center. His message was roughly the same, but with very different language and energy. I can't remember his words exactly, but I wouldn't be far off to start with the phrase, "In this world shit happens.

Without a plan, but in an extraordinarily powerful, and beautiful way, the outrage had been acknowledged, bounded, and interpreted. What happened next appeared as a natural occurrence. One by one, people from all over the outer circle stood and walked to the center until at last everybody, with the exception of myself, was standing in a larger circle surrounding the smaller one. As if on a signal, they all joined hands and broke into song. I can't remember what song, and it really made no difference. Then, as quickly as it had all begun, it ended. There was silence and the people dropped hands and walked out of the room.

I never did see how the lady got out of the room, and to this day I have no idea precisely what statement she was attempting to make, nor why she felt it necessary to do so. But I do know that when it was all over the atmosphere of the conference was profoundly and

positively different. In retrospect, nothing that I could have thought or done could have had as positive and powerful an impact on that gathering as the actions the group itself, in its own wisdom, chose to take. It is certainly interesting, and may be useful, to speculate on the whys and the wherefores, but it seemed apparent to me at the time that the group collectively, and in some way quite consciously, created a sequence of responses that took the whole outrageous occurrence to deeper levels. By creating the small circle of people who offered their own clothing, the outrage was bounded and accepted. It was then interpreted by the woman from South Africa and the man from who-knows-where. At the end it was celebrated and finally integrated into the total experience. With such integration, the group could move on, and it did in powerful and innovative ways.

Chapter VIII

Endings and New Beginnings

All good things, including Open Space, must come to an end. This ending may be just an end, which usually leaves a strong sense of incompleteness, and certainly doesn't take advantage of all the findings, feelings, and growth that typically appear during an Open Space Event. An ending with dignity and intention can supply the necessary closure, while at the same time providing a jump off point for the next round of activity that the organization or group may wish to undertake.

As you construct the closure for an Open Space Event, it will quickly become apparent that the more-or-less standard ways of bringing a program to a conclusion simply will not do. Whatever is done must be done in the same spirit as the rest of event. So, for example, having The Leader stand up and deliver an impassioned speech about all the wonderful things YOU are now going to do, will be experienced as dissonant to the synergy and collegiality which has evolved. Following one such (abortive) attempt, I overheard a participant saying, "He (referring to The Leader) is a nice guy with a nice speech, but we don't need him, or anybody else, to tell us what we must do. The experience of the last several days demonstrated, if demonstration was necessary, that collectively we have the resources, will, and the power to do what needs to get done. Somehow he missed the point: he is playing the new game by the old rules."

So how do you play the new game by the new rules? There is no single answer, as there is no single group or situation. The task, however, seems fairly clear: *To acknowledge the past, and project to the future in such a way that everybody is included, and has a part.* What follows is an approach I have used with considerable success.

We end as we began, sitting in a circle. But there are some significant changes, at least in the feelings and perceptions of the people. In the beginning, the broad, open space described by the circle was perceived as uncomfortable at the least, and threatening at worst. If people spoke in the circle, they spoke from the edges, and crossing the circle was an action best taken quickly. After all, when you are out in the center, you are very much alone and exposed.

By the conclusion of the meeting, the dynamics of the circle change markedly. No longer is it a threatening place, but rather a place of safety. Words like creativity, energy, inspiration, openness, surprise, liberation, genuine community, and empowerment are often used by participants to describe their feelings. Of course, there may be a few other words such as, 'interesting," "strange," and "uncomfortable," but typically these represent a minority opinion. Question. How do you honor all these feelings and allow the group to come to closure?

I find an adaptation from the Native American Talking Stick Ceremony to be a superbly effective *grand finale.* It will not work in all situations, especially where there is a very large group, but the ceremony may be used as a model, a point of departure.

There is no particular magic in the Talking Stick Ceremony. What is magical, or at least sometimes seems that way, is the elegant simplicity with which this ceremony elicits the

deepest kinds of sharing and reflection. One might question the appropriateness of such intimacy in a "business setting," but I think we may be achieving a level of maturity which understands that feeling, passions, spirit, and sharing not only have a place in business, they are the very wellsprings from which business and all other human activities emerge. Be that as it may, if you feel uncomfortable talking about a Talking Stick Ceremony, call it what you like, or nothing at all, for in the end it is not the words that count but the action.

The Talking Stick Ceremony, in its original form, involved a decorated piece of wood which was passed around a circle of people gathered together for purposes of decision making, discussion, or just plain being together. The rules are whoever has the stick talks, and everybody else listens. There is no time limit, or interruption. On might quail at the thought of introducing such a mechanism to the legislative bodies of the world, or the board rooms for that matter. Things might get out of control. Then again, people might say what they really had on their minds. To work at all, participants, both speakers and listeners, must accept a very high level of responsibility, commensurate with the freedom of the Talking Stick. When one spoke, one had something to say, and it would be well to say it clearly and with directness. When one listened, one did so with intention and care. The contemporary version of the talking stick is the microphone, which we often abuse as an instrument of power to simply drown out everybody else. It needn't be that way, and in the context of the ceremony, the electronic power is useful only to carry voices over a large distance. What really counts is that people truly listen to people truly speaking. In practice the microphone starts from my place in the circle. I explain simply that it will be passed to my right, and as it reaches each person, they are invited to share briefly what the event may have meant for them, and what they propose to do in the future. There is no necessity that they say anything, and should they choose, they may simply pass the mike along to the next person. The Talking Stick Ceremony is not another name for the traditional report-out, during which the leaders of the several work groups describe their results. Personally, I find the report-out less than useful, most often producing boredom, frustration, or both. If reporters take the time they think their subject deserves, most people are bored. If the time is limited, the reporters are frustrated. Truthfully, the report-out is not a very efficient or effective way of communicating the results of the conference.[4] A written set of proceedings will do a much better job, and such proceedings can be completed and made available before the end of the meeting. For the details of implementation, please see the next chapter.

'Even though I do not believe the report-out to be an effective means of sharing conference results, it can have very positive social benefits. My colleague. Antonio Nunez, who uses Open Space Technology in a Latin American environment tells me that the Latin sensibility absolutely requires a round of speeches at the end, if only to honor the leader of the groups. Having witnessed several of his events, I can see what he means. There is no question, everybody enjoys themselves. But I seriously doubt that a great deal of useful information is communicated. My bottom line would be that if you need a report-out for political or social reasons, by all means have one. But if information communication is the intent, a written report is vastly more effective.

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The Talking Stick Ceremony does take time, perhaps more than busy people are willing to spend these days. But there is an elegance and power present in the simple speaking and intense listening, making the time spent well worthwhile. To be more specific, I find that groups of 50 to 100 people will take about three hours. Double that number will take about a hour and a half more.

There can be no attempt to allot participants a set amount of time, and then hold them to it, say two minutes per person, with a bell ringing at the end. Some people will take five seconds, others no time at all, and still others ten minutes. It is all different, and it all works. But it will not, and does not, work according to the exact divisions of the clock.

Three hours or longer is obviously a long time to sit still in one place, and eventually natural necessity, to say nothing of cramped legs, will require some movement. But not everybody has the same needs at the same time, so if a general break is declared, it not only breaks the flow, it also doesn't really meet the needs. The alternative is to invite people to come and go as they need, but to do so quietly, and with deference to those who are speaking and listening.

The same arrangement applies to people needing to leave the meeting altogether. On the last day it is not uncommon that plane schedules require an early departure. Those knowing they have to leave before the end should find a seat closer to the starting point (the right half of the circle) so that they may speak early and leave when they have to.

When the microphone finally comes back to me, I ask the group to stand and allow their eyes to move around the circle acknowledging each other in silence, what they have accomplished, and what they hope to do. By this time, even in very formal groups, the circle has become a warm, friendly place. Maybe even intimate. The thought of breaking that circle and leaving hardly enters anybody's mind. And yet that is precisely what has to be done. To paraphrase the Bard, if it must be done, t'was best it be done quickly, and I would add, with intention. So after a few moments, I ask each person to turn completely around in their place, face outwards, and imagine what they are going to be doing in the days immediately ahead. Closing the eyes often helps the imagination. And then it is over.

Chapter IX

The Electronic Connection

The possibility of creating instant proceedings during the Open Space meeting has been mentioned in passing. You will recall our opening story about the 225 people who produced *150* pages of proceedings in two days, and had bound copies ready to be carried home. If it all sounds very high tech, you have been misled, for the actual process is nothing more than a mundane use of a standard word-processing program. Yes, you need access to computers, and it would probably be a good idea to know something about them. But a Ph.D. in computer science is not required.

The notion of on-the-spot proceedings, like Open Space itself, grew out of the frustration generated from dealing with meetings as they are usually done. My experience was that by the time you got the proceedings they were so old as to be useless, or else the significant parts had already been published in a dozen other places, so you didn't need them anyhow. What you did need, and nobody seemed able to produce, was an immediate, take-home package, which provided all the goodies, albeit in a rough and ready form. There had to be a way, and if it were going to work in Open Space it had to fit with that approach.

The relationship to Open Space Technology made everything clear, for in Open Space the driving forces are freedom and responsibility. In order to create proceedings, all we had to do was provide an appropriate number of computers, let the people know that they were free to use them, and responsible for doing so, if they (the people) had any expectation of having a record of the event. With a standard format we were ready to proceed (as in proceedings).

Let's start with the mechanics. For a group of 200, 10 PCs' will suffice. Larger groups will require more, but not a mathematical progression. Three hundred people seem to do quite well with 15 PCs, and 20 PC's will take care of 500 people. Nothing exotic is needed, even the venerable AT or 286 machine will do fine, and they do not need a hard drive, because everything will be done with floppies. For a word-processing program I prefer WordPerfect because many people know it. But any program will do so long as it makes only minimal demands on the operators, who may have just about all they can handle with the typing.

The machines are set up in the main room where everything else is happening. This is a major departure from normal practice where the computers are typically hidden away in some back room, as if they might contaminate somebody. But, as you will see, there is some method to the madness. The whole business of preparing proceedings becomes an integral part of the Open Space conversations. That can't happen if the computers are hidden away.

With the machines up and running, each convener of a group is invited (strongly urged, begged, but never commanded) to insure that a reasonable record of the discussions in his or her group be prepared. I say "insure" because it may be that somebody other than the convener will do the job, and often it turns into a group effort.

In order to provide some level of uniformity, a standard format is supplied. Typically it has four parts:

Title,

Convener (with phone number and address),

List of participants,

Discussion and recommendations. The actual length is immaterial, although reports usually run several pages. Some people may get carried away, and 10-page reports have found their way in. One limit to verbosity is that participants themselves are responsible for the typing.

At this point you may be wondering what would happen in a situation where nobody can type, or where typing itself is perceived as below the status of the participants. I have found this concern to be less than disastrous. In most cases, somebody in the group can type, if only the hunt-and-peck variety. I am constantly amazed how quickly people can learn when they have something they want to say, even if they employ only one finger. Even if the participants do not immediately start typing at 150 words per minute, there is a considerable collateral benefit to be realized here. Cyberphobia is being overcome. Considering the amount of money some corporations spend on making their executives computer literate," this benefit is not inconsequential.

The one time this did not apply was with a major European corporation whose senior executives were meeting in Open Space to redesign their business. In their case, the issue was not so much ability but status. Bowing to the cultural mores, we found a bevy of secretaries and the job got done. But there was also a genuine loss for those executives. The computer area normally becomes a point of major social interaction, where ideas are tried, tossed out, rearranged, and finally committed to print. If it sounds a little bit like the city room of a major newspaper, the relationship is intentional. The status conscious executives missed all of that.

How Does It Work Practically

As each new person comes into the computer area to make their report, he or she is greeted by a friendly, knowledgeable, soul who provides a formatted floppy disk,[6] a copy of the suggested format, and points out a free machine. The job of "greeter" is by no means complex and requires only a very basic knowledge computers. It is helpful to have one such person per ten computers, with some extra folks available to allow for rest periods. The work is not hard, but a break every now and again is useful.

The group reporter is asked to type the report, save it to the disk in a file designated by the individual's name, and then return the disk with the name written on the outside. Last name plus initials (owenhh) usually does the trick.

The participant's disk is kept for the duration of the meeting. In the event that some addition or correction is needed, it is a simple matter to retrieve the disk and the process is repeated. Should a participant have more than one report, the additional material may be placed on the same disk with a new file name, or a new disk may be issued. Either approach will work, but whichever one is chosen, it should be followed consistently.

A most important guideline for the whole operation is KISS. Keep it Simple, Stupid. Some reporters will feel compelled to add all sorts of bells and whistles to their report including fancy page layouts, different fonts, and other exotica. This compulsion must be avoided at all costs. The problem does not lie with the individual report, but rather what happens when all reports are combined. At that point the different command codes are very apt to get into violent conflict, not to say civil war. The resulting chaos

will only be resolved with much effort and many hours.

The best instruction is to keep everything flush left. No offsets, no columns. Use backslashes *(I)* for separation as with names and phone numbers (OwenI3OI-469-9269). Use stars *(*),* numbers, letters, and spaces for subject changes. This may not produce the most exciting copy, but it will be readable. If document aesthetics are an issue, that can be done later. But the important thing is to quickly produce a written record of the meeting. Appearance must take second place to practicality.

In most cases there are no problems, and most of the ones that do arise can be handled by the other participants, who quickly assume the role of expert. Not to be missed, this kind of support and camaraderie can only add to the growing spirit of the meeting. In a word, nothing is wasted, and everything fits.

When a report is complete the disk is returned to the person in charge. The file is then copied to a master file, assigned a number, and logged in the sequence of its reception. A quick pass through spellcheck will eliminate most errors and then the report may be printed out for all the world to see. This print out is not the final copy by any matter of means, but it is displayed on the wall under a large sign saying Breaking News.

To make sure that people not only see, but hear that something really is happening, I prefer an ancient, 9 pin, dot matrix printer, the noisier the better. In a very short time, Pavlov's experiment is validated once again, as the participants respond to the sound, and gather around to read the breaking news.

The computer printout quickly becomes an important part of the ongoing dialogue. People who were unable to attend a particular session can always catch up on the major points when they appear on the wall. Should they either strongly agree, disagree, or simply want to find out additional details, there is nothing to prevent them from catching the author and letting their request be known.

In the event that the author is unavailable, it is also possible to add a note of approval or disapproval into the written record. The interested party simply asks for a fresh disk on which to enter comments in a new file designated by their name. And so the process continues with the new comments being printed and hung adjacent to the original piece. None of this is complex, but it is a highly effective means, not only of producing a written record quickly, but also adding greatly to the overall quality of discussion.

There comes a time when literary creation must come to a halt in order for the final document be prepared. The individual document files are arranged by number and combined into a single file with the additional comments appended to the relevant documents. WordPerfect has a very nice feature that does almost all of this virtually automatically, and I am sure most other top-of-the-line programs do as well. Once in a common document, pagination is automatic, as is the production of an index. A final pass through the spellchecker is useful, but all participants must be put on notice that they are finally responsible for their own copy, including spelling.

It is possible to do a little bit with format and type, but I find that to be a bottomless pit which, given the time constraints, should not be entered into. Another pitfall is the use of charts and graphs. Such material is not a problem if supplied in appropriate format by a participant, but donot get into the graphics business, or you will be there for life. You can always remind people that, while the proceedings will appear in hard copy in time to take home, they may also be made available on disk, should people want to add embellishments.

When all is done, or it is simply time to go, press print and you will have camera-ready copy. A laser printer for this step is highly advisable. The next stop is the print shop.

How long does all of this take? Experience has shown that a minimum of two days is required to provide sufficient time, not only for the discussions, but also the write-ups. The computers should be available fairly late on the first evening, and will undoubtedly see heavy usage. There will also be a constant stream of reporters during the second day. Precisely when you stop the input process depends entirely how long your overnight printer will take. Seven hours for 225 copies of a 150-page document, including binding is about right. You also need to add time for your final edit, and preparation of camera-ready copy, which will probably take several hours. If you plan to distribute the proceedings the next morning at 9am, 7pm the night before would be a reasonable deadline.

Distributing the copies the next morning can be just a matter of handing them out, or you may wish to make it part of the closing ceremonies. We have seen people call out the participants names as in a graduation, and that was fun, if not a little tedious. But whatever you do, make sure to allow a little browsing time. People will love to look over what they have created. Coffee and doughnuts are appropriate, and very often the distribution of copies begins to look rather like the passing out of college yearbooks, with folks laughing, joking, and signing each other's copies. Nice touch, and they have the goods to take home. When the boss says, "What happened at this Open Space Event, which certainly sounded spacey?" the full document is available to tell all.

Computer Conferencing and Multi-site Open Space Events

For approximately ten years a new application for computers has been slowly evolving. Initially it was for the *cognoscenti* alone, but presently it is available for anyone who cares to use it. It is called computer conferencing. Not to be confused with electronic mail and electronic bulletin boards, computer conferencing is to those media what a Lamborghini is to a Chevrolet: obviously related but definitely a cut above. With computer conferencing, potentially infinite numbers of people can be linked together, not just on the fragmentary basis possible with E-mail or bulletin boards, but in an ongoing, interactive, dialogue of real substance and large volume. There are currently a number of programs available though such vendors as Compuserve, and doubtless more will be appearing. My favorite is Caucus II, available as MetaNet from the MetaSystem Design Group in Arlington, Virginia. Were we to go deeply into the details and opportunities of computer conferencing (CC), we would never emerge. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that, from the participants' point of view, feeding material into a master file on location, or feeding the same material into a computer conference, makes no difference. What is different, however, is that the magic of CC enables groups located in different places around the planet to know what each group is doing, as they do it. Further, each group may contribute to the thinking and process of every other group. And when it is all done, all groups everywhere can simply press print (or the equivalent), and have a full and instantaneous set of proceedings available.

Before getting carried away with the wonders of technology, let me give you an

example of where and how this was applied. Some little time ago, we had a conference on Learning Organizations, which for a variety of reasons took place in two widely separate locations, Goa, India and Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. We tied them together with MetaNet, so that each group was aware of the discussions being held by the other. When the meeting was over in the physical locations of India and West Virginia, it continued electronically. That is to say, individuals who had been participants in either location could access the system from any phone with a modem and a PC. As it turned out, there were also a number of individuals who had never physically attended either conference, but who came in by modem. They, too, read what was going on, and contributed their best thoughts.

The conference continued electronically for three months after it came to an end physically in its face-to-face mode. We attempted to stop it, but the discussion was so good that there was no holding it back. When it came time to publish our proceedings the best discussions, and indeed most of the material, had been contributed after the close of the physical conference, in locations having nothing to do with the original sites, by people who attended neither. Now I ask you – where was that conference and when was it? A truthful, but apparently unreasonable, answer might be something like, "Anywhere, anytime you wanted it." Time and space don't quite mean what they used to.

Think what it might mean to the strategic planning functions of your organization (for example). Strategic planning is something that everybody talks about, nobody likes, and it usually gets done at great expense in time and effort by the folks in the planning department. The results are then issued with great fanfare to the rest of the world, which pays no particular attention. The plan is already out of date, and besides few people, other than the planners, had any investment in it. It is also time to start the next planning cycle.

By using Open Space Technology, combined with computer conferencing, it is possible to involve most, if not all, of the organization in a brief but intense effort (how about two days, over a weekend), which accepts input from all who care to give it, and allows for maximum participation and involvement. Now that is something to conjure with when it comes to buy-in, rapid turn around, and extreme sensitivity to the environment in which the organization does business. All of which seem to have a great deal to do with doing the business well, no matter how you may define the business.

The Cybersphere Is Open Space

The Cybersphere is a useful neologism meaning the domain of the computer, or really computer conferencing ("cyber" as in cybernetics, and "sphere," as in biosphere, or domain). Computer conferencing and Open Space encourage the same sort of organizational invention and collective creativity, leading to the thought that the Cybersphere is really Open Space, or is it the other way around? And there is a reason. The environment of computer conferencing has no prescribed organizational forms that automatically put people and ideas into boxes. It is all open and adaptable to whatever form is appropriate to the people involved, and the job at hand. That is one of the central secrets for the success of Open Space Technology. It is not that there is no structure, for as a matter of fact the group itself creates a highly elaborate, complex structure. However, the structure is always appropriate to the job and the

people, and if not, it is the responsibly of the people to change it. This is true freedom and responsibility.

Precisely the same conditions pertain in computer conferencing. All of which means that computer conferencing is a natural extension of Open Space Technology. Or maybe it is the other way around. In any event, Open Space technology and computer conferencing represent a powerful combination.

Chapter X

Fringe Benefits and Follow Up

In most cases, interest in Open Space Technology grows out of the demonstrated capacity of the approach to enhance group functionality and creativity with very direct, bottom-line results. Complex meetings are organized, carried out, and concluded in a fraction of the normal time and at cost vastly below what we have come to expect. All of that, however, may well be the least value added by Open Space Technology. Apparent fringe benefits represent the central contribution.

Instant Organization – Well Almost

It is a truism that organizing the organization is terribly hard work. The proof exists in the number of hours devoted to the task, to say nothing of the number of books written thereon. And yet I suspect that this truism, like most, hides more than it reveals, and it may be that organizing the organization is hard work only because we choose to make it so.

When people are clear about what they want to do, and care about getting it done, organizational problems seem to melt away. Alternatively, if people are not clear, or don't care, the organizational problems are unending. Further, the more effort devoted to the problem of organization, the worse it gets.

So what is the alternative? I think Open Space Technology shows us at least one. Many people, when they first hear about, or even see OST, will describe it as being without structure, by which they mean organization. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just to take the example we have used from page one about the Billion Dollar Meeting. Managing more than *50* concurrent task forces for 225 disparate people over a two-day period, and insuring that proceedings were produced *(150* pages worth) simply did not take place without structure and organization. Each task force had a convener, a place, and a time. Everything was orchestrated so that the right folks could be there, or send a representative, and finally the reports had to be written and printed. All that in two days. That is organization, and it did not take months to put it together. On the contrary, everything was organized in slightly less than an hour with virtually no pain. In fact some people even said they had fun.

The structure and organization for the conference did the job required. But that same organization could have continued and done other jobs if necessary. Let us suppose, for example, that the intention had been not only to develop the best intelligence and approaches to the problem at hand (spending a billion dollars for new roads), but also to carry on from that point and actually monitor the progress in order to deal with the

operational issues as they emerged. If the broader intention existed, the organizational structure, already created by the group, could have served as the starting point for the larger effort. After all, the group had identified the major issues and combined them with people who were interested in pursuing them (conveners and participants). Now, obviously, not all of those issues would continue to be current, nor would all the people desire continued involvement, but at least there was a starting point.

Elaboration of organizational structure is a piece of cake when clarity of purpose and intensity of caring are both high. The resulting organization is truly organic, literally growing out of the purpose and concerns of those involved. It may be mindbogglingly complex, but it works for the people involved all because it is appropriate to the task they have chosen. And if it does not work, they have both the opportunity and the responsibility to change it, which they can do just as quickly and easily as they made it in the first instance. When the waters are muddy, however, no amount of additional mucking about will bring clarity to the situation. At that point, organization is very hard work.

Advanced Human Performance — Now

Every organization I know, whether it be a business, public sector, or nonprofit, is now scrambling about searching for ways to enhance performance levels of their people. To some extent this may be a search for excellence, but more usually it is a search to cut costs, raise profits, or increase services. Not that all those things can't add up to excellence, but altruism is not the fundamental motivation. Something much more basic is involved: survival. The point is, the search is not a trivial one.

The varieties of advanced human performance desired appear under many titles, including empowerment, self-managed work teams, shared leadership, management of ambiguity and diversity, supportive communities, and of course, change management. Measured in terms of the dollars expended on training programs to achieve these lofty objectives, the seriousness of the situation can not be doubted. Without wishing to take anything away from the many efforts to achieve these advanced levels of performance, I must confess to some degree of disappointment in the final results. For example, having participated in several seminars or training programs on empowerment, I ended up feeling that the only person who had clearly been empowered was the facilitator. I know that isn't the way it was meant to be, nor was it the intended outcome of the facilitator. But the truth is, if I empower you, you, to some extent, are in my power.

Much of the new verbiage and associated programs are but further examples of playing the new game by the old rules. No matter what the words may say, the bottom line still seems to be control, and how to achieve it. Occasionally this concern comes right up front as in Change Management, where there is the clear implication that you can actually *manage* change. From where I sit, the variety of change we are experiencing at the moment goes beyond the capacity of anybody to control, at least in the sense that we all used to think of control as good managers. Remember the old saw that a good manager makes the plan, manages to the plan, and meets the plan, all of which means control, control, control. One might also say the same thing about the management of diversity or complexity. I have written about some new possibilities of dealing with our world other than the old closed system control model

(See *Riding the Tiger* and *Leadership Is),* and it is not my intent to repeat the material here. My present interest is to suggest that not only are there some new ways of *thinking* about how we operate in organizations other than control, but there are also some new ways of helping people achieve competence in those areas. And furthermore, the whole process may not be so difficult.

We come back to Open Space Technology, and what I find to be the rather remarkable discovery of those who have participated in its many uses. When it comes to many of the desired advanced human behaviors, *we are already there.* Consider the matter of empowerment It is the common experience in every Open Space Event that within the first hour or so the total group discovers that it has accomplished what most, if not all, of the participants would have said was impossible. A large group of people, sometimes of highly diverse origins and points of view, has managed to organize a multi-day program with numerous concurrent workshops (task groups), which they then proceed to self-manage for the duration. All without special training programs, or an army of facilitators. When a group manages to do what it "knows" to be impossible, that is empowerment.

Or let's take the matter of self-managed work teams. Many millions of dollars and hours of training time are expended seeking to develop such things. But in Open Space, that is what people do from the beginning, and on a continuing basis. Continuing down the list, consider the business of shared leadership. I am reminded here of the president of a Latin American company who remarked during the course of an Open Space program, that if somebody were to walk into the event they could have absolutely no idea who the "big boss" was on the basis of observed behavior. Leadership was being exercised by all sorts of people from all levels of the company, and the pattern was constantly changing according to task and opportunity. And all of that was taking place in a hierarchical, top down, corporate environment. If it could happen in the world where "macho" was invented, it could happen anywhere.

I have no clear understanding as to how or why these departures from the expected behavioral norm take place, at least as that norm is established by the conventional wisdom.

However, the departure does take place, and on a regular basis. Every time we have used Open Space Technology, anywhere in the world with the groups marked by enormous diversity in education, culture, position, economics, and ethnicity, it all happens again. Perhaps a day will come when it won't happen, and then we will learn something new, but in the interim I can only say that advanced human performance is an expected, every day, ordinary, happening in Open Space. Perhaps most remarkable is that it seems so ordinary while it is happening. One might say that, in terms of the future, we are already there.

The question now arises: how do we capitalize on what we have already achieved, and transfer its impact to other aspects of organizational life? Most efforts that I know of, which purport to take groups of people into the rarefied heights of advanced human performance, begin with a description of the ideal state. Then they offer a series of exercises which will supposedly enable the participants to make the journey. Usually at this point the program is over, and the participants are left with this image of the Olympian heights they must climb and an understanding of some of the tools necessary to make the ascent. They are told to practice on their own. Better programs offer guided practice sessions, but there comes a point where the economics of doing business says enough.

Contrast all of the above with the situation created in Open Space. The questions are not: Can the people do it? Do they have the skills ? Should they do it? ...The point is: *they have already done it.* Now, do they want to do it again and better? All of which shapes the basic concern. How do we help people acknowledge the experience they have already had, learn from it, and improve upon it? There is no reason to present an ideal model, nor design exercises necessary to achieve it. When you are already there, I think the proper mode of learning may be *reflection.*

My work in this area is still in its infancy, and therefore what I have to say should be viewed with more than the ordinary dose of skepticism. Along with this caveat comes an invitation to experiment on your own and share the results.

Reflections on Open Space: The Medicine Wheel

My present practice begins with an invitation to the total group to spend an additional 30-40 minutes of reflection at, or shortly after, the conclusion of the formal event. The focus is not the substance of what transpired, the plans or products developed, but rather the process. How did it all get done, and was there anything strange that people may have noticed along the way? To guide the reflection I use an adaptation of the Native American Medicine Wheel.

Whole books have been written on the Medicine Wheelmin terms of its forms and uses, but for our purposes, it is sufficient to know that many Native Americans understood each individual and all groups of people to be composed of four elements, represented by the four points of the compass, certain animal symbols, and colors.

To the north is *Leadership,* the powerful trailbreaker, pointing the direction and opening the way for Spirit to grow and evolve. The animal is the deer, and the color is red. To the east is *Vision,* the high-flying seer of all: The animal is the eagle. The color is blue. To the south is *Community,* the warmth of hearth and heart, which binds all people together. The animal is the mouse (as in cuddly, warm, friendly), and the color is yellow, the color of the Sun. To the west is *Management.* I think it is quite doubtful that the Native Americans ever used this term, but I believe (or at least I would like to believe) this is what they had in mind. The animal here is the bear in his slow, methodical, plodding mode, best seen in the berry patch as he takes care of business. Not very exciting, but very effective when it comes to handling the details of living in the community. The color is green, as in growing things.

The message of the Medicine Wheel is that each individual, and all communities (organizations), have these four elements. Under the best of circumstances there will be a balance, for all are necessary, but none sufficient. In practice, however, the balance is always dynamic and changing. With the passage of time and the changing of circumstances, different elements are called to the fore: now leadership, then community. But for the people to survive, the overall balance must be maintained. The balance of elements is affected not only by external factors but internal dynamics as well. Leaders, for example are always suspicious of folks whose concentration is on community, heart, and hearth: the warm fuzzies, in contemporary jargon. After all, what do they do really?

At the same time bears look at eagles and suggest that if they could just come down from their heights, they might understand what the business is about. And the eagles reciprocate by admonishing the bears to get their noses out of the berry patch, and

maybe they would see where they were going. Each element has its part to play, but not without a certain dynamic, creative tension. But the community is lost when the elements do not work together.

Note also that there is a logical sequence to the Medicine Wheel, which requires that it be circumnavigated (walked) in a clockwise direction. One begins with Leadership to the north, providing the dynamism to get the show on the road. It then becomes important to ask which road, and what direction. Vision supplies the answer. Once the journey is engaged, the issue is who is coming, and Community offers the response. Last but not least, a certain order is necessary for the journey, which is the job of Management. If the elements are taken in the reverse order (counterclockwise, starting with management), the net effect is to create a marvelous organization without ever considering who is being organized, what direction they are going in, by what power. This may be the way of many businesses. When organizational structure takes precedence over the job at hand, the people, and the overall purpose, it is no wonder that the level of performance is less than optimal.

I find enormous power in the elegant simplicity of this image. One might think of it as the original Myers Briggs, and although it has never been statistically validated to the best of my knowledge, it does have the weight of history and practice on its side. In terms of providing a frame of reference for meaningful reflection on the process and behaviors of an Open Space event, it is superb. The elements of the Medicine Wheel are so intuitive and clear that no lengthy explanation is required to set the stage. In fact, I find that saying little more than I have written here will usually do the job, even (or perhaps most especially) with people who have never heard of the Medicine Wheel or the Native Americans.

With the stage set, the process of reflection can begin. What happens next will vary from group to group, but some typical questions and responses include the following. I start in the north, with *Leadership.* What did the people notice that was strange, or different, about the leadership function as it played out in Open Space? In one case, there was a long pause after the question and some quizzical expressions on the faces. Then one participant said, "You know, I don't remember seeing any, at least not any leadership of the sort I have been used to. Nobody was telling us what to do or when. We all sort of took charge, and different people led the way at different times." I could tell from the tone of voice that the speaker was almost disappointed. The domineering leader of his expectations was simply absent. So I asked, "Well, how did things work?" And the answer was very well, indeed, better than usual. I followed up with, "Did you like it?" Again a long, reflective pause, and the answer, "Yes, it was very comfortable, supportive, and in an odd way, very challenging." My final question, "Would you do it again?" And this time, there was no hesitation, "Yes." That was all there was to it. No long discourse on effective models of leadership, simply an acknowledgment of what was. A simple act of reflection revealed the reality of a new, powerful form of leadership, and the fact that the group had already done it. In less time than it takes to tell about it, the group had grounded and appropriated an experience. There was nothing more to learn at the moment, nor anything to do.

From the north, we move around the circle to *Vision* and the eagle. What was strange here? I asked. One participant's response was very quick and simple. "It happened." he said. When I asked what he meant, he explained that it seemed to him that all the issues and opportunities which the group had put up on the wall represented an objective manifestation of their vision for the future, the directions they proposed to

follow. He was surprised at the diversity and richness, and also at the logic which appeared, only after the fact, in the sequence of issues as they were posted on the wall. Mostly he was surprised at how quickly it happened, and how effective that "vision statement" had been in guiding the work of the group. At that point he made some odious comparisons to a recently concluded visioning exercise that the company had just gone through. It took months and endless committee meetings to arrive at a watered-down statement that few people read, and nobody really cared about. "I think the difference was," he said, "we spoke from our passion What else can you say about vision? Vision without passion has little likelihood of motivating. Next stop is *Community,* the south. What was strange here? I asked. A smile slowly spread across the face of a member of a senior management team which had been using Open Space to reorient their company and rebuild the team after a series of mergers and acquisitions. He answered, "You know when we started, I was convinced that everybody else in this room was either a wimp or a SOB. I now know we have no wimps, but my original judgment about those SOBs was correct. However, we are all in this together and I like them." Faint praise perhaps, but in context, that phrase had all the connotations of hearts, flowers, and love notes. Something about the nature of community had been recognized and acknowledged. And for sure it was not business as usual.

Last stop is the west, the bear and *Management.* What struck you as odd here? I asked. The answer was quick and to the point "I never really noticed it, and we never actually talked about it. Everything just seemed to get done." All of which made the point perfectly that when Leadership opens the way, Vision shows the direction, and the people are all together, the details of management just fall in place. Or put somewhat differently, there are rarely management problems. Usually it is a question of Leadership, Vision, or Community. I couldn't have said it better, and there was no need to say more. Everybody was already there.

Chapter XI

What Next?

The story of Open Space Technology has just begun to be written. Even though development has been underway for the better part of eight years, the truth of the matter is, we have just passed the Beta Tests. There is now a growing body of experience, in a variety of organizational settings, saying the approach works well in the delicate task of bringing disparate folks together around complex and contentious issues. While the progress to date may be important, I cannot help but feel that it is only the tip of the iceberg. An enormous amount of work remains to be done discovering those additional areas where OST may be useful and, of equal importance, to determine much more precisely where and when it is *not* appropriate. The first item on the "What Next?" list must be research.

Research in Open Space Technology

To date, the majority of the experience with Open Space Technology has been my own. This is not to suggest that others have not utilized the approach with genuine success, for they have, but the fact remains, I have been in large part a solo practitioner. Some people feel that what works is not Open Space Technology, but Harrison Owen. That this is not true is demonstrated by the successes of others, but as long as the whole endeavor is viewed as a magic peculiar to myself, it will never be fully useful. I am hopeful that this user's guide will make everything more accessible to others, and even more hopeful that the new users will not only try a multitude of applications, but be willing to share them in some appropriate format. It has always been clear to me that OST was not a proprietary product of H. H. Owen and Company, but a useful technique in the public domain.

As the variety of uses and users multiplies so will the opportunity and necessity for rigorous research. The questions are endless. Not the least of which are how and why it works. I have my suspicions, which I have sought to spell out here and in *Riding the Tiger,* but I know we can go much deeper.

There is also the question of what happens long term. What is the lasting impact, if any? It was only three years ago, in 1989, that I attempted an Open Space event with something approaching a "regular organization," by which I mean a body of people not specially assembled for the "Open Space Experience." Since then a number of organizations, covering a broad range of types and sizes, have participated in the experiment. Sufficient time has now passed that it would be possible, and probably useful, to view the situations retrospectively. Does anybody even remember that Open Space came to town? And if so, what good did it do?

A deeper level of questioning would consider some of the aspects of human behavior which seem to be new, or are at least newly apparent. I make specific reference to what I can only call the phenomenon of collective consciousness. This notion has been around for eons, but the individualistic bent of our world has chosen to largely ignore it. Even studies on the behavior of groups tend to be viewed as the study of

the aggregate of the individual behaviors. My experience in Open Space suggests that something else is operational. If you will remember the response of the group to the woman who removed her clothing, you may agree with me that while individuals certainly contributed their part, the orchestration of the whole took place at some level beyond that of any individual. It certainly took place at a level beyond mine, and I was supposed to be "in charge."

A slight variant of this interest would consider the unfolding logic of the work group (issue) signs as they are displayed on the wall. Casual observation would suggest that each individual act of displaying an area of interest on the wall was totally random and disconnected from some larger point of view, or logic. However, a friend of mine in South Africa, Andre Speer, pointed out that this was not the case. Viewed retrospectively, there was a logic and a progression manifest, not only when the signs were put up, but also where they appeared (high, low, in the middle) Ever since Andre made the point, I have seen the point made again and again with every subsequent Open Space Event. If this is totally random, it is the strangest randomness I have ever seen.

Another area of research which seems especially fruitful is how best to prepare people to facilitate an Open Space Event. I am convinced that focus, presence, and detachment on the part of the facilitator are the strongest predictors of success or failure in any application. If the facilitator is clear, the result will be clear. If not, then not. But none of this deals with the central question of the best way, or probably *ways,* of preparing the facilitator. I know what works for me, but just as I am aware that different approaches work better for me at different times, so also I am aware that others must have a similar need and range. But what are the options? What are the alternatives? We have only just begun.

Other Applications

There is small but growing evidence that Open Space Technology can have major impact in specific business and organizational areas such as strategic planning, conflict resolution, market research, product development, issues of diversity, and probably many more. I have alluded to several of these uses, and offer by way of further example an application by a client which links market research and product development in some interesting ways.

Several years ago, a client with whom I had used Open Space Technology as part of an organizational redesign process, decided on its own to use the process with the customers. This organization was engaged in the software business, creating large systems for a variety of sectors, one of which was the financial community. Over the years they had held users' conferences to wine and dine their customers while unveiling new products. The idea of using OST grew out of a felt need to make the whole enterprise more interactive and participatory.

Customers were invited to join employees in a day long Open Space Event around the theme, "Issues and Opportunities for Software Applications in the Financial Area. As the areas of interest were posted on the wall, largely by the customers, it quickly became apparent that the net effect was market research of a new order. After all, the participants were identifying and posting those concerns they held with "real passion." In short order we had a wall full, and then came the Village Market Place. As expected, customers and employees signed up for the areas that held their interest.

The balance of the day was spent with customer/employee teams working the issues. Talk about "sticking close to the customer" (thank you, Tom Peters).

Working on the issues in this case turned into some rather specific undertakings, such as jointly developing specifications for what could turn out to be new products. Apparently things got even more specific with customers sketching out some of the architecture (system design) and even a little bit of code. One of my client's senior staff members remarked during a small break in the action that the whole enterprise was rather like "shooting fish in a barrel." You could scarcely miss, for you had the customer right there. Best of all the customer was doing a lot of the work.

To the best of my knowledge, there was no concerted follow-up to the day's activities, which always appeared a waste to me. Imagine having a business where your market research and product design were done in large part by the customers. Pre-selling would be virtually guaranteed, and when the product finally came out the best sales people would be the ones who designed it, who were also the people who were going to buy it and use it. I think this is called smart business.

Open Space Technology as a Tool for Organizational Interventions

OST works well as a meeting management tool, but as we saw in the preceding chapter, it has some other potential applications, especially in the area of advanced human performance. That particular use was, however, aimed more at the individuals involved, and enhancing the ways in which they carried out their duties. I believe OST has an additional use as part of a broader organizational intervention strategy. Of special interest is the possibility of leapfrogging from OST to the *Learning Organization.*

As Learning Organizations have become part of the jargon, clarity as to what they might be, or do, seems to have faded. Much of the current conversation describes the learning organization as some sort of hybrid, combining university and the corporation. The substance appears as an expanded training and course offering. From where I sit, should the corporation and the university turn out to be the parents of the new learning organization, its effective life would be quite short and not terribly sweet. Neither institution, at the moment, seems to have particularly strong credentials when it comes to profound learning of the sort that will enable us to cope with our emerging world. The university has demonstrated its power as a custodian of the past, a good and useful function. And the corporation, almost by default, has become the custodian of the present I say "by default" because governments seem less willing and able to rise to the occasion. Who or what shall become the custodian of the future? I nominate the Learning Organization.

The Learning Organization, as I understand it, is not so much an institution as a way of life, a style of getting along in the world. While it may have forms and structures to deal with details, it is constantly inventing new configurations and passing beyond the old ones.

In *Riding the Tiger,* I added a word and called it an *Interactive Learning Organization.* The entity is interactive in that it is constantly engaged in dialogue with its surroundings, embracing the chaotic challenges thrown up by the environment as an occasion for growth, which is to say learning, or evolution.

In an open system, control as we used to think about it is not only impossible, but

undesirable. For that sort of control forces us to shut the doors and windows on change to preserve the fiction that we really are in charge. In doing so we prohibit learning.

The Learning Organization is an *organization* in the sense that it is not just a blob, a passing fancy, a good idea, or merely good feelings. It has a center and focus. There is a rationale and purpose which is expressed in terms more organic and biological than structural and mechanistic.

Most of all, the Learning Organization is a new form of organization. It is highly adapted, and adaptable, to life in the transforming world in which we find ourselves. I refer you to *Riding the Tiger* for a fuller treatment. But, should such an organization sound useful, the central question becomes: how do we get there from here? In my judgement, a straight, linear, developmental approach will not work, for that would only produce more and better of what we already have, which is precisely the problem of the moment. An added problem is that we are so deeply embedded in our current notions of what an organization is, and should be, that life after control is out of the question. So we find ourselves trying to control our way into the new reality, manage change, and do it all incrementally so that nothing is essentially disturbed.

We are now twice damned, for we are using the new words in the old reality, or the old rules in the new game. Not only doesn't it work, but we feel confused, guilty, and somehow cheated. After all, aren't we saying all the right words, giving it our very best? Absolutely. But you know what? You can't get there from here the way we are going.

There is a radical, non-linear, discontinuity between our present state and our new condition as an Interactive Learning Organization. All of which requires a jump, a jump which unfortunately takes us into the unknown. We have never been this way before, and there are no guarantees that we will make it, but there would seem to be one guarantee. Doing more and better of what we are already doing won't make it either.

Taking the necessary jump would be made a lot easier were it possible for us to have had a small, but realistic, experience with the whole process. It is precisely here that I believe OST can play a critical role. The key suggestion for this role came from a chance observation made at the conclusion of one of the first uses of Open Space Technology in a non-experimental mode. This was the meeting in Goa, India, described above. The subject matter of that meeting concerned Learning Organizations. At the end of four days of wonderful, deep, give-and-take discussion, Nazneen Kamali, one of the participants and the managing editor of *Business India* (sort of India's *Fortune)* said, "We came here thinking we were going to talk about learning organizations, and we have, but in a curious way we have become a Learning Organization."

At the time, I wasn't quite sure what she meant, but in retrospect, it has become a lot clearer. Not having any fixed agenda to start meant that nobody was in control, although there were certainly a number of efforts to establish boundaries for the discussions, largely by various people offering their favorite theory. The whole first day of the conference was a model of academic decorum, with theories and counter-theories taking the stage. At the end of that first day, Prasaad Kaipa, an Indian by birth, but an American by naturalization, said at the Evening News, "I do not wish to insult anybody, but I must say that I have learned nothing today. I suggest that if we are going to leave with what we came, we should go home now." And he sat down.

The impact verged on the outrageous, but nobody could really argue. Prasaad was right. Chaos virtually lapped at all the well wrought theories, but what happened was not the dissolution of either the group or the enterprise. It was the deepening of both. We all went to dinner after the News, and the next day things were very different. Indeed it was a new day on more than one level. The theories had gone, or at least were completely transformed, and most remarkable was the sense of being out of control and loving it. The new experience was *High Learning* in the extreme. To the best of our knowledge, nobody had ever quite been where we were. Even more remarkable was a sense of playfulness and joy. New ideas and approaches bubbled to the surface and then, with equal playfulness, were abandoned. Major, massive egos (and we certainly had some) who in other situations would have blanched at the notion of giving up control, found that it was actually fun and productive. As Naneen said, we started out talking about learning organizations, but I have to agree, we became one. That was not our intention, but it was the reality. And the means was Open Space Technology.

Non-Conclusion

Typically, at the end of a book such at this, the author brings all of the strains of his argument to a fine point and renders a conclusion. I cannot do that for a multitude of reasons. First, the data is not in, and such data as is available largely originated with a single investigator, myself. This data is obviously suspect. But it is also intriguing. Open Spice Technology has now been utilized in a sufficiently large number of situations with predictable results that it seems reasonable to claim that it is not just a one-time fluke or happenstance. As the number of practitioners grows, it will be possible to contrast their results with my own, permitting some broader level of generalization concerning the applicability and effectiveness of the technique. The early returns in this area are also quite positive. Common approaches done by different people yield comparable results. So far, so good, but the numbers are small. Then there is the business of long-term impact. While it is true that we now have three years of history, it is also true that nothing approaching a careful study has been done. No standards were established prior to the interventions. Such data as has been collected is purely anecdotal and gathered by the practitioner(s) themselves. Last but not least, no effort has been made to return to the scene of the crime for an assessment of lasting impact. In short there is a lot of work to be done.
In another time and another place it might have been well to heed the voice of caution and wait until all the results were in. But my natural impatience, combined with a growing conviction that Open Space Technology does work, and that it does do some good in our crazy, fragmented world, drives me to the conclusion that action research is the only way. Do it. Think about it. Do it again ‗better. Please join me.