

Effective Engagement: building relationships  
with community and other stakeholders

# Book 3 the engagement toolkit



### 3.36 Open Space Technology

#### Description:

A radical participatory approach developed by US Management Consultant Harrison Owen in the 1980s. Stated simply, open space technology allows participants to offer topics for discussion and others to participate according to their interest.

The theory behind open space technology is that people will take ownership of issues they wish to address.

The open space technology operates on the following four principles:

1. Whoever comes are the right people.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
3. Whenever it starts is the right time.
4. When it's over, it's over.<sup>26</sup>

#### Objectives:

Open space technology aims to provide an event which is relevant, timely, and participatory. Its relevance is determined by the participants, who determine the agenda, the length of the event, and the outcomes.

#### Outcomes:

The open space technology event puts people of like interests in touch with one another, allows people to exchange views and to understand a wider range of viewpoints, and provides a sense of empowerment to shape the world towards the kind of future the participants might desire.

#### Uses/strengths:

- Appropriate for use where there is a need for new ideas and the prevailing climate is characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity and a low level of trust.
- Because there are a limited set of rules, the process is driven by the participants.
- Absence of 'control' of the process means participants must be prepared to go where the process takes them.
- Includes immediate summary and discussion.

- Provides a structure by giving participants opportunities and responsibilities to create a valuable product or an experience.

#### Special considerations/weaknesses:

- Facilities should be flexible to accommodate variable group sizes.
- A powerful theme or vision statement is needed to generate topics.
- A large number of participants are involved in the process (up to 500).
- The most important issues can sometimes be lost in the discussion.
- It can sometimes be difficult to get accurate records of results.

#### Resources required:

- Venue with room for a large gathering space, plus up to 10 smaller breakout spaces, which offers shelter in case of rain, heat, etc.
- Facilitator trained in open space technology techniques
- Publicity (which, for a large gathering may include a website on which topics or themes can be predetermined)
- Website or other means to disseminate outcomes or issues papers

#### Can be used for:

- Discover community issues
- Develop community capacity
- Communicate an issue

#### Number of people required to help organise:

- Medium (2–12 people)

#### Audience size:

- Large (> 30)

#### Time required:

- Medium (6 weeks – 6 months)

#### Skill level/support required:

- High (Specialist skills)
- Low (No special skills)

#### Cost:

- Medium (AUD\$1,000 – AUD\$10,000)

#### Participation level:

- Low (Information only)

#### Innovation level:

- High (Innovative)

#### Method:

1. Determine whether the open space technology process is the most appropriate technique for your situation, considering the people who are likely to take part and their preferences and attitudes, and the venues available to you.
2. Select venue, facilitators and prepare information (open space technology can be successfully used in conjunction with other techniques such as conferences and workshops).
3. Publicise the event.
4. Describe process and rules to the participants, as outlined below:
  - 4.1. Principles: Whoever comes are the right people: Whatever happens is the only thing that could have: Whenever it starts is the right time: When it's over, it's over.
  - 4.2. Law of two feet: The law of two feet: people are honour bound to walk away from proceedings and sessions which they believe are irrelevant.
  - 4.3. Follow due process.
5. One by one, each person who wishes to, steps into the centre of the circle and announces their name and topics they feel passionate enough about to be willing to lead a break out session on that topic.
6. Each passionate person writes the topic on a piece of paper along with time and venue for a discussion.
7. Following announcements of topics by passionate people, the market place becomes open. The marketplace is a wall where all the topics, times and venues are posted to allow participants to decide which session to sign up to.
8. Those who announced the topics facilitate the individual discussions and appoint people to record minutes on provided computers.
9. Reconvene into the larger group and report back, or combine reports into one document and ensure widespread dissemination to all those who took part, and all those likely to make a decision.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.iap2.org> [accessed 07/06/2005]

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