

## **Tips for Innovative Meetings/Events (T.I.M.E.)**

**Topic: Meeting Agendas**

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### **WELCOME**

Welcome to T.I.M.E. If you are a new subscriber to T.I.M.E., welcome! We hope you enjoy this monthly e-newsletter that we fill with ideas for experiential, innovative meetings, training events and conferences.

An index of our past issues is included in the last section.

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### **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- 1) A Blank Wall
- 2) The Circle
- 3) Making the Circle Work
- 4) Guiding Principles And The Law
- 5) Freebies
- 6) Tracking Success
- 7) Future T.I.M.E. (Upcoming dates and administrative details)

For your ease, sections are numbered and separated with “ \_\_\_ ’s”; Scroll down or use Ctrl +f to locate a specific section.

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#### **1. A BLANK WALL**

Can you imagine a meeting without an agenda?? What’s your prediction for the success of that meeting?

Interestingly, a concept called Open Space Technology provides a framework for doing exactly that. Open Space Technology allows the agenda and content to evolve from the participants.

This issue of T.I.M.E. will discuss Open Space Technology.

Think about this: You go to a meeting or a conference and you discover that the most valuable part was the coffee break? The best part was the informal exchange of information you had in the hall, over a cup of coffee, late night after the formal part of the conference was over.

Interestingly:

- Coffee breaks offer no formal agenda
  - Conversations during a coffee break aren't dictated to be certain length (although the program organizers don't really encourage you to extend beyond the break!)
  - Coffee breaks take advantage of the wonderful network of people attending the conference or meeting
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## 2. THE CIRCLE

Harrison Owen is the guru about Open Space Technology or OST. Open Space is an innovative approach to organizing meetings that has been practiced for over 15 dozen years. However, Harrison Owen writes, "I suspect it has been around as long as *Homo sapiens* has gathered for one purpose or another, from the days of the campfire circle onward."

OST enables self-organizing groups of all sizes to deal with complex issues in a short period of time.

Open Space was formalized in 1985 when eighty-five (brave) participants gathered in Monterey, California for *The Third Annual International Symposium on Organization Transformation*. The first two versions of this conference were organized in a most traditional manner - papers, panels, and traditional formats.

But the consensus of participants was, that despite the monumental planning effort extending over a long time, the real excitement came during the informal interactions (like coffee breaks).

So the participants of the Third International Symposium determined that this symposium was going to be different.

And different it was. At the point of arrival, the participants knew only when things would start, when it would conclude, and generally what the theme might be. There was no agenda, no planning committee, no management committee, and the only facilitator in evidence essentially disappeared after several hours. Just 85 people sitting in a circle. Much to the amazement of everybody, 2½ hours later, the participants had a three-day agenda totally planned out including multiple workshops, all with conveners, times, places and participants.

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## 3. THE CIRCLE AT WORK

How did this happen? As each person determined that they had some area of exploration they would like to pursue, they would write a brief description on a small placard, announce their topic to the assembled group, post the placard on the wall and sit down.

When no further topics were posted, the time and place for meeting, and anybody interested in a particular topic signed up.

For several years following, the annual symposium was conducted in a similar fashion.

And then, in 1989, Open Space escaped. Within a period of less than a month, Open Space was utilized with two vastly different groups in widely separated areas. Polymer Chemists from Dupont wrestled with the future of Dacron in the USA followed immediately by a group of scholars and executives in India considering the issue of Learning in Organizations. In both cases, everybody sat in a circle, identified what had heart and meaning for them, and collectively organized a multi-session gathering in less than an hour.

Years later, the Open Space concept has been used thousands of times on all continents with groups ranging in size from 5 to over 1000. Participants have come from Fortune 500 companies, third world villages, religious communities, governmental agencies, and whole towns. They have represented all socio-economic and demographic classes. They have approached issues from similar and vastly different perspectives. For example, 100+ Zulus, Haussa, Afrikaners, and Brits used Open Space to gain an understanding of each other as they worked to create the New South Africa. Or, 225 federal bureaucrats, state and local bureaucrats, and Native Americans gathered to work out approaches to building roads on tribal lands using Open Space.

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#### **4. GUIDING PRINCIPLES and THE LAW**

There are Four Principles and One Law that guide behavior in Open Space.

The principles are:

- 1) Whoever comes is the right people - which reminds people that getting something done is not a matter of having 100,000 people and the chairman of the board. The fundamental requirement is people who care to do something. And by showing up, that essential care is demonstrated.
- 2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have - keeps people focused on the here and now, and eliminates all of the could-have-beens, should-have-beens or might-have-beens. This principle focuses people on the present; what is happening at that moment.
- 3) Whenever it starts is the right time - alerts people to the fact that inspired performance and genuine creativity rarely, if ever, pay attention to the clock. They happen (or not) when they happen.

Lastly, 4) When it's over it's over. In a word, don't waste time. Do what you have to do, and when it's done, move on to something more useful.

The Law is the so called *Law of Two Feet*, which states simply, if at any time you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing – use your two feet and move to some place more to your liking. Such a place might be another group, or even outside into the sunshine. No matter what, don't sit there feeling miserable. The law reminds us that unhappy people are unlikely to be productive people.

One of the most profound impacts of the law is to make it exquisitely clear precisely who is responsible for the quality of a participant's learning. If any situation is not learning rich, it is incumbent upon the individual participant to make it so. There is no point in blaming the conference committee, for none exists. Responsibility resides with the individual.

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## **5. FREEBIES: THE RISKS AND REWARDS**

When can you employ Open Space Technology?

Open Space is appropriate in any situation where there is a real issue to be solved marked by:

- High levels of Complexity
- High levels of Diversity in terms of the people needed to solve it
- High levels of Conflict (potential or actual)
- Decision time of Yesterday

I recently adapted Open Space for a meeting I facilitated and it worked fabulously. Was I nervous – absolutely! Was I concerned about how the conference organizers would perceive my session – absolutely! My experience cannot be translated easily into a “freebie” document. However, if you would like to talk with me first-hand about my experience, call me at 847.394.9857.

Or if you are generally intrigued, you can email us for a list of resources (books and websites) that talk more about Open Space Technology. Send an email to [stinnish@ameritech.net](mailto:stinnish@ameritech.net) with the words “Open Space Technology” in the subject line.

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## **6. DEBUNK THE DEBRIEF**

None of our programs, neither our simulations nor workshops, employ Open Space Technology. However, we do allow the debrief sessions to evolve to react to the participants and their actions and comments during the program.

Our debrief sessions are facilitated but they are not driven by the facilitator. Our trained facilitators draw out the audience, making links between the program and the learning, and helping draw parallels between the activity of the simulation and the real world.

I wrote last month that motivation is an internal characteristic. No meeting, training event, or speaker will “create” motivation. Motivation comes from within. Programs allow participants to hold up a mirror and see for themselves their behavior and attitudes. A debrief that is responsive to the participants will allow them to examine their behavior and attitudes – resulting in changes that are more likely to be lasting.

Jeremy Wier Alderson wrote about Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in the March issue of Meetings & Conventions. He commented on the similarities and differences between AA meetings and other meetings. One of his points rings true for AA meetings, Open Space meetings, and an effective debrief: He writes that there are no experts at an AA meeting.

I think this point is worth pondering – How can your next meeting capitalize on the inspiration, wisdom, expertise and experience of the attendees?

We are always here to help. To learn how we can help you meet your business objectives, or to learn more about our clients, and our programs, please contact Sue Tinnish, 1415 N. Salem Blvd., Arlington Heights, Illinois 60004, 847.394.9857, email [stinnish@ameritech.net](mailto:stinnish@ameritech.net) or visit our website at [www.ontrackusa.com](http://www.ontrackusa.com).

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## **7. FUTURE T.I.M.E.**

Our April 2001 topic is still undecided! If you have any suggestions, we welcome your ideas or suggestions.

Please forward this newsletter to your associates and colleagues! Your recommendations are key to our success. Or anyone can subscribe by sending an email to [stinnish@ameritech.net](mailto:stinnish@ameritech.net).

Past issues of T.I.M.E. can be requested by emailing us. Here is an index of topics and “freebies” offered in the past:

May: Teambuilding and (freebie) New York Times reprint and summary on why teambuilding programs miss the mark.

June: Green Meetings and (freebie) list of books that have 20-30 minute exercises for meetings and events.

July: American (Values) and (freebie) Meeting Analysis, a 1-page document that will outline the scope and needs analysis for your next meeting.

August: Minimum/Minimal Meetings and (freebie) Web Winners (web resources to make you and your meetings more productive).

October: Evaluations and (freebie) sample evaluation questions.

November: Politics and (freebie) on-line experiences.

December: Toys and (freebie) brainstorming ideas.

January: Sales, Award Presentations and (freebie) sales tips.

February: Change, Change Management and Communicating change and (freebie) Change Bombs (reasons change management fails),

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