Open Space Methodology

Background: Why We Need New Tools[1]

We all experience our life and the world in which we operate as increasingly complex and uncertain. The need for instruments dealing with this uncertainty has never been more pressing than now. On January 23, 2000 the world known theoretical physicist Stephen Hawkins told the SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS: "I think the next century will be the century of complexity." The famous butterfly effect, which suggests that small interventions into a system can have unpredictable, large effects has now become mainstream and was even the subject of a Hollywood movie released in 2004, in which the main actor intends to influence his and other people's destiny by changing his personal history.

Complexity theory, although in practice having an influence on many parts of our daily life (such as in meteorology or the stock exchange) has only recently entered the sphere of management. It probably started once people recognized that the engineering approach to project management ("objectives + activities + inputs = project success") did not work out in case of many complex projects. And this is not about small deviations from the original plan, but about projects that did not meet at all the original goals. It has recently been estimated that in Germany alone the loss that can be attributed to failed projects amounts to more than $ 100 billion annually. Leaving beside many other macro and micro economic factors that influence the project outcome (and influence each other in an unpredictable way), the most critical variable for the success or failure of change processes is the human factor. The more people you have and the more diversity – the higher the probability that things develop their own dynamics.

Multiple leadership and stakeholder participation are other buzzwords which dominate many discussions in the corporate as well as in the political sphere:

As in the Renaissance, it will be an exciting time, a time of great opportunities for those who can see and seize them, but of a great threat and fear for many. It will be more difficult to hold organizations and societies together. The softer words of leadership and vision and common purpose will replace the tougher words of control and authority because the tough words won't bite anymore. Organizations will have to become communities rather than properties, with members, not employees, because few will be content to be owned by others. Societies will break down into smaller units but will also regroup into even larger ones than now for particular purposes. (Charles Handy, 1995: Beyond Certainty. The changing worlds of organizations).

It is this background which has stimulated the development of new tools and approaches that can help social systems of any size to transform. These methodologies utilize the general properties of complex systems such as self-organization as well as the concept of mental models. This idea has been introduced as a basic principle of organization by neurobiologists and cognitive psychologists: organizations are open books; they are continually created and re-created by the way people think and talk about them. If all people in an organization think that it is a torture chamber, the organization will be a torture chamber. If all members of this organization think it is a great place to work, it will be…

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[1] **1 Short Introduction into Open Space Technology** (from Holger Nauheimer: Open Space Technology. New Stories from the Field, 2005). A more detailed description of the methodology can be found in the book: Harrison Owen: Open Space Technology. A User's Guide. Berret-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco

One of these new tools is Open Space Technology.

What Are the Application Fields of OST?

In simple words, OST is an approach to facilitate meetings, seminars, workshops, conferences or any other form of gatherings which are described by the following characteristics:

- high levels of complexity
- high levels of diversity
- high potential or actual conflict
- a decision time of yesterday

OST events can last from a few hours to a maximum of three days and can involve from 5 to more than 2,000 folks. In fact, it seems that the maximum number is only limited by logistical concerns, mainly space and the availability of a good supportive team. For a long time, 500 people were considered the maximum. Some years ago, this figure was corrected to 1,000, until two brave teams of facilitators (Michael M Pannwitz/Harrison Owen in Germany and Peggy Holman/Andrés Agudelo in Colombia) facilitated events of more than 2,000 (the story of the OST with 1,700 street kids and 300 adults in Bogotá is included in this documentation).

The opportunities for application of OST are not unlimited but manifold. A non-exhaustive list of good reasons to organize an Open Space could include:

- project identification, implementation or participatory evaluation
- change processes in organizations and societies
- cultural change in organizations such as mergers and acquisitions
- development of an organization's vision
- urban, rural or regional development and other multi-stakeholder processes
- design of innovative products or product features
- critical decisions in teams
- collaborative learning processes / networking
- initiation and consolidation of peace processes
- school development
- etc.

As OST event is taking participation of stakeholders in their own affairs serious, the approach cannot be applied if there is somebody who has all the answers and a master plan in mind. Therefore the task of consultants or facilitators starts long before the actual event: they have to make sure that the mentioned characteristics and pre-conditions apply.

How Does It Work?

Harrison Owen has once described the entire methodology in one page, using 5 headlines and 15 bullet points. A lot of practical experience has been collected over the past 20 years and has been added to the toolbox of the global community of OST facilitators. Those folks can draw from many resources that help them to plan and implement an OS event and to help the sponsor of the event to follow up with the results. However, the original 5 headlines and 15 bullet points still apply and explain the basic processes through which any Open Space conference goes:

1. The Four Mechanisms

- **Circle**

Any OST event starts and ends with a circle. If you have more than 50 participants, you will have several concentric circles. The circle is a symbol for community and for mutual respect of all individuals who made their way into the assembly. It is an ancient form that encourages people to dialogue. In Open Space, it is this initial circle where the facilitators explains the basic rules before they give way for self-organization.

- **Breath**

"Breath" is a metaphor and signals that an OST event cannot be understood from a mechanistical viewpoint but rather resembles life. It is organic and follows the pace of the group instead of a predetermined agenda.

- **Bulletin Board**

Although any OS event has a theme which confirms the four conditions for use (see below), not a single Open Space has an agenda but the Bulletin Board. This is a huge blank board, which indicates not more than time slots and designated breakout rooms as a framework for the sessions to be announced by the participants. The actual number of working groups and in particular their subjects are determined in a session at the beginning of an OS event, in which the facilitator encourages participants to identify their passion and to take responsibility. Depending on the size of the conference, this detailed agenda is usually established within one or two hours after the inauguration of the event.

- **Marketplace**

After the agenda has been established, all participants move towards the Bulletin Board to comprehend the complexity of the original theme and to make their choices. Like in any market place, negotiations are made; in this case these negotiations are about convergence or re-scheduling of working groups. Like in any other market place of the world, it is the contributor who decides on whether a deal is made or not.

2. The Four Principles

The Four Principles apply naturally in any Open Space event. Nobody needs to observe them, they just happen.

- **Whoever comes is the right person**

OST is based on passion and responsibility (see below). Those who happen to show up in a working group are those who take interest in the subject at the given moment in time; we assume that the likelihood of those folks taking the issue a step further is much higher than in traditional meetings where people are forced to work on something that has been imposed on them. Working groups can have any size from one to several hundreds, although in practice it is often a manageable size of three to twenty. It also happens that nobody shows up, including the convenor. Then, something more important is happening at the same time, but at another place (see principle 2).

- **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have**

The beauty of self-organization is that predetermined agendas are only of limited value. Instead, in Open Space those things happen that would have happened naturally if no external force or threat was applied. Therefore, a working group is as good as the passion, and the responsibility people are ready to commit. OST shows where the energy for change is located – and what issues the organization that is sponsoring the event should take seriously. Against common sense, in Open Space people are ready to take responsibility – that is why the outcome and the follow-up of an OS event regularly has a higher impact on the intended change than traditional approaches.

- **It starts at the right time**

Although the Bulletin Board indicates time slots for working groups, this does not mean that they start on time. They might start earlier, when people cannot wait to get into dialogue. They might start late, when other, more important things happen, and they might not start at all, in which case Principles 1 and 2 apply.

- **When it's over, it's over (when it's not over, it's not over)**

Although the steering group decides, prior to the event, on the designated time slots (usually between 30 and 90 minutes), participants are encouraged to (i) to close their discussion and adjourn the group early if everything significant has been said, or (ii) to continue their discussion if at the end of the time slot much more needs to be said. In the latter case, they need to decide whether they want to continue right away or to schedule a new meeting for further elaboration of their topic.

3. The Law of the Two Feet

- If you find yourself in a working group discovering that you are neither contributing or learning (i.e. you are bored), use your two feet and move on.

4. The Four Conditions for Use

OST works for events to which the following conditions apply

- high levels of complexity
- high levels of diversity
- high potential or actual conflict
- a decision time of yesterday

5. Two Engines to Drive With

- **Passion**

OST assumes that if people are encouraged to work on what they are genuinely interested in, their entire passion and creativity will unfold. No passion, no issue.

- **Responsibility**

Those who convene a session in an OS event take responsibility for (i) assigning time and space (i.e., announcing when and where their subject will be explored), and (ii) taking care for the documentation of the working group's discussion, agreements, results and further steps. The full

documentation of all results is handed out to all participants at the end of the conference. In Open Space this is usually called "The Book of Proceedings".

Convergence and Follow-Up of an OS event

The principles described above outline the essentials of OST. Everything else done before and afterwards depends on the circumstances and the skills of the facilitator. Open Space conferences can stand-alone or be part of a larger process. Like for other Change Management approaches the same applies for OST: it is not the methodology which drives the process but the type of the process determines which approach should be applied, or as Abraham Maslov said: "If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail". Rarely, clients ask for Open Space, but want a task to be completed. It is part of essential consulting skills to assess the client's needs before and to find out whether a participatory process such as OST fits into the present or desired organizational culture.

After the party is over, there is more to do. Often, OS conferences are concluded with a convergence phase, in which the subjects discussed during the event are ranked according to their significance for the change process. Also regularly, projects are devised to deal with these issues, and action plans are elaborated to put things into practice. However, even in such a phase it is pertinent that participants of the OS event take over responsibility and don't delegate it to others. Usually 3-6 months after an Open Space conference there is a follow-up meeting in which the progress of projects is assessed. At the same time, the project groups that have been established during the OS conference self-organize their own agenda.

You never step into the same river twice – organizations that have experienced OST are transformed in one or another way. It is an important leadership task to create framework conditions in which further self-organization can blossom. Otherwise, the momentum created in an Open Space conference will be lost in a short time.