# Open Space Technology
*(Harrison Owen)*

Open Space Technology (OST) is a way to convene people for a conference, retreat or meeting. "Technology" in this case means 'tool' - a process; a method. Attendees are asked to generate the meeting agenda as well as participate by leading small group break-out sessions during the meeting time. There is usually a facilitator, but no official meeting leader who demands compliance.

It is similar to Future workshops, BarCamps or Unconferences.

Open Space Technology enables groups of any size to address complex, important issues and achieve meaningful results quickly. It is at its best where more traditional meeting formats fail: when there is conflict, complexity, diversity of thought or people, and short decision times. It has been used in widely diverse settings, from designing aircraft doors at a large aircraft manufacturing company to engaging street kids in defining a sustainable jobs program.

OST is a meeting methodology. It is also a philosophy and a life practice. It has been widely copied and adapted to private open space meetings and public open space conference purposes, including many practices not originally part of the initial practice.

According to its founders, these adaptations are fair, as the essential core that determines whether something is "open space or not" is "the invitation to take responsibility for discussing your passion". When participants do so, the needs of both the individual and the collective are supposedly met.

Use of the term OST was first attributed to Harrison Owen in 1986. In its original form has been used in over 100 countries and in diverse settings, industries, cultures and situations - for program and product design, knowledge exchange, interdisciplinary thinking, conflict resolution and conferences. This method has been used all over the world by thousands of practitioners for groups of people from 4 to over 2000.

In Open Space, a facilitator explains the process and then participants are invited to co-create the agenda and host their own discussion groups. Discussions are held in designated areas or separate rooms known as 'breakout spaces' and participants are free to move amongst the discussion groups. Each group records the conversations in a form that can be used to distribute or broadcast the proceedings of the meeting (in hard copy, blog, podcast, video, etc). Online networking can occur both before and following the actual face-to-face meetings so discussions can continue seamlessly. In a multi-day Open Space, participants have the opportunity to announce new discussion topics / late-breaking sessions each new morning. At the end of the day (or 2 days or 2.5 days) the full group reconvenes for comments and reflection. This helps participants to re-engage in the full group over the duration of the meeting.

While the mechanics of Open Space provide a simple means to self-organize, it is the underlying principles that make it effective both for meetings and as a guidepost for individual and collective effectiveness. The Law of Two Feet (also known as the Law of Mobility in settings where participants don't necessarily have the use of both feet) -- a foot of passion and a foot of responsibility -- expresses the core idea of taking responsibility for what you love. In practical terms, the law says that if you're neither contributing nor getting value where you are, use your two feet (or available form of mobility) and go somewhere where you can. It is also a reminder to stand up for your passion. From the law, flow four principles:

- Whoever comes is 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

The organizing theme of an Open Space meeting is that people who care about the subject will come together. The initial meeting notice takes the form of an invitation, thus the people who have attended have chosen to be there and are willing to contribute. The objectives for the meeting and the time available affect design decisions such as whether action planning is included in the Open Space or not.

*Source: Harrison Owen's book, Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, 1997, Berrett-Koehler*