

Chapter VI

Creating Time and Space

The preparations have been made and the people are assembled; everybody is sitting in a circle. The middle is open space except for a small pile of markers, masking tape, and quarter-sheets of flip-chart paper. It is time to get started.

The initiatory activities of an Open Space event are designed to move 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 close to one and one-half hours. By the end of that time, 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 consists of the following six stages:

- 1. Welcome
- 2. Focus the Group
- 3. State the Theme
- 4. Describe the Process
- 5. Create the Community Bulletin Board
- 6. Open the Village Marketplace
- 7. Get out of the way!

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INITIATION**

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What follows is my usual approach, but please note, there is no one right way. My way 81 works for me and is dependent on my style, chemistry, and 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 wind. There are certain principles you would 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 strictly a “do your own thing” party.

Welcome

Unless you are hosting your own group, the first person to speak in the circle is the official sponsor, whomever that may be. Particularly if you are an external facilitator, it is important that the assembled body be greeted by somebody they all know, or know of. The meeting environment is not the standard one, and the process of creating the safe space necessary for that particular group to get on with its unique business can only begin when they feel some degree of familiarity and ownership. Seeing a familiar face at the start is a good beginning.

The words spoken should be brief; indeed there is rarely need for more than a few. The invitation will have taken care of the whys and wherefores for gathering, and all the information essential to getting the event off and running will be provided by the facilitator. Recommended speech in this situation goes something like the following: “Welcome to you all. I know we are going to have a useful time together, and now is the moment to get on with it. Here’s Harrison.” Short, sweet, and to the point. And of course, if there are some essential logistics to be communicated, that can be done too, but above everything else, keep it brief.

Focus the Group

It is my practice to stand outside the circle until I have been introduced. This is not about shyness. In most cases, few if any of the participants will have the least clue as to who I am, so there is little reason for me to be cluttering up the space until I am needed. Once introduced, I come to the edge of the circle and say something simple like, “Welcome to Open Space.” I then start walking slowly around the inside of the circle, and as I go, I invite the participants to let their eyes trace the circle to see who is there. The important thing is to move with slow deliberation and allow people time to really see who is sitting in the circle, even if they do not know who the other people are. The slow pace also enables everyone to catch their breath before rushing onward. By the time I come back around to my starting point, a significant change has taken place. The empty Open Space, which may have seemed hostile and forbidding to many, has now been invisibly filled with the hopes and expectations of the group as a whole, and no words, save for mine, have been spoken. The process is well underway.

State the Theme

The next order of business is to make clear the purpose of the meeting. If you are standing at the edge of the circle, as I usually am, now is a good time to move into the center. From that position, words describing why we are here and what we propose to do will come quite naturally. Avoid long histories or detailed presentations, for people will have received invitations that presumably gave them the necessary details. And besides, the assembled group doubtless knows much more about the situation than you do—especially if you are an external consultant/facilitator. This is simply a destination check. The plane is leaving for Chicago, and if that is not what some passengers had in mind, now would be a good time to get off.

If you find yourself forgetting what comes next in the process, check the signs on the walls. Remember that you placed them in sequence, starting with the theme. All you have to do to keep your place is let your eyes run around the walls. And nobody will even know you are doing that.

The statement of the theme, purpose, objective should be done in such a way that 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 83 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 \$1.5 billion meeting in Denver, Colorado (see [chapter 1](#)), 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. To help us with all that we have some very friendly computers located in our Newsroom. 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 for now just know—it will get done.

Notice the upbeat 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 this stage, 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 of the above and go with something like: "We all know why we are here, so let's get on with the business." 84

Describe the Process

By now 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 liftoff. 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 has been used all over the world with groups from five to two thousand. You will be surprised how simple it is, and strangely it always seems to work."

I make no effort to give a full accounting of the approach. The objective 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 to set some expectations that this group will join the others in a positive and successful experience. 85

There are also some other things going on with these words. By citing the numbers and noting the simplicity, 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 difficult, if not impossible, to imagine anything like what is described. The conventional wisdom says you just do not (cannot) do things like it, 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 to do this are twofold. First, as they acknowledge their anxiety, they will effectively be able to 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 adrenaline is running, it is time to put some content into the notion of Open Space Technology. The approach here is fairly straightforward:

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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 okay, 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 marker. If you have more than one issue, take several pieces of paper. Write down a short title and sign your name. Then stand in front of the group and say, "My issue is...and my name is...." There is no need for a speech at this point or any sort of explanation. Nothing but the facts—your issue and your name. After you have announced your theme, take your piece of paper and tape it up on that blank wall. On your way, grab a Post-it from the chart, which will give you a time and place of meeting, attach it to your paper, and put the paper on the wall. When you have done that, please return to your seat.

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 to announce 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.

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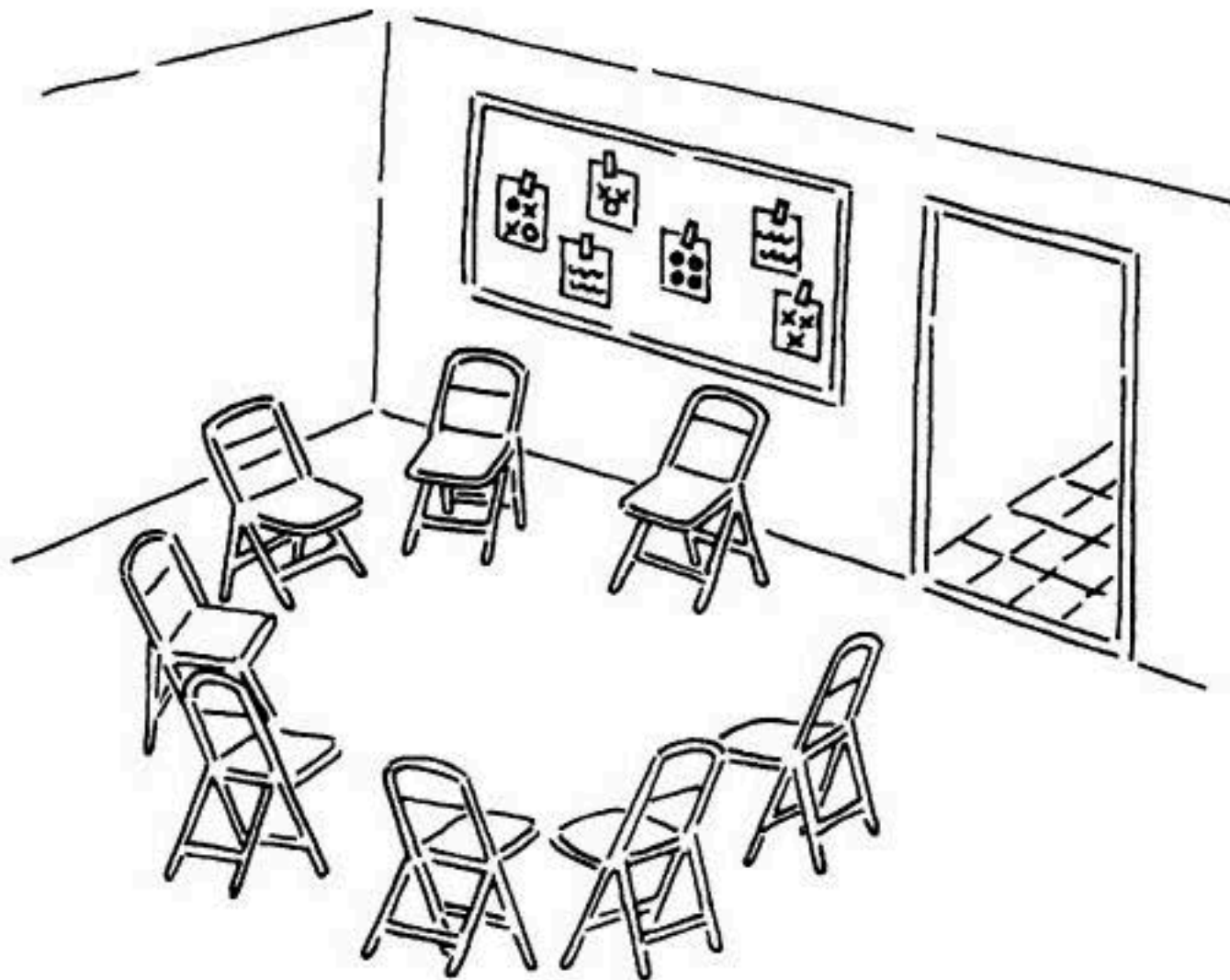
Some people have wondered whether the very rigor of the journey to the center of the circle might not discourage a few folks and eliminate some good ideas. The answer is obviously yes. But my experience has been that no good ideas, supported by passion, disappear (by definition). The world is full of 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 business.

Just about now you may notice many pairs of eyes beginning to fixate on the large, blank wall reserved for the community bulletin board. Usually at this moment people feel, and sometimes express, a degree of apprehension. After all, most people who found themselves sitting in a room with their peers, colleagues, or perfect strangers and looking at a blank wall supposedly representative of their agenda for the next day, or God forbid, three days, would feel nervousness. What are they going to do? How did they get into this mess? Picking up on those feelings, I say:

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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 got into this, and more importantly, how you are going to get out of it. Well, I have a promise for you. If at this moment you are looking at that wall and wondering “what on earth are we going to do for the rest of our time together?” I promise that within an hour you will be looking at that same wall and wondering “how are we going to get it all done?”



Then it is time to go 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 be given. Either or both of those can be true, but it is equally possible that the proposer is virtually ignorant on the particular subject and is looking for some people with whom to share the ignorance and develop some knowledge. My words in this part go something like,

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Raising an issue does not require that you be an expert on the subject. In fact the only thing you need to have is the question. I can't speak for you, but in my life I find that there are so many people ready to give answers to questions I have never asked or care little about. It is so nice to start with the question, my question. Questions create an open space in which good thinking can happen, so if all you have is the question, that is a great place to start. Don't worry if you have no PowerPoints, or a prepared text—just state your question, and I believe you will find that your colleagues here will join you in finding some answers that really work for you.

Taking responsibility means that the proposer will lead the session on their issue, which will be open for anybody who cares about that issue. This may be a lot of people or just a few, but the point is these are the people who cared to come. If proceedings are to be created, the convener has the additional responsibility of entering the results of the discussion into the computer, or if they are terribly cyberphobic, finding somebody else to do the chore.

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 you want to make is 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.

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Questions?

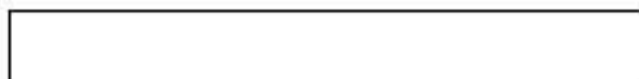
At this point, you have described the basic mechanisms of Open Space Technology, and some participants may have some questions. My advice is don't take any; keep on going. The OST mechanisms are so intuitive that even when the language of the facilitator is not the participants' native tongue there has never been any problem in understanding what needs to be done. Furthermore, once the action starts, any possible confusion is resolved by simply 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 up 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. Inasmuch as every group I have ever worked with is always sure that the process will *not* work with their group, I can safely say that the possibility of logically convincing anybody 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 business, they need to know about the four principles and the one law.

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THE 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 principles are simple statements of the way things work in Open Space. In a word, they are descriptive and not prescriptive. The fact that they may appear counterintuitive 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 offhanded way, as something that people might find helpful to keep in mind. You will find your own way of presenting The Principles and The Law, mine goes as follows:

While you are thinking about the issues for which you have a real passion, allow me to describe the Four Principles and the One Law of Open Space. Of course, if you have to think about what you have a passion for, perhaps you are not all that passionate? It is sort of like being in love. If you have to ask if you are—the high likelihood is that you aren't. Whatever—The Four Principles are...

The first principle, *Whoever comes is the right people*, reminds people, particularly 92 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 and cares about what you care about. It is probably true that they care in very different ways than you do, but that is not a problem. In fact it is a genuine advantage because it is out of the differences in points of view that new perspectives emerge, and new options are created. If we all thought exactly the same thing we would inevitably end at exactly the same place we started. But the major reason that the people who come will be the right people is that they cared to come.

When talking about the first principle, it is usually a good time to deal with the possibility that nobody will care to come for a particular group. Even though this doesn't happen often, it can be distressing to the person who is giving the party if nobody shows 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 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 be a great idea but at the wrong time. In either case, you are getting some useful information. There is, however, another possibility. It is 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 "conversation group" must be composed of more than one. As a matter of fact, some of the best conversations I have ever had occurred with me talking to myself. And by the way, when was the last time you had a large piece of time free to work on a question for which you had passion?

The second principle, *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have*, is a reminder 93 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. This principle also puts to rest what I call the "should-have-beens, could-have-beens, or might-have

beens.” An endless amount of time and energy can be wasted worrying about all the things that didn’t happen to the point that we lose sight of the incredible things that are happening right now. It is a truism but true. The past is over; the future hasn’t happened yet. All we have is NOW! So pay attention!

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 it: *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 pays 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 p.m., there 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’s over, it’s over*, offers a marvelous way to save time and 94 aggravation. Supposing, for example, that you have scheduled a meeting at 2:00 p.m. with the expectation that it should take about two hours, ending therefore at 4:00 p.m. As it turns out, all of the useful business is conducted in the first twenty 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 often rehash things that already have been done, to the point where 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’s over, it’s over,” and be on our way?

There is also a corollary to the fourth principle: *When it’s not over, it’s not over*. People need to understand that the time (and space) available is theirs to do with as they choose. If they have concluded their discussion, then it is fine to go on to something else. But if they are not finished, nobody is there to tell them to move on, particularly if things are just getting really good. Of course, they will have to respect other people who may have signed up for their meeting space. But it is no great task to move to some other place, or to choose another time when they might conveniently gather.

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The One Law

The one law is the Law of Two Feet, which says that *If, during our time together, you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet and go to some more productive place*. In deference to those who may be differently abled, the law can be redescribed as the Law of Mobility, but the intent is the same. This law may seem blunt, but it has four 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 anyone else’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. Indeed, just knowing that all participants do have the option to walk usually is sufficient to keep the egotists in line.

The second major effect of the law is to place responsibility for the quality of each person's learning and/or contribution directly where it belongs—with that person. In the final analysis, nobody can assume that responsibility for any other person, except in the case of very small children and seriously compromised individuals. 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 go on our way and do something useful. The Law of Two Feet allows for that by placing the responsibility for our actions directly on our own shoulders. Should we choose to remain in a situation where we are miserable and nonproductive, that is our option. But as our anger and disappointment grows, we need to remember exactly who is keeping us in that uncomfortable situation. We are—and if we want to make a change the means is readily available. Use the two feet!

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In addition to curbing egos and defining responsibility, the Law of Two Feet makes two 97 additional 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, and indeed one might wonder why they even bothered to come. The truth is that butterflies do very little, and therein lies their contribution. They create centers of nonaction, 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.

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Actually, butterflies do one thing—which is precisely the same thing their natural counterparts do. They are beautiful. And some passer by will be attracted by that beauty and sit down. The conversation begins.

A Final Admonition

Before everybody goes to work, there is a final admonition, *Be Prepared to Be Surprised*. Many organizations and lots of people spend considerable time trying to ensure that they will not be surprised. When this effort succeeds, a degree of comfort is doubtless experienced, but at a price. Things get pretty dull, and creativity is difficult to find. Open Space is not about being dull; innovation is the coin of the realm. Surprise, therefore, is the essence of the undertaking. So I say:

If at the end of our time together you find yourself walking out with just what you walked in with, you will have wasted your time. It is a common experience in Open Space that our precious agendas are trashed. While this experience may be painful, it is not without benefit, for when our old agendas depart, new ideas may emerge. So do yourself a favor, trash that agenda right now. Or at the very least get ready to. Be Prepared to Be Surprised!

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Time to Go to Work

Just about now in the course 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 for the group to function effectively. But in most cases, people know the rules already. After all, how much do you need to say about the operation of a community bulletin board and a village marketplace?

The important function of these moments has more to do with the creation of a safe time and space for the group to work in than with the communication of information and technique. 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.

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 to 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...." Decide when and where your group will gather, and then go post it on the wall. On the way, grab a Post-it to reserve your time and place.

You can never tell how fast people will respond, but they always do. A few may be 100 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. While I am waiting for that first group that does not respond, I must confess that I find the moment between the invitation and response to be totally delicious. I know for a fact that most first-time sponsors experience no small amount of anxiety, but their reward is virtually instantaneous and positive. And for myself, the intense expectation which permeates the room in the brief moment before the people come to the center is one of the high points of every Open Space.

Creating the Community Bulletin Board

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. Several important things are 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 directly to the number of people in the group. Groups of twenty-five to fifty will have about thirty issues; groups of one hundred to two hundred will have about seventy-five issues. Groups of more than three hundred participants will not generate a substantial increase in the number of issues. The largest number I have experienced was 236 issues with a group of two thousand.

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 if the arrangement is anonymous. Going on record, publicly, is critical to confirm commitment.

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

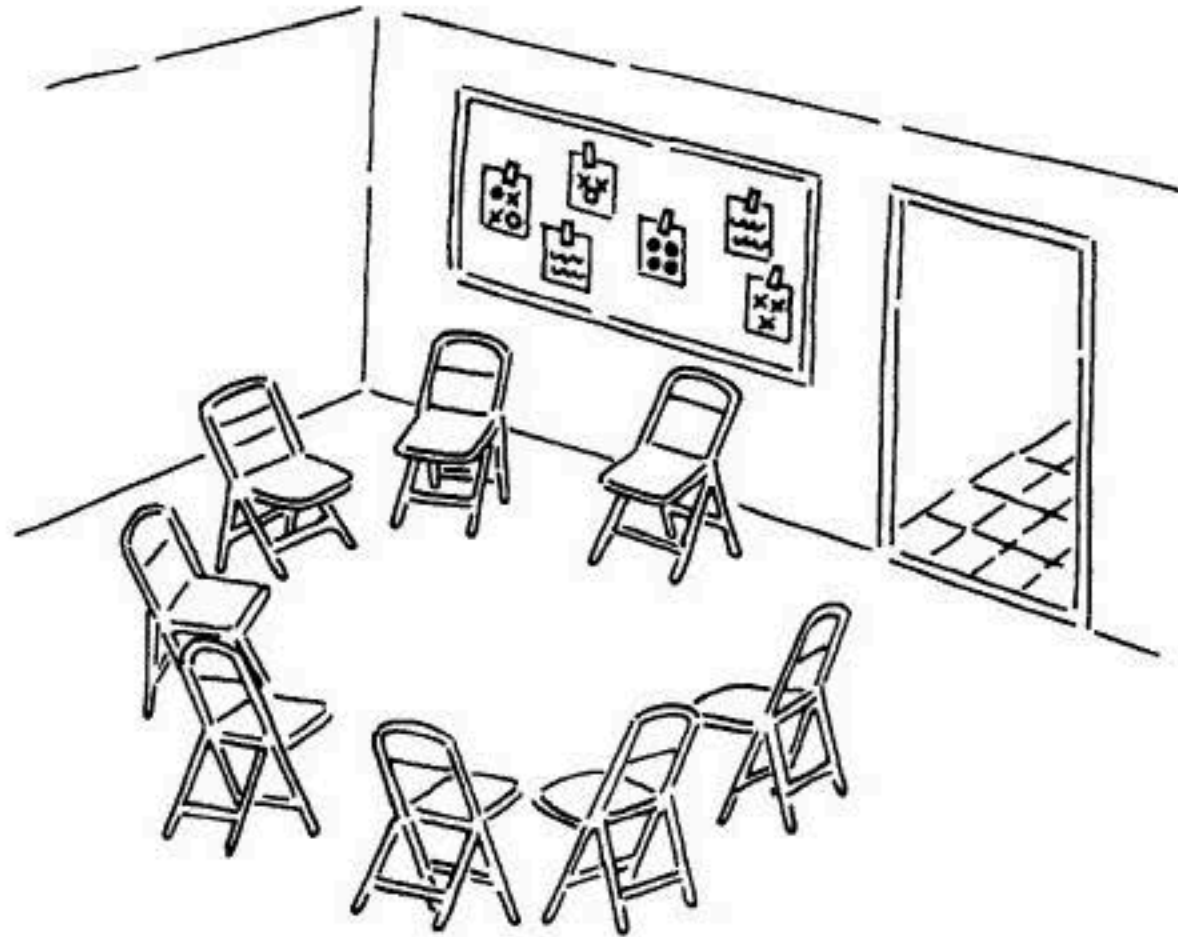
During the process of posting, remind people that nothing will appear on the wall unless 102 they put it there, for they, and they alone, are responsible for the agenda. If someone does not find his favorite issue, only he is to blame.

Toward the end, take special pains to make sure that, for whatever reason, somebody isn't hanging back and about to be left out. More often than not, just as you are sure that nobody has anything more, somebody will make a break for the center. It is extremely important that everybody has a chance, even if it means holding the group up for a few moments. After all, each person who publicly declares 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 watch 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. When you start getting a milling throng, however, 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 of this 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.

It may occur to you that arranging the issue papers by time slots (in addition to by the 103 days) could be helpful. If nothing else this would make the Community Bulletin Board look more like a traditional agenda. I would advise against this for several reasons. First, there is the practical fact that such arrangement will add yet another level of complication—when

simplicity is the order of the day. But more importantly, I have found that just as soon as everything is arranged in the “proper” order everything changes. Sessions are combined (see below) or withdrawn, and unless you (or somebody) wants to constantly tidy things up, it is a losing proposition. But the most important reason for not adding this new level of complexity is that doing so is unnecessary. Things will not only work out quite well with the generally random placement of issue papers for each day, but it is an advantage.



The advantage appears because people will sort by *meaning* and not by *time*. When 104 issues are carefully posted in each time slot, the natural tendency for participants is to fill out their “meeting card”—one meeting for every time period. And God forbid that you have an empty slot! Rather like the old Dance Cards, if it wasn’t full you were somehow a lesser person. However, if the issues are posted randomly on a given day, people will look for what they really care for, and work out the times later. Perhaps they will seek to change the times, or possibly combine sessions—or failing everything else, they will become expert Bumblebees, flitting between sessions they wish to attend. I am not sure how people do it, but even in very large Open Spaces with one hundred or more sessions, they will quickly find what they are looking for. And should they have a problem, they can always ask one of their colleagues for a little help. These chance conversations go a long way toward weaving the fabric of community. What may seem a waste of time and a bother is actually a powerful mechanism for community building.

Eventually, all good things have to come to an end, and it is time to move on to the village marketplace. At 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.

Opening the Village Marketplace

When the village marketplace is opened, everybody is invited to enter into 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. Often this part of the process is more like acknowledging a revolution already underway 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 105 two sessions, and they are scheduled at the same time. The rule is simple: the conflicted person must find the two conveners and convince them either to combine their sessions or change the time. If neither of those options will work, a choice must be made. Or of course, you can always be a bumblebee!

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. People can do exactly what they want, of course, but I always suggest that it is better to have two sessions on the same subject with ten people attending each and all having a good conversation, than one session with twenty folks, all frustrated because few have a chance to talk. And when it comes to combining sessions, the rules are the same as with conflicts: The Conveners Rule! Which is to say that if some person wishes to combine two sessions they must find the two conveners and obtain their permission. If the answer is, yes, then combine the sessions. And if, no, then the two sessions remain as originally posted.

Public Safety The last item concerns public safety. When there is a large group and it comes time to move to the wall, they do just that. Everything, and anything, in 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 and other belongings and move them out of the way. When all, or most, have reached high ground, I say something like, "People, the village marketplace is open. Go and sign up for whatever issues you wish to pursue. Enjoy yourselves. As soon as you have your groups together, go to work. I will see you for Evening News." And I leave to take a walk or more usually a nap.

In the early days, I used to preface my departure with some words like, "I am going now, 106 but if you need me I will be just down the hall." I have since learned that those words are totally gratuitous. The participants don't need me and don't care where I will be. I am the only one who is even aware that I have left. People take Open Space seriously. If you help to 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 that need to be done, as we will explore in the next chapter. But the "out front," public role of the facilitator is essentially over.

*"No day is so bad that it cannot be improved with a nap."
(Carrie Snow)*