

Open Space:

A New Way to Manage Discussions

by Anne Stadler

Open Space is a self-organizing practice of inner discipline and collective activity which releases the inherent creativity and leadership in people. By inviting people to take responsibility for what they care about, Open Space establishes reflection and learning, bringing out the best in both individuals and the whole.

When to Use It

- Where conflict is holding back the ability to change
- Where the situation is complex
- Where there is a high degree of diversity
- Where there is an urgent need to make speedy decisions

- Where all stakeholders are needed for good decisions to be made
- Where you have no preconceived notion of what the outcomes should be.

Probable Outcomes

- Builds energy, commitment and shared leadership
- Participants accept responsibility for what does or doesn't happen
- Action plans and recommendations emerge from discussions as appropriate
- You create a record of the entire proceedings as you go along.

How It Works

The *Law of Two Feet* means you take responsibility for what you care about — standing up and using your own two feet to move to whatever place you can best contribute and/or learn. Four principles apply to how you navigate in open space:

Whoever comes are the right people

Whoever is attracted to the same conversation are the people who can contribute most to that conversation — because they care. They are exactly the right ones, for the whole group, who are capable of initiating action.

Whatever happens is the only thing that could've happened

We are all limited by our own pasts and expectations. This principle acknowledges we'll all do our best to focus on NOW — the present time and place — and not get bogged down in what could've or should've happened.

When it starts is the right time

The creative spirit has its own time, and our task is to make our best contribution and enter the flow of creativity when it starts.

When it's over, it's over

Creativity has its own rhythm and so do groups. Just a reminder to pay

Open Space discussions can be held anywhere. By using the Law of Two Feet, you move to a topic that most interests you.

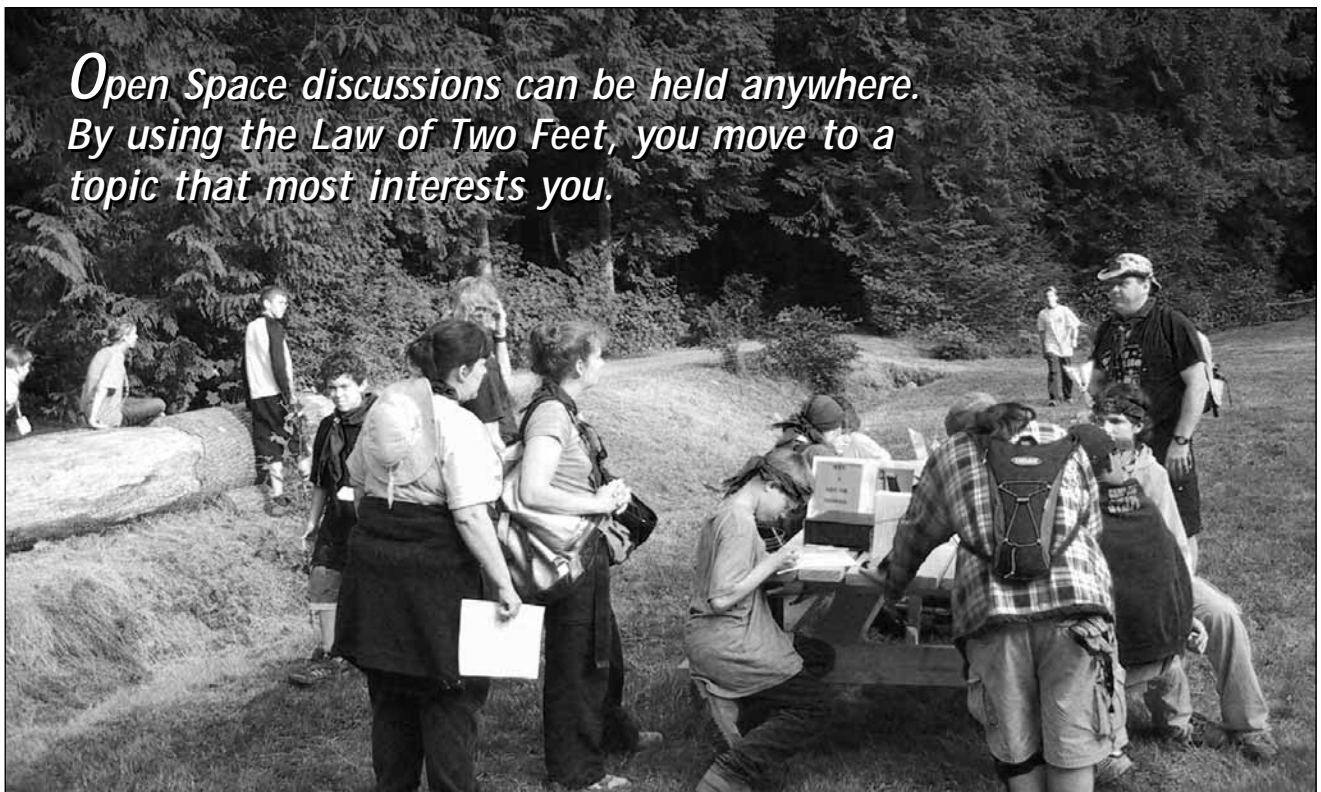


Photo: Julian Cairns

attention to the flow of creativity — not the clock. When you think it is over, ask: Is it over? And if it is, go on to the next thing you have passion for. If it's not, make plans for continuing the conversation.

How Open Space Works When There is Conflict

The Law of Two Feet gives participants freedom to move at any time to a discussion they care about. Carving creates common ground, and helps to remind participants of the higher purpose.

Setting Up an Open Space Discussion

1. Select a focusing statement or question for your gathering. It should frame the higher purpose and widest context for your discussion in a positive way.
2. Invite the circle of people: all stakeholders or all the people you'd like to have in the room. Include the theme, date, place and time of gathering in the invitation.
3. Create the circle: Set up chairs in a circle or in concentric circles, leaving space in the center. Choose a blank wall for the Agenda Wall

and label it AGENDA: AM, PM across the top. Set up a table for computers near a wall you label NEWS. Put blank sheets of newsprint (about a quarter size of a flip chart page) and colored felt pens in the center of the circle. Near the Agenda Wall and the News Wall put masking tape for people to post papers on the walls.

Open Space. Try it with your group the next time you need to make some decisions.


4. To begin the gathering: A facilitator explains the theme, the simple process the group will follow to organize and create a record, where to put things up and find out what is happening, the Law of Two Feet, and the Principles of Open Space. Then, the facilitator invites people to silently meditate on what has heart and meaning for each of them.
5. Opening the marketplace: The Facilitator invites anyone who cares about an issue to step into the middle of the circle and write the topic, their name, a time and place for meeting, announce it and post the offering on the Agenda Wall — one sheet per topic, with as many topics as he/she wants. They will be the "Conveners" (or will recruit a Convener) who have the responsibility for facilitating their session(s) and seeing to it that a report is made and shared on the News Wall.

6. When ALL offerings are concluded, the Facilitator invites people to sign up for what they are interested in by using the Law of Two Feet. Those people then move together to a suitable location to discuss the topic they signed up for.
7. People participate in discussions. One person agrees to be the "Reporter", entering discussion points in the computers and posting print-outs on the News Wall.
8. Closing Circle: Everyone reconvenes an hour before closing to share highlights, "ahas" and key learnings. Participants listen to whatever people have to offer without discussion, or you can pass a "talking stick" for each person to hold as he/she is talking.
9. Mail out whatever records are created and an address list to all who came (optional).

Editor's Note:

I was at a meeting where the Open Space concept was used to discuss national issues important to Scouting. It was very interesting to see how people gravitated to topics that were important to them, contributing to the discussion, and working together to come forth with solutions. The Reporter wrote important details down on flipchart paper, which was later posted on the NEWS wall. Each group decided together what their solutions would be to the topic, and the Convener then read them aloud during the Closing Circle. It was absolutely amazing to watch the process unfold — providing solutions to many topics in a short time frame. Try it with your group the next time you need to make some decisions. √

— Anne Stadler is a founder of the Open Space Institute of the United States and Spirited Work. To find an OST practitioner in your area, contact www.openspaceworld.org.



NOVA CRAFT CANOE


Discover why They're Canada's Most Popular Canoe for Camps and Groups.

Our Prospector Series of Royalex canoes are tough, rugged and stable for years of dependable service.

With special pricing for Scout Groups, Nova Craft Canoes are an excellent value. And they're made in Canada by people who love to paddle.

Call us at 1-866-88-CANOE, email us at info@novacraft.com or visit our website: www.novacraft.com

We also make kayaks! See them at www.aquafusion.com



NOVA CRAFT CANOE

More on Open Space

Open Space discussions work for five to five thousand people. This type of conference has no keynote speakers, no pre-announced schedules of workshops, no panel discussions, no organizational booths. Instead, sitting in a large circle, participants learn in the first hour how they are going to create their own conference. Almost before they realize it, they become each other's teachers and leaders and passionate discussions are happening throughout the room. For more information about Open Space, visit:

<http://www.chriscorrigan.com/wiki/pmwiki.php?n=Main.OpenSpaceTechnology>
<http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-Openspace.html>