

Opening Space for Emerging Order

by Harrison Owen, 1997

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Open Space Technology, as a definable approach to organizing meetings has been in existence for somewhat more than a dozen years. Truthfully, 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. It is only that our modern wisdom has obfuscated what we already knew and have experienced from the beginning. But that is getting somewhat ahead of our story.

In 1985, eighty-five brave souls, or there abouts, gathered in Monterey for The Third Annual International Symposium on Organization Transformation. The first two iterations of this continuing international event (we are now at OT16) were organized in a most traditional manner. Papers, panels, and all the rest. But the consensus of participants was, that despite monumental planning effort extending over a long time, the real excitement came in the coffee breaks. Which of course weren't planned at all. And so the Third International 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 we had a three day agenda totally planned out including multiple workshops, all with conveners, times, places and participants.

Observably, the operative mechanism was simplicity itself. 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 original proposers determined the time and place for meeting, and anybody interested in a particular topic signed up. That was it.

For several years following, the annual symposium was conducted in a similar fashion. The only real difference was that more people came and it took less time to get organized. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world that 150 (or more) executives and consultants should sit in a circle and organize a multi-session, three day

meeting in less than an hour, with not a single argument. If anybody gave it a thought, which I doubt, this miraculous occurrence was probably attributed to the outstanding nature of the assembled group.

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. Something rather strange was taking place.

In subsequent years, the space has continued to open. At this point, the experience described above has been replicated literally thousands of times on all continents with groups ranging in size from 5 to over 1000. Participants have come from Fortune 500's, third world villages, religious communities, governmental agencies, and whole towns. They have been rich, poor, educated and not, labor and management, politicians and people... and all of the above. And in each case that I know of Open Space appeared to do the job.

"Doing the Job" begs for further specificity. In the case of Open Space, it means (at the very least) that diverse, often conflicted groups up to 1000 people, manage hugely complex issues in minimal amounts of time, with no advance agenda preparation, and little, to no, overt facilitation. Typically by the conclusion of a gathering, the following promises have been kept: 1) Every issue of concern to anybody had been laid upon the table. 2) All issues were discussed to the extent that anybody cared to do that. 3) A full written record of all discussions existed and was in the hands of all participants. 4) All issues were ranked in priority order. 5) Critical "focal issues" had been isolated and Next Step actions identified for their resolution.

Also to be included under the heading of, "doing the job" are a range of manifest behaviors evidenced by the participant group. In a typical Open Space, self-managed work groups are the general mode of operations, distributed leadership the norm, and diversity is perceived as a rich resource to be cherished, as opposed to a problem to be managed. It is also usually noted that when participants treat each other with respect, conflict inevitably seems to yield deeper outcomes, and high energy --often experienced as playful, is the marked characteristic of the occasion.

It is reasonable to ask, what on earth is going on. The mere thought of inviting 500 relative strangers, united by little more than their conflict around a particular issue to join together for a three day gathering, without a shred of agenda preparation, a small army of facilitators...should be sufficient to raise eyebrows. The suggestion that something productive might occur obviously contravenes most of what we have taught and/or learned about meeting management and the care and feeding of hostile groups, and definitely qualifies as outrageous. And yet productive outcomes from unlikely quarters has been the continuing experience of groups gathered in Open Space all over the planet.

The outrageous is now common place. Somehow incipient (or actual chaos) is productive of order. Regularly.

What's the secret? Some have suggested that the Four Principles and One Law which guide behavior in Open space provide the clues. The principles are: 1)Whoever comes is “the right people”, which reminds people in the small groups 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. What is is the only thing there is at the 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. 4) Lastly, “When it's over it's over”. In a word, don't waste time. Do what you have to do, and when its 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 you two feet and move to some place more to you 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, as stated, may sound like rank hedonism, but even hedonism has its place, reminding us hat unhappy people are unlikely to be productive people.

Actually the Law of Two Feet goes rather beyond hedonistic pandering to personal desires. 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 he individual.

One of the more surprising gifts of the Law of Two Feet is the apparent contribution to conflict resolution. I say "apparent" because I have no direct evidence connecting the Law to the resolution of conflict, but it is true that intensely conflicted groups of people find effective and amicable solutions in Open Space without benefit of formal conflict resolution procedure, or even any intermediary facilitators. Apparently they do it all by themselves. By way of example consider 100+ Zulus, Haussa, Afrikaners, and Brits struggling to gain an understanding of each other as they worked to create the New South Africa. Or how about 225 federal bureaucrats, state and local bureaucrats, and Native Americans gathered to work out approaches to building roads on tribal lands. Sounds like Wounded Knee all over again, but in fact no blood was shed and the task was accomplished. So what is going on?

Truthfully, I don't know, however I suspect it is the Law of Two Feet at work. Observably, participants intensely engage up to the point that they can't stand it any more, and then exercise the Law of Two Feet. They will walk away, cool off, and come back for more. Apparently the common concern to achieve resolution keeps people together, and the law allows them to separate when things become too hot to handle.

Coming back to the original question: Why does Open Space work? - I don't think it has much to do with the Four principles or The Law of Two Feet. In fact, The Principles and The Law appear to function more descriptively than prescriptively. In other words, and as strange as it may sound, both the principles and the law simply acknowledge what people are going to do anyhow. If there is any substantive contribution derived from either principles or law, it is merely to eliminate all the guilt. After all, people are going to exercise the law of two feet, mentally if not physically, but now they do not have to feel badly about it. By the same token, meetings will start when they start, regardless of what the clock says - so why feel badly about it. Just get on with the business. Truthfully, the elimination of major pieces of guilt and blame can go a long way towards the enhancement of group function. But not far enough to explain the quantum jumps in productivity typically experienced in Open Space. Something else is going on.

That "something else" is, I believe, self-organization. Ever since Meg Wheatley published *Leadership and the New Science*, excitement around self-organization and complexity has been building. One of the oddest manifestations of this emergent interest is the number of people who have apparently dedicated themselves to the organization of self-organization. I think there is something wrong with this picture. Either there is such a thing as self-organization in which case, why bother. Or there isn't - and why bother.

I have a growing, perhaps nagging, suspicion that there is no such thing as a non-self-organizing system, at least in the natural world, which would include us. Should this be true, then much of what we are currently doing under the heading of "getting organized" is rather a waste of time, and the potential implications are fairly mind-boggling. Regardless of the accuracy of my nagging suspicion, I feel quite confident that the phenomenon of self-organization lies at the heart of Open Space.

One of the more significant players in the growing field of self-organizing systems, also known as Complex Adaptive Systems, is Stuart Kaufmann. Kaufmann is a member of the Santa Fe Institute and a biologist by training and profession. He has set for himself the modest task of figuring how life may have emerged from a rich stew of molecules, way back when. The details are contained in his 1995 book, *At Home in the Universe* (Oxford). Admittedly, he is a biologist, working with biological systems, and therefore somewhat removed from the realm of human systems. I am by no means sufficiently expert to judge the validity of his findings, although his colleagues seem to take him quite seriously. In any event, scattered amongst some very esoteric biology and interesting mathematics are what I take to be Kaufmann's understanding of the essential pre-conditions for self-organization. Nowhere does he state them exactly as I will, but I do think I have the flavor.

The essential preconditions are: 1) A relatively safe nutrient environment. 2) High levels of diversity and complexity in terms of the elements to be self-organized. 3) Living at the edge of chaos, in a word nothing will happen if everything is sitting like a lump. 4) An inner drive towards improvement, hence if you are an atom it would be useful to get together with another atom to become a molecule. 5) Scarcity of connections. This one is a little hard to visualize and was a real surprise to me. Kaufmann is suggesting that self-organization will only occur if there are few prior connections between the elements; indeed he says no more than two. In retrospect, it seems to make sense. If everything is hardwired in advance how could it self organize?

Kaufmann's preconditions for self-organization in no way prove that Open Space works. But there is no need for that as people all over the world, in thousands of situations, know that it works. Indeed the fact that it works seems to be the problem, eliciting the natural question, why? It is in answer to that question that I find Kaufmann's observations most intriguing.

The intrigue derives in part from the similarity of what Kaufmann is saying and what I have said for almost a dozen years when asked what are the appropriate conditions for using Open Space. My answer has been: Open Space is appropriate in any situation where there is a real business issue to be solved marked by High levels of complexity, in terms of the issues to be resolved, High levels of Diversity in terms of the people needed to solve it, High levels of conflict (potential or actual), and there is a Decision time of yesterday. Given these conditions, Open space is not only appropriate, but always seems to work.

Without going through a point by point comparison, I would like to believe that Kaufmann and I are looking at pretty much the same phenomenon, albeit in very different realms. And of course, that phenomenon is the process of self-organization. The one thing I missed, but Kaufmann saw, is the necessity for scarcity of connections. I had noticed, however, that groups with a long standing history of association took to Open Space at a marginally slower rate than groups only recently come together. I suspect that the difference may be traced to the scarcity of prior connection.

So if Kaufmann and I are looking at the same elephant, where do we go from here? The answer, I think, lies in a curious phrase which appears mantra-like throughout Kaufmann's work: "Order for Free." Given the reality of self-organization, the presence of order is no mystery, nor the product of great struggle, it is only what one might expect. In short, order is for free!

Switching from the world of biological systems to the very different world of corporations and other human systems, supposing that order is for free there too? If true, this would mean that most, perhaps all of our current activities dedicated to system design, re-design and the like, were suspect, and quite possibly unneeded. Talk about paradigm shift and turning the world on its head!

Now back to Open Space. If it turns out that the global experience of thousands of people in an open space environment is something other than a massive aberration, it would seem that self-organization in the realm of human systems was an every day occurrence. It is in this light that I choose to view the significance of Open Space Technology. It is not about having better meetings, although that certainly takes place. It is about experiencing the mystery and power of self-organization to the end that we might learn to be at home in this rather strange, possibly new, universe (to borrow the title of Kaufmann's book).

And we have a lot to learn. But our learnings will not be of the sort we have experienced in the past. No longer will it be necessary to learn the fundamentals of self-managed work groups, empowered and distributed leadership, community building, and appreciation of diversity as a resource and not as a problem to be managed. All of these things apparently happen as natural acts in an Open Space environment. We might of course, learn to do them better, but when the essential conditions of self-organizations are met, all of the above just seems to happen, almost in spite of ourselves.

And there is a further learning, all about control. We have been taught forever it seems, that the essence of management is control, and if you are out of control, you are out of a job. Not terribly long ago, the function of management was described as making the plan, managing to the plan, and meeting the plan. All of that adds up to control. It now turns out that we can make any plan we want to, but managing to that plan is an act of frustration, and meeting that (original) plan is not only impossible, but probably inadvisable. Worst of all (perhaps best of all) it turns out that the systems we are supposed to control, to say nothing of the environment in which they exist, are so horribly complex as to defy comprehension. And what you can't comprehend is very difficult to control.

The lesson from Open Space is a simple one. The only way to bring an Open Space gathering to its knees is to attempt to control it. It may, therefore, turn out that the one thing we always wanted (control) is not only unavailable, but unnecessary. After all, if order is for free we could afford being out of control and love it. Emergent order appears in Open Space when the conditions for self-organization are met. Perhaps we can now relax, and stop working so hard.