

Preparing for an “Open Space” Day

OVERVIEW

Open space is a process by which participants create their own conference by sharing their own passionate interests and curiosities.

A conference board, with times and places is created on a wall, but it is empty of content. Through the open space process the sessions are filled with topics the participants are passionate about. The conveners merely declare the over all conference theme.

Everyone is invited to create, and host a session of their own choice which reflects the overall conference theme. Hosting a session does not mean you are the expert on that topic. It simply means you want to discuss that topic with other colleagues that are also interested in it, to learn from and with one another, to form possible coalitions or simply to hear different ideas and points of view other than your own.

For example, the theme of the day might be **Making Our CCM’s More Effective**. If I were a participant, I might wish to host a session on “Improving Communication among members of a CCM” or “Monitoring and Evaluating Projects”, etc. At the beginning of the day I would write down my topic area on a piece of chart pad paper. Then I would have a chance to stand up and announce my topic and briefly explain my intentions. Next I would select the time and place for the session I wanted to host and hang my piece of chart pad paper on the wall in the designated space. Everyone would have an opportunity to do the same thing. The intention is not that every person come up with their own individual topic. This may occur, but it is important that there are some non-hosting participants to attend the sessions in order to develop partnerships, and/or build coalitions around an idea or topic.

Once the topics are presented and placed up on the conference board on the wall, all the conference participants go to the wall and sign up for the sessions they are interested in by writing their name or placing a sticky dot on the meetings they wish to attend. In some cases, several people who are hosting sessions may have a similar topic area and decide to combine their meetings. Some people may decide to host a session and have no one sign up for their session. That is just part of the process.

Sometimes people want to attend one session which conflicts with another session of interest. Then they would commence a negotiation with the session hosts to try to relocate one of the sessions. When this is complete or when the time for this process is up, the open space meeting begins. A bell will signal the end the hours, but sessions may end early or go late.

People are totally on their own once process begins – free to participate in this as they choose. They can attend the sessions they originally chose or not. They can decide to

leave a session in the middle and go to another. They can choose to not attend any sessions and sit in the sun; or meet with a person for a conversation; or sleep.

These choices are based on the **open space principles**:

1. Whoever comes are the right people
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened
3. Whenever it starts is the right time
4. When it's over, it's over

The Process

We will . . .

1. Write topic statements, location of the session and your name on flip chart paper. Also indicate if it is a one or two hour session. Place your paper in time slot you would like to host the discussion.
2. Stand up one at a time to briefly state and describe your topic
3. Have time for negotiations for changing session times or combining sessions.
4. Sign up for sessions.
5. Begin the first round of sessions at the same time.
6. At the end of the day have 1one hour to debrief the experience, share what was learned and complete the day.

Open space is meant to be free, open and a little chaotic. It is meant to give us the optimum chance to be in dialogue about topics that really interest us – to design our own conference.