

What is OST?

Open Space Technology (OST) is a specific technique to format a group meeting, retreat or conference from 5 to 1,000 participants. Advanced by Harrison Owen, OST is appropriate in any situation where there is a real, pressing business issue marked by high levels of:

- ♦ *Complexity*, in terms of the issues to be resolved
- ♦ *Diversity* in terms of the numbers and talents of people needed to solve the issue
- ♦ Actual or potential *conflict* and/or *passion* about the topic
- ♦ *Stakeholder involvement* throughout the organization needed to implement solutions
- ♦ *Uncertainty* in the “answer” or solution
- ♦ *Urgency* in that answers and actions are needed as soon as possible.

Outcomes

The entire system is collaboratively engaged in the process, inspiring energy, commitment and shared leadership. Participants are more creative and innovative in their approaches and they accept responsibility for what does (or does not) happen in the room. Communication is self-managed and connections are forged and reinforced for continued action and communication, even after the event.

Specifically, by the conclusion of a three-day OST gathering,

- ♦ Every issue of concern to any participant is identified and recognized by the group
- ♦ All issues are discussed to the extent that anyone cares to engage in a conversation
- ♦ A full written record of all discussions is created and in the hands of the participants prior to the conclusion of the event
- ♦ All issues are ranked in priority order
- ♦ Critical issues are identified and next steps/actions identified for resolution

OST Assumptions

- ♦ People are creative, synergistic and self-motivated. If this type of behavior is not desired during the event and beyond, OST is not for you or the organization.
- ♦ There is a concrete, business issue of passionate concern to those who will be involved.
- ♦ Keep it simple (KISS). OST is an “organic” approach to group dynamics. Where many meetings are about control, OST assumes that people will (and they never let us down) self-manage their activities, given a few guidelines.

Participants

If possible, invite the whole system - all who will be affected. Whoever cares about the business issue will come. You are looking for volunteers from diverse levels, functions and perspectives, *not* prisoners. Note: Give them every opportunity to see that participation is their best interest and to understand the implications of their absence.

Set Up

- ♦ Large room with chairs in a circle, markers/tape/Post-its® in center
- ♦ One large, unobstructed wall
- ♦ Several break-out *spaces*
- ♦ Snacks/beverage service table
- ♦ Computer station (optional)
- ♦ Wireless handheld microphone for groups over 75

Ground Rules

- ♦ 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 law of two feet
- ♦ Be prepared to be surprised

Duration

OST can be done in four different formats: 1/2 day; one, two or three full days, depending on the desired outcomes.

Process - Day 1

Speakers/programmatic activities (only if you must)
Welcome
Focus the group
State the theme
Describe the process/set positive expectations
Create the community bulletin board
Open the village marketplace
Intense discussion
Record results

Process - Day 2 (optional)

Intense discussion
Record results
Compile final report

Process - Day 3 (optional)

Review the final report/discuss meaning and intent
Individually prioritize the issues with a ballot/dots
Tally the ballots/dots
Converge related issues
Create action plans
Discuss next steps
Closure

Recommended Resource

Owen, Harrison. **Open Space Technology: A User's Guide.** 2nd Ed. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1997. ISBN 1-57675-024-8