

# Open Space TECHNOLOGY

As part of A New Direction's Space for Change we present a beginner's guide to Open Space Technology (OST) as a non-hierarchical, direct, collaborative tool for dialogue.

## History of OST

Harrison Owen developed the method in the early 1980s as an alternative to pre-planned conferences having found that some of the richest dialogue happens in tea breaks. It can be for groups of 5-2,000 working around a central theme of strategic importance.

## Why OST?

Inspired by A New Directions' encouragement to 'use what you have' and holding the weight of a crumbling world as a backdrop, this participatory, inclusive and collaborative approach to dialogue is adaptable, easy to use and produces unpredictable responses.

## How to run OST: Before the session

- Identify a question/provocation that is of central strategic importance
- Choose a venue that can comfortably hold participants and simultaneous discussions
- Send invites with the central question and ask participants to bring their ideas, views and something to write with
- Source the materials you will need for running the space, including a grid for the agenda (whiteboard, wall space or slides) and a way of indicating which spaces different discussions will take place in.

## How to run OST: On the day

**Step 1: Welcome** Facilitator welcomes attendees into the space and they all sit in a circle for introductions. Facilitator leads an ice-breaker exercise. Here are 2 examples:

Introduce these prompts one-by-one, giving people time to note down their responses after each. Record 5 things you can see, 4 you can hear, 3 you can feel, 2 you can taste, 1 you can smell. Then compare your answers with your neighbour. *Benefits: encourages identifying things in common, starts conversations, grounds us in the space.*

Draw a self-portrait with your non-dominant hand over background music lasting 3-4 minutes. After the music stops, exchange reflections about the exercise with others in the group. *Benefits: challenges people to do something outside their comfort zone and get brave, sets the tone.*

## Step 2: Sharing the process

- Define what Open Space Technology is and briefly introduce what we are doing.

- Explain that we are about to co-create an agenda together with everyone invited to submit their views, provocations and ideas for discussion topics.
- Explain where the different locations for different topics are and how the space is set up.
- Point out the breakout space which can be used by anyone anytime.
- Introduce the 4 principles of OST, which are:
  1. Whoever comes are the **right people**
  2. Whenever it starts is the **right time**
  3. Whatever happens is **the only thing that could have happened**
  4. When it's over it's over
- Introduce the 1 law of OST, the law of mobility, which we suggest reframing as '**the right to come and go**'. If you find yourself in a situation where you are neither learning or contributing, go somewhere you can. You don't need to explain or excuse yourself.

### Step 3: Producing an agenda

An OST agenda starts as a grid of times and locations with blank boxes that will be filled with topics. Invite participants to offer their discussion topics/questions and add them to the agenda until it is filled. Below is an example agenda partway through being completed where the central question/provocation is: *How do we promote equity in creative career pathways for the next generation?*

	Space 1	Space 2	Space 3
14:00	1. Getting paid	2.	3.
14:20	4.	5. Creative careers	6.
14:40	7.	8.	9. Equitable leadership

- Once the agenda is complete give everyone time to read it and identify where they will start the session and might like to go next.
- Share the signal that you will be using to indicate when everyone in the room is invited to move from one topic to another, it might be a bell or another sound, but make sure everyone knows what it will sound like and what it is telling them. Remind the group that moving on from existing conversations is not compulsory when they hear the sound.

### Step 4: Exploring the Open Space

- At the agreed start time people will move to the sessions they want to begin at.
- People may take notes on the main points and any actions, but otherwise the session can be structured informally and led by the principles and law of OST outlined above.
- Participants will enact their right to come and go, moving to where they feel they can learn or contribute

### Step 5: Closing the circle

The facilitator brings participants back to the starting circle and invites everyone to reflect on their experience of OST and to share them with the group. Possible prompts for exchange:

*Did anything that happened surprise you?*

*What is your key takeaway from today?*