

## **CBODN's OD-ICD SIG**

### **"Confessions of a Heretic: Opening Space for Peace"**

**Harrison Owen**

**November 11, 2010, 6:30 to 9:00 pm**

**Carey School of Business, Johns Hopkins University**

#### **Summary Report with Major Discussion Themes**

### **Overview**

Twenty-six participants were present from diverse backgrounds. Kristen Barney, SIG Leader, provided an overview of the SIG Mission and Principles, and introduced Harrison Owen, originator of Open Space Technology.

### **Harrison's Introductory Statements**

Three conclusions:

- › All systems are open: there's no such thing as control; management theory is out the window.
- › All systems are self-organizing: organizations will evolve or die; analyzing is futile.
- › Everything's moving: organizations are in a constant state of flux.

A story

Harrison told a story about a multi-day Open Space he facilitated in Rome in a beautiful location with indoor and outdoor spaces for the work. The participants were fifty Palestinians and Israelis who may have been ordering each other dead before the meeting. The focus was "ending the cycle of violence."

Even in such a heated arena, Harrison stuck to the principles of Open Space Technology, and trusted the process, guiding and intervening very little. He began by setting up the Open Space:

- 1) Identifying the issue: ending the cycle of violence.
- 2) Creating a bulletin board where participants could post topics they cared about
- 3) Opening the marketplace, to let participants choose the topics/groups they would join
- 4) Inviting the participants to go into groups to begin their conversations.

While the tones of voice were confrontational for a while, Harrison remained confident that the participants could work it out, and made no interventions. By 5 pm there was a peaceful calm, and nobody had died. The participants had done it all themselves.

Overnight there must have been a bombing or assassination that the participants heard about, because the atmosphere was tense, hot, and intense. Nevertheless, the process went on, and the participants went into groups for discussions on new or continued topics. By the end of the day there were two large groups set apart from each other in the middle of a green field. Harrison went and sat on the ground between the two groups, and just sat there.

During the "Evening News" portion of the Open Space process that evening, a time to talk and reflect on the day, Harrison spoke the Persian Poet Rumi's phrase, which goes something like: "there's a place beyond right and wrong: I'll meet you there." He said, "Today's a day of choosing. You can keep going or go home." An hour later, the participants were all sitting in a circle, and Harrison invited them to each

share where they were at. He handed the group an olive branch – not an insignificant symbol in the Middle East – from a nearby tree to use as a Talking Stick in the Native American tradition. When one has the talking stick, one may talk; others listen. Two and a half hours of intense sharing ensued. Then came a moment when a Senior Rabbi from Jerusalem stood with a Senior Imam from Rome. The Imam spoke after looking each person in the eyes, saying: “The Koran teaches, ‘if you kill one, you kill the world; if you save one, you save the world.’ We have a lot of work to do.” The Imam and the Rabbi stood up, held hands, and hugged and kissed.

Harrison reported that his total face time with the participants was 10-20 minutes total. He never intervened; he did nothing. He estimates that Open Space has been used 140,000 to 300,000 times in 140 countries, with as few as 5 participants and as many as 3,000.

### **SIG Participant Reactions and Questions**

Following Harrison’s introduction, he invited the SIG participants to move into small groups to reflect on, “what did I hear, what did I want to hear, and/or what did I not hear” or similar questions. After about twenty minutes, he invited the participants to either continue in small groups or to reassemble into a large group for a question-and-answer session. After about 10 minutes, the participants self-organized back into a large group. Participant questions for Harrison, with his responses, were as follows:

*How do you offer the invitation for an Open Space? How do you set the stage?*

I love the word invitation. With real invitations, they are not commands. You can refuse them. I make the invitation for anyone who cares about X to come discuss it. Open Space works because of the power of self-organizing, a principle that has been operating for 13.7 billion years. We tend to get resistance to change efforts because most of what we do (e.g., management) doesn’t need to be done. When you have the juxtaposition of passion and responsibility, then you have leadership. In complexity terminology, passion is a “strange attractor” in a system.

*Under what conditions is Open Space not successful?*

Here are the initiating conditions for an Open Space:

- › There’s a real business issue, something people care seriously about.
- › There are high levels of complexity.
- › No one group could get their hands around it.
- › There is a high level of diversity.
- › There is an obvious amount of passion and conflict. Conflict means people care.
- › There is a decision time. It needs to be done yesterday; there’s a sense of urgency.

Stuart Kauffman of Santa Fe wrote a book called *At Home in the Universe*. He researched how life happened. He concludes life is the result of a self-organizing system: the Earth. He wrote about the preconditions for life, and coincidentally, they are the same as mine for Open Space.

*What is the lasting impact today from the Palestinian-Israeli Open Space?*

There were some powerful relationships established. Except for small groups of twos and threes, the participants never met again. They didn’t want it known that they had met. The myth and culture of the near Middle East has been like this since 5,000 years ago. Open Space is not going to end conflict in the Middle East.

We can also note what didn't happen - no violent conflict, no dissolution of the process. We created a safe space for the meeting. Something similar happened in Jerusalem at the Ambassador Hotel run by a man named Sammy. It became a safe space. A large proportion of the key peace meetings have taken place there.

We have to think again: what do we mean by peace? It is not just the absence of conflict. Peace is a convergence of flows. If we get rid of chaos, we get rid of life. Confusion is the leading edge of wisdom.

Conflict turns bad ideas into things with respectability. We can stop peacekeeping sometimes and open space so parties can heal themselves, which may involve conflict. The body is a self-healing system. Medicine can help so the body's self-healing can kick in. We are too fast to intervene.

*If you didn't do much, why did they fly you over to Rome?*

› *Doing nothing*

I tell them it's all in the book and they can do it themselves, and I will charge them a lot of money to come, but they still invite me. What am I doing when I'm doing nothing? I pick up coffee cups. I've been known to run copies. I intentionally do nothing.

And, I do prepare for being in a meditative space. If there is a 9 am start time for the Open Space, I am up at 3 am doing seated and walking meditation. By 9 am I am as fully present as I can be. Open Space is an ongoing meditative experience.

› *Observing the nonverbal*

To operate effectively one needs to learn stuff that has nothing to do with words. It's easier to work with a group of 2,000 people where I can't speak the language, because 95% of communication is nonverbal. Usually facilitation is verbal, and that's missing the action. The way to alert oneself to the nonverbal world is to meditate and take long walks.

› *Key facilitation skills*

Here are some questions to ask oneself as a facilitator when observing nonverbal behavior. In the moment, when you are in the center of 1,500 people, stop talking. Stand anywhere in the group and ask yourself:

- 1) What's the dance? A group will have an ebb and flow. It will be circular, or split into groups. There is a dance. Example: In a sports dome in Seattle we filmed a 48-hour Open Space in real time with 1,000 participants wearing colored tee-shirts according to their roles (e.g., teachers in red, students in blue). Then we compressed the film to 5 minutes. It became a fractal, and we could do the math on it. Since Open Space generates reports on outcomes, we could do a sociometric study based on the compressed film (a fractal) and the reports. Looking at the dance a high level, you can key into the patterns of the whole group.
- 2) What's the smell? The nose is an acute sense organ. You can smell a thunderstorm. You can smell fear and exhilaration. There is a layering of dance and smell.
- 3) What's the color? During the Open Space, go somewhere and close your eyes. It's better than the aurora borealis. Close your eyes and you will see color. There is joy in learning to operate at the subtle level.

› *What to do with this nonverbal information*

The interpretive mechanism is intuitive. I always take a nap. I am never disconnected from the people. Your intuition will take you out of bed. But usually we ignore intuition. It's not nothing.

You have to listen to your intuitive capacity. Doing something helpful for an Open Space might be going to some place. During the Palestinian-Israeli Open Space, I had the sense to go somewhere, and ended up sitting between the two groups. As the groups broke up, many stopped by and said, "thanks for sitting there." I grounded them, and allowed them to do what they needed to do.

› *What about violence?*

Peacekeeping is necessary. A body can get cancer. Humans get messed up. But when it's over with, and hopefully that's quickly, we need to open space as quickly as possible to let the healing begin. There was an Open Space that took place half on the Gaza Strip and half on the West Bank. It went back and forth for four days. The intuition is to close space down. That is 180 degrees the wrong way. We have to make an attractive invitation. Amazing things happen in circles.

Here is an example from South Africa. A 20-year old kid who couldn't spell, from the township Khayelitsha, put up a topic: "Fear: how we change it to something else." Desmond Tutu and the Mayor of Cape Town were there. The place was electric. The drumming started, and then intense silence. Someone said, "We are the New South Africa, and we have a lot of work to do." I've never seen physical violence in an Open Space.

Example from the American West. There were 220 people meeting on building roads on tribal lands. One-third of the participants were federal bureaucrats; one-third were state bureaucrats; and one-third were Native Americans. A Navajo said: "White man, what took you so long? I have known and disliked you for many years. For the first time, I feel respected and listened to."

*How do you convince people to do an Open Space?*

As far as inviting people, usually you can't keep them away. You don't have to "get" people to attend."

*In regard to your three conclusions (see above) how do you get an organization going together in the same direction? And different participant asked: I understand you to say that change does not come from the top, but from all levels. How does it work when there are few seeds for change and resistance is ready to explode?*

*Efficiency*

Given the space the groups will do that themselves. Here are two stories:

- 1) German Psychiatrists. A large group of German psychiatrists met in circus tents with twenty-minutes to post their issues. They held 236 sessions over an eight hour period – a remarkable number of sessions.
- 2) AT&T. AT&T was designing a building for the Olympic pavilion in Atlanta in 1996. They had spent 10 months for design and well along with the design work. Then they suddenly had the opportunity to locate the building in the center of the pavilion. They liked that idea because of the exposure AT&T would get, but had only 6 months to build the building. Twenty-three experts showed up for an Open Space to design the building, and 2 days later they stopped. They got further ahead in those 2 days than in the previous months, the building was aesthetically better, and they still liked each other!

If you could tell you boss you'd get a 15,000% improvement in efficiency (2 days instead of 10 months), wouldn't that be motivating? We are doing stuff that doesn't need to be done. We are sub-optimizing.

### *Moving forward together*

How to synthesize and move logistics forward? Some ideas generated will be bad ideas, and those fall away. A strategic plan is often done before you leave the room. I leave the last half-day to look over everything that has been done. People chose what they want to carry forward. There are kiosks all around the hall. Co-conspirators select the immediate next steps. There are three categories of actions:

- 1) Do it – move it forward.
- 2) Talk about it – we need more information.
- 3) Clear as mud – we need to do another Open Space. It's an iterative process.

I hope to get rid of strategic planning. We need real time ongoing organization development processes.

#### *What applications of Open Space have there been for difficult issues such as disease or trafficking?*

Harrison may not have addressed this question specifically, but one story he told addresses it to some degree:

The taxi drivers in a South African port area were shooting each other. There was an open space that brought together a whole mess of different people to talk about the economic future of the place. Who would have thought to bring together taxi drivers who were shooting each other with lots of other people? When the diversification goes up, the conflict is spread out. It's diminished, but it's still there. When you open space widely, and invite anyone who cares, ASAP, things can get resolved. The issue was a nonissue or misunderstanding, but they were killing each other.

### **Conclusion**

Harrison says, "Open Space works, but don't take my word for it. Try it yourself." His books outline the simple instructions for hosting an Open Space and share lots of case stories both in business and in broader community efforts such as the Palestinian-Israeli example.

Visit the Open Space Community at: [openspaceworld.org](http://openspaceworld.org), and Harrison's personal web site (with book references) at: [ho-image.com](http://ho-image.com).