# Open Space

½ day
to 3 days

20 to 1,000
people

Average

## RESOURCES REQUIRED

### MATERIALS:
- Large room that can accommodate all the participants;
- Large room that can be divided into separate areas;
- Chairs (more chairs than people);
- Paper;
- Large sheets of paper (ideally, flip charts);
- Pencils;
- Tape;
- "Post-it" notes; and
- Beverages and food.

### HUMAN RESOURCES:
- One or more facilitators.

## SUMMARY

The Open Space technique is a way of hosting meetings to discuss simple or complex issues in an informal way that resembles coffee breaks. This technique is based on the concepts of self organization and purpose-driven leadership. The participants create the agenda by suggesting topics that relate to a specific issue and discuss these topics to identify solutions to which the entire group will adherer.

### Strengths ⇧
- Works in communities with limited resources;
- Works in situations that are chaotic and conflict-ridden;
- Gives participants a lot of freedom in the process;
- Encourages initiative and creativity;
- Fairly rapid approach;
- Can accommodate a large number of participants;
- Encourages dialogue;
- Ensures co construction of knowledge; and
- Ensures great flexibility.

### Weaknesses ⇩
- Not useful if the vision is already clear or has already been identified;
- Risk of bias by secretaries and organizers;
- Apparent lack of structure because there is no real leader (participants self-organize);
- Requires significant openness on the part of organizers and participants; and
- Facilitator must be able to adapt easily.

Information
Consultation
**INVOLVEMENT**
Collaboration
Empowerment

## OBJECTIVES

The objective of the Open Space technique is to promote dialogue among a group of people in order to identify potential solutions that could lead to a consensus or a "joint" project. It makes it possible to balance conflicting interests and achieve a consensus among the individuals, social groups or stakeholders involved in the change process.

## **WHEN** TO USE

This technique works best with a diverse group of participants (individuals, civil society economic sector and audience), to achieve nuanced, varied and debated solutions to address the issues. Although the diverse opinions can be a source of friction, this technique is effective when the potential for conflict is high, the vision is vague, the work to be done is complex and there is limited time for the exercise. The Open Space technique is effective in mobilizing stakeholders when it is well facilitated and dialogue leads to participative planning and the establishment of working groups on the topics identified during the activity.

## **BEFORE** THE ACTIVITY

### Estimated preparation time: 8 to 10 hours

#### 1- Logistics and preparing the rooms
Because this technique is based on self-organization, there is no pre-set agenda. Nonetheless, it is a good idea to establish an organizing committee whose role it is to identify the general issue to be addressed and to ensure that the activity runs smoothly. The organizers must reserve a room that is large enough to accommodate all the participants at the start and end of the activity and during the plenary sessions, and a room that can be divided into separate "breakout" spaces that will allow simultaneous discussions to take place in sub groups. For large Open Space meetings, there may be one large room and several smaller rooms. The rooms look more like coffee-break rooms than classrooms. The  organizers must purchase the necessary materials (paper, pencils, etc.), as well as refreshments and coffee. They will also send out invitations to community members.

The ambiance for this exercise is very important. The organizers should set up the room several hours before the activity—ideally, the night before. They should put up posters for the coffee break area, a community bulletin board and other relevant information, including table numbers. As far as the bulletin board is concerned, the organizers set up a schedule containing the meeting place (table number) and time to meet on large sheets of paper or on a board. These sheets are posted on a wall where everyone can consult them without getting in the way of the other participants. Lastly, the organizers must provide paper and pencils for the participants. For the plenary session, the chairs are arranged in a circle.

#### 2- Facilitator
The organizers must choose a facilitator whose job it will be to explain the Open Space principles. Although the facilitator must be somewhat familiar with this type of self-organization exercise, he/she has an important role to play in the plenary sessions. The facilitator explains how the technique works, breaks the ice, creates a climate of collaboration, ensures that everyone is participating, answers questions, etc. Ideally, the organizers should choose someone who has experience in using the Open Space technique.

## ACTIVITY

### 1. Explanation

To ensure that all the participants are on equal footing and to create a climate of openness, the facilitator invites everyone to take a seat and provides instructions and key explanations regarding the Open Space technique. The facilitator encourages the participants to become aware of their environment and of the people who are in the circle with them, and explains the purpose of the exercise (political, environmental, economic and democratic issues, etc.). He/she then introduces the theme of the Open Space event, which is formulated as a question. The theme is usually based on one or more issues facing the community. The facilitator explains the four principles and one law that guide the Open Space technique (15 minutes):

### Guiding Principles of Open Space

**"Whoever comes in is [sic] the right people":** Every participant can contribute to the conversation; no one is excluded;

**"Whatever happens is the only thing that could have":** The organizers will not intervene in the discussions;

**"Whenever it starts is the right time":** The organizers will not set out a strict schedule; the participants will decide when to start a conversation;

**"When it's over, it's over":** The time needed to explore a topic cannot be determined in advance. One topic may run its course before another.

**"Law of mobility (Law of Two Feet)":** If at any time during our time together you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet, go someplace else.

### 2. Plenary session

While still in the large circle, the participants plan out the agenda by proposing discussion topics based on the question asked by the facilitator. Participants who wish to suggest a topic are invited to step into the middle of the circle, and write the proposed topic and their name on a piece of paper that they will then post on the community bulletin board known as the "marketplace". They will then introduce themselves and present their topic out loud to the rest of the group. Each suggestion is discussed. It is recommended that similar topics not be grouped together without the permission of the originator. If there is no more space on the bulletin board and there are still participants who want to add topics, new breakout spaces can be created or permission can be sought to combine topics. The only proviso for suggesting a topic is to agree to remain at the table for the full duration of the discussion. During the plenary session, the facilitator determines the time allocated based on the size of the group (45 minutes to 2 hours).

### 3. Marketplace

Once the topics have been identified and the schedule has been established, the marketplace is opened. The participants go to the marketplace to consult the community bulletin boards, choose topics of interest to them and write them down. The participants responsible for the first topics are invited to go to their breakout space. They can refer to the "post-it" they placed on the bulletin board if they need to be reminded where to meet. (20 minutes)

## ACTIVITY

### 4. Breakout sessions

A signal is given to mark the start of the first breakout session. The participants are invited to move to their first choice of discussion topics. These topics will become self-organized sub-working groups. Depending on size, they can be divided into several sections. Since the groups are self-organized, there is no moderator. However, the individual who proposed the topic must introduce it and initiate the discussion. Moreover, each sub-group must appoint one or more secretaries to take notes of the points raised and the discussions in general, to ensure follow-up. These individuals must remain neutral and unobtrusive throughout the process.

Participants may move to a different discussion group or take a break at any time. Moreover, if individuals are not learning anything and not contributing to the group, they should move to another group. No one is obliged to speak; however, even if participants choose not to speak, they must contribute by learning something new. The breakout session ends when the specified time has elapsed and another signal is given. A group may decide to end sooner if the topic has run its course or no one is left in the group. Conversely, if the participants wish to pursue the discussion, the group can move to another area or arrange to meet again at another time. Subsequent breakout sessions work in the same way. (Time for breakout sessions varies, depending on the total time allotted for the Open Space activity. One-hour segments are recommended).

### 5. Closing circle

The organizers must allow sufficient time at the end of the event to effectively wrap up. All the participants gather in a closing circle to share the findings, proposals and consensuses of the various breakout sessions. It is suggested that participants be asked to share one idea or key element they have taken away from this activity. All opinions are welcome in the Open Space. It is recommended that the organizers reiterate the purpose of this technique to show that the reflection and dialogue that took place will yield concrete results. It is possible, for example, to propose concrete actions, a subsequent activity or the creation of working groups during the closing circle. If the Open Space meeting lasts more than one day, announcements can also be made at this time. (45 minutes to 2 hours)

## AFTER THE ACTIVITY

The main outcome expected from an Open Space meeting is a series of possible solutions identified by the participants during the discussions. These solutions can then be implemented to remedy a given situation. The notes taken by the sub-group secretaries will be used to prepare a final report that will be sent to all the participants.

## PITFALLS TO AVOID

- The biases of the organizers and facilitators could bias the results;
- Not adequately advertising the activity and ending up with too few participants;
- Choosing a time when the participants are pre-occupied (Night of a hockey game, start of the hunting/fishing season, etc.);
- Poor logistical planning;
- Discarding conclusions if they don't reflect the initial topic;
- If the principles explained at the outset are not applied, one or more participants could take control of the discussion and message.

## OPEN SPACE IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF RIVIÈRE-AU-TONNERRE

In November 2011, the Open Space technique was used in the North Shore municipality of Rivière-au-Tonnerre as part of a support project for communities dealing with coastal risks. The event was organized by the Agence de la santé et des services sociaux (ASSS) de la Côte-Nord in partnership with the Coastal Communities Challenges—Community-University Research Alliance (CCC-CURA). The activity, which focussed on shoreline erosion, took place over one afternoon and comprised 13 participants, including elected officials. In addition, a group of students from the undergraduate program in social development at the Université du Québec à Rimouski (UQAR), accompanied by their professor, was present. They helped with the note-taking in the various breakout sessions that would be used to draft the document summarizing the content of the Open Space meeting.

On the day of the activity, the organizers began by explaining the activity to the participants. The mayor of Rivière-au-Tonnerre then opened the meeting by thanking the participants for their presence and their interest in the issue of shoreline erosion. Next, the facilitator introduced himself and explained his role, namely, to help the North Shore communities find a collective solution for dealing with shoreline erosion. He then explained the four principles and one law underlying the Open Space technique.

Those present were given about 20 minutes to consider how shoreline erosion impacted them personally. At the end of that time, five issues emerged:

1. Silting;

2. Problem of rivers, beaches and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs);

3. Uranium exploration and mining;

4. Increased flooding in recent years; and

5. Protection of infrastructures (present, past and future).

Once the topics were identified, the participants opened the marketplace. By mutual consent, the fourth topic was combined with the first. The third topic was abandoned by the majority of participants in favour of the other issues (1-2-4-5).

During the breakout sessions, the participants could go for coffee and donuts, change groups or take a break. At the end of the activity, the facilitator invited the participants to reunite for the closing circle. During the closing circle the participants go over the activity and provide feedback of the self-organization process in which they just participated.

This example shows how the Open Space technique can be effectively used in a very local context with a limited number of participants. Nonetheless, the technique is equally effective with large, diverse groups where the issue warrants.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

CCC-CURA: http://www.defisdescommunautescotieres.org/.

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The Coastal Communities Challenges—Community-University Research Alliance (CCC-CURA) comprises a group of partners and researchers concerned with issues pertaining to resilience and governance for coastal and riverside communities in the context of climate change.

The Regroupement des organismes de bassins versants du Québec (ROBVQ) comprises some 40 watershed organizations operating in Quebec. It is a key partner of the Quebec government in the development of watershed management measures.

**ROBVQ**
Regroupement des Organismes
de Bassins Versants du Québec

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