

# How to Run an Open Space Event Guide



Prepared by: Transition Network 2016, updated by Vesna Ilievska 2025.

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Open Space is a powerful tool for engaging large or small groups of people in discussions to explore particular questions or topics. Open Space can be used with groups from 10 to 1,000 people. Harrison Owen's book '[Open Space Technology](#)' describes how to run an Open Space event over a longer time period with larger groups. The Open Space method allows participants at a meeting to create and manage their own agenda by arranging parallel working-groups to discuss topics. Usually, all working-groups address topics related to one central theme of strategic importance. This can enable people with ideas and energy to connect, and to turn ideas into action. It is a fantastic tool for shifting a group away from "we have no idea" toward "we know what we are going to do."

The Open Space method has Four Principles and One Law:

## Four Principles

1. Whoever shows up 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 Law of Two Feet

"If, during the course of the gathering, you find yourself in a situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, you can go to some more productive place."

## Two Types of Participants

One type of participant mostly socialises, drinks tea, and doesn't appear to engage much. However, they may happen to be involved with the most important discussions of the day. Another type of participant tends to flit from conversation to conversation, bringing new ideas and fresh eyes.



## Considerations

### Question/ Topic/ Theme

The initial question you ask and how you frame it is key; it will determine who shows up to the event (and to your working-group). Try to avoid the temptation of only wanting people who agree with you to turn up. Doing this can limit the diversity of your group and your ability to gain from differing perspectives – which can help with troubleshooting, safeguarding, and inclusivity (see [Unconscious Bias](#)).

Usually the title of the event asks a provocative question or invites a theme, setting the expectations for what the overall topic of discussion is. Some examples might include:

- How Will [Our Town] Feed Itself in Response to Climate Change?
- Powering Past Peak Oil - The Future of Electricity in [Our Town]
- The Economic Revival of [Our Town] – how can we build a sustainable, equitable, and circular economy here?

You might choose to invite specific people; or you can leave it open to whoever turns up. It is important that the question is stated clearly on the invitations and all publicity.

### Venue

Make sure your venue:

- Is large enough for everyone to sit in a large circle.
- Has walls on which you can stick things.
- Has enough space for several working-groups to happen simultaneously.

### Materials

Plenty of markers and pens; plenty of pieces of paper to write on; big pieces of flipchart paper; bluetack or masking tape to stick posters and papers on the wall. Tea, coffee, snacks.

### Set up and Sequence

1. As people arrive, allow some time for socialising, maybe getting cups of tea (see [Building Trust](#)).
2. Set up a circle of chairs with some paper and pens in the centre.
3. On the wall (or on the floor, or on a table) put an empty timetable. Mark the timings of the different sessions on left, and the various discussion areas on the top. It might look something like this:



	1 Table by window	2 Table with flowers on	3 Side room	4 Room Upstairs	5 Dining room
Opening	The Event all Together			9.15 -	10
10am - 11.30am					
11:30am - 1pm					
Lunch break					
2pm - 3.30pm					
Closing	session all together			3.30 -	4.30

4. Explain the Four Principles and the Law; the two types of participants; and how to record discussions (see below). You also might include a bit about how to facilitate discussions. For instance, making sure one or two voices don't dominate; or the art of making people feel safe and welcome so they have the confidence to take part (see [Building Trust](#), see [How to Run Effective Meetings](#), see [Facilitating Meetings](#)).
5. After you've explained everything, offer people the opportunity to propose a topic for the timetable. When they do this they must:
  - Write their name on the sheet.
  - Host that discussion for the entire session time.
  - Record the conversation themselves (or arrange for someone else to do it) for the benefit of anyone unable to participate.
6. After everyone is clear with the instructions, say "Go!" This can feel nerve-wracking. Try not to worry that no one will come forward. Once one person does, others often follow.
7. Give everyone 10 minutes to propose topics and stick them up on the timetable. If there end up being more topics than available slots, sometimes you can combine similar topics.
8. Once the timetable is full, allow people a few minutes to look at it and work out which discussion sessions they want to attend (or visit). Then ring a bell (or something similar) to announce the start of the first session.
9. People then use their two feet. They can move around the space to wherever their topics of interest are being hosted. Hosts guide the discussions, while other participants may come and go, visiting one or more working-groups.



## Other things to consider

- Ensure each working-group space has plenty of paper and pens.
- Tell people when each session starts, and remind them about the Law of Two Feet.
- At the end of each session, ring a bell (or similar) to let people know it is finished.
- Make sure there is a way to collect the notes recorded by each working-group.
- Ask someone to type up the notes; this allows you to send them out quickly, or to post them online.
- Put the notes up on the wall so everyone can reach them and review them. After the event, ask someone to circulate the notes to everyone who attended.
- Before closing, take 30-40 minutes to collect feedback from everyone; try to get feedback from at least one person from each working-group.

## Finishing and completion

An Open Space event can be for simply generating ideas, without making any specific decisions. Even though future activities might emerge from the event, you might prefer those actions to be agreed before being taken forward. Depending on your focus, the closing session could be a brief and simple “thank you” and “hope you had a good time.” Or, if you are setting up working-groups and specific plans, it may require more time to come to agreements (see [Decision Making](#), see [Group Agreements](#)).

## When to Use Open Space

If your group’s direction is clear and if you have clear future plans, then Open Space can feel unhelpful, chaotic, and frustrating. Open Space is most effective when you want a focus on real learning, experimentation, and innovation. If you are unclear about your group’s direction, or if you want to generate ideas and engage all members in the process, then Open Space can be a great tool.

An Open Space event is surprisingly easy to run, and an amazingly powerful way of exploring topics. It can draw together people who are passionate about certain topics. A facilitator with prior experience can be helpful for your first one; and, once you have had one success, you’ll marvel at how simple it is!

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## Related Resources

[Unconscious Bias](#)  
[Planning and Putting On Events](#)  
[Building Trust](#)

[How to Run Effective Meetings](#)  
[Decision Making](#)  
[Group Agreements](#)



## References

Camp Stomping Ground (2015). "[Open Space Technology Introduction.](#)"  
Owen, Harrison. "[A Brief User's Guide to Open Space Technology.](#)" Open Space World.  
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Seeds for Change. "[Facilitating Meetings.](#)"

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