

# CH 9

Harrison Owen

## Open Space Technology

*The times, they are a-changin’*

---Bob Dylan

### Open Space at Work

*Three stories:*

It was a bold experiment, not unlike jumping out of an airplane without knowing if the parachute was functioning. One morning, the Rockport Company, a subsidiary of Reebok International, closed for two days. No shoes were shipped. Nor orders were processed. The head office was locked.

Except for a skeleton crew left behind to answer the phones, the company’s entire work force gathered in a cavernous warehouse at the distribution center. The president and his senior executives, many of whom questioned his judgment in shutting down a \$300M operation, were there. Managers, clerks, supervisors and dock workers – 350 people in all – milled around uncertainly.

There had been no extensive planning for this day, no agenda set. No one had the foggiest notion of what would happen during the two day meeting. As the tension built, the consultant stepped into the center of the loosely formed circle and introduced the gathering to Open Space Technology. He told them that this was their meeting and their time. What they did was entirely up to them. He explained a simple procedure: anyone who wished to do so could step into the circle, write a topic and her or his name on a paper, announce it to the group and take responsibility for convening a break-out session on the subject. He described four principles:

- Whoever comes is the right people
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
- When it starts is the right time
- When it’s over, it’s over.

He told them the one law – The Law of Two Feet (if you’re not contributing or getting value where you are, use your two feet and go somewhere else). In less than 30 minutes, the meeting was theirs.

“There was a long silence,” recalls Rockport’s director of distribution. “I thought the meeting had ended right there. With so much of the top brass around, I fully expected that no

one would write anything down. But one person rose tentatively, then another, and soon it was like ants going to sugar.”

In less than an hour, an energized group had posted dozens of topics: distribution, on-time delivery, customer service, excess raw materials. Many topics were sensitive and had never before been acknowledged as issues of concern: women’s perceptions of the Rockport environment, eliminating political games, overcoming “we vs. they” thinking, getting rid of paperwork.

At the end of day two, 66 sessions had been held, creating a sense of camaraderie and purpose. By bringing together sales, production, procurement and merchandising employees, a \$4M/year supply chain problem was solved. This achievement was dwarfed only by the new product line that was conceived and prototyped, complete with a marketing and financial plan that launched a new shoe adding \$20M/year in sales.

(Thanks to Srikumar S. Rao, srikumarsrao@cs.com, for this story.)

### *Here is a story of ongoing Open Space*

We live in a field of abundance. That was only one of the discoveries made in Spirited Work, an experiment in open space organization which began in 1999 at the Whidbey Institute on Whidbey Island, Washington. Meeting face to face four times a year and linked in an on-line learning environment, Spirited Work was a pioneering experience of emergent organization.

We were an open space learning community of practice. The heart of our practice was the law of Open Space Technology: take responsibility for what you love. We applied the essential principles of OST: Whoever comes are the right people; Whatever happens is the only thing that could; Whenever it starts is the right time; When it’s over, it’s over.

To align with the energies of the natural world, we practiced Angeles Arrien’s Four Fold Way. (Arrien is a cultural anthropologist who gleaned these principles from her cross-cultural studies of aboriginal people.) Each season we met, focusing on that season’s practice:

- Winter: Show up and choose to be present;
- Spring: Follow what has heart and meaning;
- Summer: Tell the truth without blame or judgment;
- Fall: Be open, not attached to outcomes.

We organized ourselves according to the patterns of OST—patterns fundamental to human relationship:

- Meet in a circle;
- Begin in silence to listen for the creative spirit;
- Establish a marketplace so individuals can offer whatever they are guided to share—and the emergent field can show up;
- Honor and welcome the “stranger” (or the unexpected!);
- Reflect on our learning;
- Practice dialogic conversation to hear and respect all voices and ways of relationship.

Our company included a wild diversity: corporate folks, educators, artists, writers, musicians, computer wizards, architects, chefs, builders, consultants, students, preschoolers. Ages ranged from 1 to mid-80. Over 300 people participated, with a core of about 50 each season. We were from the US, India, Australia, the Bahamas, Canada, Europe, Taiwan, Israel, Northern Ireland, Ireland, England, Africa, Vietnam, Colombia, Denmark. We welcomed whoever showed up, whenever they showed up.

Over six and a half years, we experienced individuals transforming, many people taking courageous new steps in their work, their lives, and their relationships. The collective itself transformed. We learned that conflicts signaled something new wanting to happen. By opening to the unknown through asking a question, initiating a conversation in the marketplace, those who cared dealt with the issue on behalf of the whole.

Governance was handled by a voluntary circle of “stewards”. Decisions were made by noticing what was emerging, discerning what served the whole and taking action. If the response didn’t work, someone simply convened a marketplace session and the decision evolved in real time.

Spirited Work functioned as an incubator. People self-organized to work together on projects, research, or long-term conversations and learning. Some of the projects spawned include: Global Citizens’ Journey; Integral Wellness, a systems approach to Health; an international Practice of Peace conference; Radiant Networking; Journalism that Matters.

Books were written: *Breaking the Trance of Scarcity*; *The Power of TED*; *Spirited Food: A Cookbook for All Seasons*.

Many are now asking: “How do we foster emergent organization?” Our answer from six and a half years of experience is: open space. Live the Law of Two Feet on a daily basis. Organize using OST. That’s where the magic is.

(Thanks to Anne Stadler, [annestad@comcast.net](mailto:annestad@comcast.net), for this story.)

### *Opening Space in Community*

In January 2005 under the auspices of the federal government’s Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS), 275 people met in Prince George, British Columbia, Canada to address the complex needs of the inner city Aboriginal community in that city of 80,000. They used Open Space Technology to identify priority areas and create a consortium of projects aimed at making a difference in a community riddled with poverty, violence, addictions and health issues.

But this was no ordinary gathering. The 275 people included regular citizens, youth, elders, disabled folks, folks with mental illness, the poor and dyslexic and the rich and educated.

The sponsoring agencies, a loose committee of service providers, government and local Aboriginal groups set the stage for the success of this event. They decided that the UAS should not be controlled by the existing agencies and organizations. To solicit community leadership, the agencies committed to turning the UAS over to the community. That willingness and openness made a huge difference on the day. In the pre-meeting, phrases like “we need new

ideas to grow" and "supporting community leadership" became touchstones for the media campaign that formed the invitation. The sponsors stated their desire to be completely transparent in how this process was to unfold. They even committed to publishing a summary of the OST results in the local paper. Over three weeks these messages were repeated in local media with the startling results.

The agenda was set within the first hour of the day and the first of 55 discussion groups met on a huge range of issues. By the end of the day the group had produced a 63 page proceedings document with summaries from 41 groups.

On day two, about 100 people returned to work on projects. People reviewed the previous day's proceedings, space was opened again and people were invited to post invitations to champion new projects. Participants were asked for passion to be tightly bound to responsibility on this day as they deliberated on how to "get it out of the room."

Project champions came forward from a wide spectrum of experience and background, from poor single mothers to City councilors. Twenty-four project postings were made and these convened into 19 groups addressing a wide variety of community issues. All of them found support from existing organizations and in just one and a half hours, partnerships were made, action plans drafted and in some cases, goals, objectives and visions were written. One group became so close that when they were finished, they stood in a circle for a minute tightly holding hands and prayed together. All of this was self-organizing, all of it happened in Open Space.

Within three weeks of the Open Space event, most of the champions had hosted follow-up meetings and attracted funding sponsors and other resources. By six weeks after the event the project champions had formed a collaborative decision making body that would oversee the strategy and make funding recommendations to the federal government.

(Thanks to Chris Corrigan, [www.chriscorrigan.com](http://www.chriscorrigan.com), for this story.)

## Frequently asked Questions

### *What is it?*

At the very least, Open Space is a fast, cheap, and simple way to better, more productive meetings. At a deeper level, it enables people to experience a very different quality of organization in which self managed work groups are the norm, just-in-time leadership a constantly shared phenomenon, diversity becomes a resource to be used instead of a problem to be overcome, and personal empowerment a shared experience. It is also fun. In a word, the conditions are set for fundamental organizational change, indeed that change may already have occurred. By the end, groups face an interesting choice. They can do it again, they can do it better, or they can go back to their prior mode of behavior.

### *When to use it?*

Open Space is appropriate in situations where a major issue must be resolved, characterized by high levels of complexity, high levels of diversity (in terms of the people involved), the presence of potential or actual conflict, and with a decision time of yesterday.

### *Probable Outcomes?*

Depending on the length of time (1-3 days) the following are essentially guaranteed. Every issue of concern to anybody in the group will be on the table. All issues will have been discussed to the extent that the interested parties choose to do so. A full record of the proceedings from the discussions will be in the hands of participants upon departure. Priorities will have been identified, related issues converged, and initial action steps identified. And the people in the organization will have experienced a very different and self-empowering way of working that they take back with them into their organizations. Substantive outcomes have ranged from organization re-design, strategic plan development, product design, to name a few.

#### *How it works?*

Open Space runs on two fundamentals: passion and responsibility. Passion engages the people in the room. Responsibility ensures things get done. An urgent theme or question provides the focus for the event. The art of the question lies in saying just enough to evoke attention, while leaving sufficient open space for the imagination to run wild.

All participants are seated in a circle (or concentric circles if the group is large). I have found that the circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication; have you ever heard of a *square* of friends? The four principles and the one law that guide life in Open Space are introduced. The participants are invited to identify any issue for which they have some genuine passion and are prepared to take personal responsibility. With the issue(s) in mind they come to the center of the circle, write their issue on a piece of paper, announce it to the group, and post the paper on the wall. When all the issues that anybody cares to identify have been surfaced, the group is invited to go to the wall, sign up for the issues they care to deal with, and get to work. No matter the group size, all this takes somewhat more than an hour. From there on out, the group is self-managing. As the several groups meet, reports of their activities are generated (typically on computers), and at the conclusion (in a 3 day event) all issues are prioritized. The “hot” issues are developed in further detail with concrete action as the goal.

#### *The principles of Open Space*

*Whoever comes are the right people.*

This reminds people that it is not how many people or the position they hold that counts, rather it is their passion for the subject that is important. So what happens if nobody comes to your group? Well, when was the last time you had the time to work on an idea you really cared about? Even a group of one works.

*Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.* This is a reminder to let go of what might have been, should have been or could have been. It is in the moments of surprise, large and small, that real learning and growth occur.

*When it starts is the right time.* Creativity and spirit don't happen according to the clock; they appear in their own time. Open Space merely reminds us that clocks are human-made constructs and have very little to do with the right time for things.

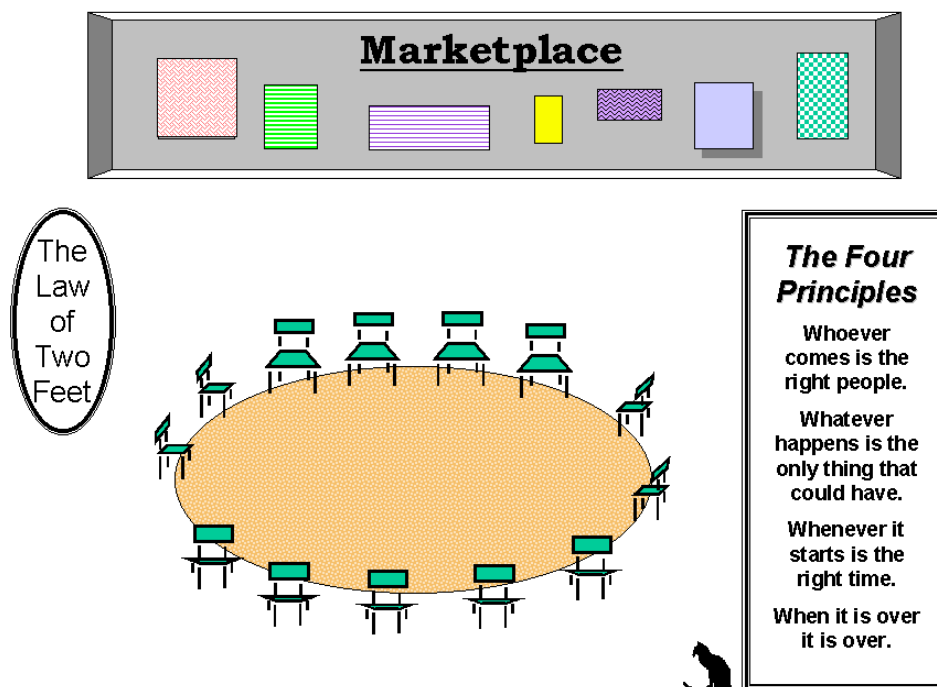
*When it's over, it's over.* Offers a marvelous way to save time and aggravation. If you get

together and it takes 10 minutes to do what you wanted, congratulations! Move on and do something else. If, on the other hand, you find yourself deeply engaged in what you are doing, keep doing it until you are complete.

These principles are simple statements of the way things work. While they may appear counter-intuitive to some, they are my observations of what always happens when people interact.

*The Law of Two Feet* (or in the case of the "differently-abled," the law of mobility) says to take responsibility for what you love. This shows up by standing up for what you believe. If you feel you are neither contributing nor learning where you are, use your two feet and go somewhere else. The law is fundamentally about personal responsibility. It makes it clear that the only person responsible for your experience is you.

The actual Open Space event lasts from 1-3 days, depending on desired outcomes. One day allows for the raising and discussion of pertinent issues. In two days a useful set of proceedings can be generated. With an additional half day, all issues may be prioritized, converged, and brought to a point of action. Shorter times are possible but with a genuine loss of depth.



**Figure 1. The Law of Two Feet**

### *Life After Open Space*

To the best of my knowledge, no organization comes away unaffected by Open Space. In addition to whatever substantive outcomes may have emerged from the gathering, the "subtle"

effects may be even more impactful. At the very least, the organization has a new performance bench mark, for all participants now know that endless preparation is not required for useful engagement. distributed leadership, personal empowerment, appreciation of diversity, even self-managed work groups are all a matter of experience. Of course the group may choose never to experience all this again, but there is no denying that all of the above took place.

*Cost Justification.* Since there is virtually no up-front planning or training required (except for theme identification and logistics), and only one facilitator necessary regardless of the group size, costs can range from essentially nothing to whatever the group is prepared to spend for accommodations, travel and the like. Run these costs against the benefit of doing in 2 days what had previously taken 10 months on a 200 million dollar project, and the justification is pretty clear. Needless to say, not every instance of Open Space produces those sorts of results, but it is not uncommon.

## Table of Uses

Typical Setting/ Brief Description	Project Length	# Participants, Time Required
Complex design issue Design an Olympic pavilion to accommodate 20,000 visitors with only two months prior to the Olympics	2 months	35 people, 2 days
Strategic Planning/ Community Building Create a strategic plan for the arts in Washington state through a state-wide conversation about the arts. New connections across the arts community were an unexpected benefit	7 months	1,500 people at 20 gatherings, that ranged from 5 to 100 people
Handling High Conflict Brought together 25 Israelis and 25 Palestinians across the political spectrum to explore trust.	1 month	50 people for 3 days
Jobs for Street Kids Bogotá street kids recently out of drug rehab and into a jobs program identified ideas for finding ongoing jobs when they leave the program	2 weeks	2,100 people (including 1,800 - 15-22 year olds) for 2 days
Handling layoffs at a large avionics defense plant Plant of 2,400 employees self-organize to reduce their numbers to 1,600 and completely restructure their operations	2 months	450 people at 16 2-day gatherings
Operating an organization in Open Space on an ongoing basis A social service agency transitioned to an entirely self-organizing operational	Ongoing	100 people, gatherings convened as needed

structure. When client load doubled, the increased volume was handled with no added resources, winning awards for leadership and excellence.		
Supply Chain Management Reorganize airplane door manufacturing at a large airplane manufacturer	3 days	150 people from the whole supply chain in 2 locations linked by computer

## Getting Started

When contemplating fundamental change, my first advice is, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” In short, make sure you really want to take this trip before you start. With specific reference to Open Space, the advice is --if you can find any other way to do what you want to do (other than Open Space), do it. The reason is simple. With Open Space the good news and the bad news are identical: It works. In Open Space, every group I have worked with becomes excited, innovative, creative, and ready to assume responsibility for what they care about. This all sounds wonderful, but for some people sometimes, it also sounds like a prescription for going out of control. And they are right. If maintaining control is your fundamental intent, for goodness sake don’t even think about Open Space. On the other hand, if you are prepared to believe in the people, trust them, and acknowledge that in all probability they are the true experts about what needs to be done, then Open Space will deliver. And you can be sure that fundamental change is a likely consequence.

## Roles, Responsibilities, Relationships

	<b>Before</b>	<b>During</b>	<b>After</b>
<b>Sponsor(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design the invitation</li> <li>• Create the invitation list</li> <li>• Support the logistics</li> <li>• Prepare for post-event support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome participants</li> <li>• Set the context, focusing the intention</li> <li>• Take responsibility for what they love</li> <li>• Listen and speak authentically</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the outcomes</li> <li>• Stay open to where the experience takes the organization</li> </ul>
<b>Facilitator</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the development of a good invitation</li> <li>• Work with the logistics team to create the space</li> <li>• Coach leadership on the new ways of working that will emerge in Open Space, beginning the conversation on supporting this spirit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open and hold space</li> <li>• Help out with the proceedings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support the emergence of innovation and maintaining the spirit of the event</li> <li>• Assist the leadership and organization in working with chaos and self-organization</li> </ul>
<b>Participants</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take responsibility for what they love</li> <li>• Listen and speak authentically</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow through on commitments</li> <li>• Bring the 4 principles and the law back with</li> </ul>



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**Table 1. Roles and Responsibilities**

### *Sponsorship Requirements*

The sponsors must be prepared to honor and respect all the participants. This does not mean that every crazy idea generated in the course of the gathering must be implemented, and there will be some crazy ideas. But it does mean that the space created must be safe for people to be fully creative and fully themselves. As a matter of fact, groups that I have worked with are rather conservative, whether they be corporations, communities, religious orders, or major political jurisdictions, and collectively they prove to be excellent judges regarding the insanity or applicability of an idea.

### *Role of the Facilitator*

The job of the facilitator is to open the spiritual and practical space in which people can work, and then keep on opening space. . Observably, the facilitator has a maximum of 20 minutes “up-front” and from that point on, apparently does nothing. He or she will not intervene in any of the groups, or with the group as a whole, unless a Space Invader presents him or herself. Space Invaders may just be overly enthusiastic participants or (in the worst case) the Chairman of the Board who is concerned that things are “out of control.” Space Invaders take it upon themselves to coral everybody into a single course of action of their design. Open Space is the quintessential “Trust the Group – Trust the Process” sort of thing, and *nobody* has the right to control specific outcomes, so long as they choose to be in Open Space.

### *Participants Roles*

The simple answer to who participates in Open Space is whoever cares. In practice, the invitation goes to everyone who might care about the answers to the theme or framing question, whether they are from within the organization or from outside. Where the logistics are a challenge, there are a variety of ways to handle the situation, such as limiting attendance to first come, first serve or to a certain number from each community affected.

The job of the participant is to be fully themselves. If they are scared, trustless, frustrated -- so be it, but that is the way they are. And if they are enthusiastic, creative, and ready for innovation – that is good too. But anyway, they are the way they are, and that is precisely the way they should be. Expectations of participants (and that includes everybody including the planning committee, executive staff, or Chairman of the Board) is that they will come, show up , and open to outcomes... and then take personal responsibility for ensuring that good and useful things get done. All of this is not the sort of thing that a rousing speech on values and responsibilities is likely to engender. But it seems to take place, almost as a matter of course, in situations where genuine respect is present.

For those who are not able to participate, the proceedings and the people who were there provide the connection to the experience. What happens after that is guided by the passion and responsibility of those who participated and what they bring back with them.

### *A Word on Planning Committees*

Open Space presents a problem to planning committees. There is very little to be done in advance. As a matter of fact, my major effort with such committees is to help them identify what they really care about, shape that into a calling question or theme for the gathering; and help them understand that after the theme has been determined and the guests have been invited, all the rest is quite simple and straight forward logistics. Rent the hall, arrange for meals, and let it happen. Self organization does have its advantages.

## **Conditions for Success**

*When to Use:* Use Open Space whenever the answer is basically unknown, and the only possible hope is that the group, consisting of all those who care, can from their collective wisdom, arrive at solutions that no individual or small group can hope to devise.

*Why it works:* Open Space is an evolving mystery. It's simply what people do when they voluntarily organize something. The answers to the question why it works, when and as they appear, will come from what we know, and are finding out, about self-organizing systems.

*Do not use this method if:* you wish to remain in total control, at least as we used to understand "total" and "control". Control and accountability are still very much present in Open Space, but the locus of both shifts from the one, wise, all powerful, executive to the participants themselves.

*Common Mistakes:* Open Space is remarkably forgiving. Indeed the only way I know to totally mess up the process is to think that you are in charge of it. (See above)

## **Theoretical Basis**

Open Space Technology was not the product of careful design. It occurred simply because I was tired of organizing meetings only to discover that the best loved part were the coffee breaks, the only part I had nothing to do with. The immediate inspiration was social organization in tribal West Africa where I discovered that everything of importance and utility occurred in a circle, and all exchange happens via a marketplace of some sort. Every indigenous population of which I am aware, made the same discovery a long time before I did.

Retrospectively, as we try to figure out why on earth Open Space works, the answers generally come from research dealing with self-organization, complex adaptive systems, Dissipative Structures and the like. The associated names are not generally found in the literature of management or even behavioral science, and include the likes of Stuart Kaufmann (biologist), Ilya Prigogine (chemist) and Murray Gel-Mann (physicist) – to name a few. At the level of popularization we should also include Meg Wheatley and her work presented under the title of "Leadership and the New Science," and more recently, "A Simpler Way." (Berrett-Koehler)

## **Sustaining Results**

So you had a great gathering. What do you do next? The answer is quite simple, but perhaps not

totally satisfactory. The answer: Go with the flow. Concretely this means that in an Open space gathering the emergent structure, purpose and power of an organization will not only reveal itself but will be mapped out in terms of the proceedings and what follows. The "smart money" will support the energy. Where it is strong (coherent and useful) it will provide resources and break down barriers (as in bureaucratic constraints); and where it is weak, don't bother.

The choices of immediate next steps are usually pretty clear and typically are one of three possibilities:

- The actions to be taken are so clear it only remains to do them;
- The actions to be taken are pretty clear, but more information or consultation is required, in which case it is important to set a time by which these tasks will be completed; or
- The issue remains clear as mud, in which case a reasonable next step would be to hold another Open Space, this time devoted exclusively to that issue.

There is also a major opportunity to anchor the new organizational behaviors experienced in Open Space. As mentioned, self-managed work groups, distributed leadership, appreciation of diversity, self-empowerment, amongst others, appear as natural by-products of the Open Space environment. Typically, however, these behaviors manifest so quickly and easily that many of the participants will have missed their arrival. For an intact work group it is very useful to reflect upon the new arrivals. Such reflection should not be confused with standard training programs which previously had sought to engender these behaviors. When a group is already functioning as a self-managed work group (for example) it makes little sense to go back to the beginning with fundamental concepts and practices. We are now dealing with a matter of experience which may be acknowledged and built upon.

## **Burning Question**

Will it work? Answer -- Yes.

When faced with this question, explain the results:

- every pertinent issue identified,
- all issues discussed,
- reports written,
- priorities set,
- action plans in place.

Don't explain the process. The skeptical won't believe you and the others aren't interested.

## **Final Comments (Mis-conceptions)**

A number of people, when they first hear about Open Space, come away with the opinion that there is no structure and less control. This opinion is totally wrong. What is right is that there is

no *pre-imposed structure and control*. Such structure and control as is present (and it turns out to be a lot) is all emergent from the people involved, the task they perform, and the environment in which they are operating. In short it is *appropriate* structure and control – appropriate to the people, task and environment.

In most cases, people who view Open Space as being out of control with no structure have not actually been in Open Space. Had they been there, they would know what 500 Presbyterians knew after they had gathered to re-think their church. In the process the Presbyterians created 164 task groups which were self-managed over a 48 hour period, ending with a book of proceedings (350 pages of it) in their hands. All of this was not done by levitation. In short, the level of emergent structure and control is generally of a sort that no planning committee would dare imagine, let alone seek to implement. But it happens and it works. Such is the nature of self-organizing systems.

There also seems to be a notion that Open Space is good only for establishing useful conversation, with substantive contribution not part of the package. One author even described its sole use as a forum for airing employee grievances. Doubtless good conversations do take place, and grievances get aired -- but substantive output, as in the case of Rockport, is no stranger.

## About the Author

**Harrison Owen**, [hhowen@verizon.net](mailto:hhowen@verizon.net), created H.H.Owen and Company in order to explore the culture of organizations in transformation as a theorist and practicing consultant. Somebody once asked me what I did. My response was that I honestly didn't know, but my intent was to *make human life human*. I have worked in a variety of areas from the African Jungle to the Halls of Congress – with large corporations in between. With an academic background and training centered on the nature and function of myth, ritual and culture, Open Space was just more of what I have always done.