

# A Model for Aboriginal Facilitation: an Open, Empowering Way to Get Consensus and Action

Introducing *Open Space Technology*

*John Swanson*

If online surveys are to be believed, many people fear speaking in public more than they fear death. When public speaking is combined with having to balance the interests of a diverse group of people in a facilitated setting, even experienced professionals can feel daunted.

Having good facilitation skills is a vital asset in today's world. Yet unlike straight public speaking, a facilitator's communication skills will often be less important than their facilitation technique. It therefore makes good business sense to have a working knowledge of facilitation models and methods.

For organizations which work with First Nations communities, having facilitation capability is also vitally important. The National Centre for First Nations Governance is one such organization. The NCFNG, an organization dedicated to assisting First Nations implement their inherent right to self-governance, has been trialing a facilitation technique known as Open Space Technology. Designed by Harrison Owen, Open Space is an emergence-based facilitation methodology which has proved itself to be effective in the broader business world, but one which is particularly relevant in Aboriginal contexts.

Having worked in numerous small communities in West Africa and other parts of the world, Owen distilled many of the underlying principles of how these communities made decisions into the Open Space approach. But in acknowledgement of its tribal roots and collaborative and evolutionary development, Owen has not claimed proprietary rights to the process. Rather, he encourages organizations across the world to freely adapt Open Space Technology to their needs.

The 'open space' in Open Space Technology derives from the fact that a circle structure of gathering tends to create greater openness in communications amongst participants. Thus, an area of space is required that will allow all participants (regardless of the number), to sit in a circle. This is how an Open Space gathering begins. As ideas emerge and topics of discussion are tabled, further spaces are utilized to host these discussions. But these too are circle-structures, with no Chair, and the only recognized position within the group is that of note-taker.

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Furthermore, break-out sessions are not funneled off to separate locations. Like cells dividing, groups form off of the main circle, and participants in all groups can actually see what topics are most interesting by the number of participants that gather around each nodal point. Contrary to more traditional facilitation techniques, opinionated or aggressive participants who might normally dominate proceedings will eventually find themselves without an audience, as participants move freely to those discussions which most interest them. It is an organic process, and also highly democratic. Even timid or reluctant participants can find themselves in a position to directly influence events, if only by attending those discussions they feel are interesting or important and not attending those which aren't.

The interest of participants is what drives Open Space Technology. While the facilitator outlines a broad theme as directed by the business or organization, the nature of the process ensures that the issues which are most important to the participants are the issues that will actually be raised and discussed. By creating a space in which individuals can create their own self-organized groups, the discussion, planning and action stages are limited only by the interest level of participants.

The 'technology' of Open Space Technology is surprisingly minimalist. To facilitate an Open Space forum, all that is needed is paper, Post-It notes, markers, and masking tape. Of course, larger gatherings may require a microphone, and computers are handy for the typing of action plans, proceedings, and priorities lists. Yet rather than conveying a sense of amateurishness, this bare-bones approach carries an authenticity that makes participants feel less like they are involved in a formal decision making process and more like they are involved in a friendly brainstorming session. To mediate the Open Space process with high-tech gadgetry would be an artificial - and stultifying - imposition. It is the elemental nature of the process that makes it work.

Open Space Technology is a particularly useful tool when the audience represents a diverse range of interests, when there are no immediately obvious solutions to the issues being addressed, when there is the potential for conflicting ideas, and where innovative thinking is required. While Open Space may be used in conjunction with more traditional forms of gathering (for example, after a series of conference speakers), the process is self-contained. An underlying principle of Open Space is that of voluntary self-selection and so presentations of any sort are excluded.

As Open Space Technology is a dynamic and empowering methodology, there are times when it may not be an appropriate facilitation tool. Companies which seek to provide employees with the opportunity to express themselves, but which do not really intend to modify organizational behaviour, are ill-suited to utilizing Open Space. Organizations that want to do more than simply mollify constituents, may find that the results of letting participants control the agenda and create action-plans to begin to implement the findings of the groups, results in

activity which moves in a faster speed and different direction than envisaged.

Open Space Technology is more than a theoretical methodology. It has been utilized in a number of First Nations settings and has proven its practical usefulness in business, governance, and community organizations. One such setting was a recent Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group conference on governance in British Columbia.

Six First Nations on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands in southwestern BC are working together as the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group for the purpose of negotiating a treaty with Canada and the province. Members include Chemainus First Nation, Cowichan Tribe, Halalt First Nation, Lake Cowichan First Nation, Lyackson First Nation and Penelakut Tribe. Robert Morales, Chief Negotiator Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group approached the National Centre for First Nations Governance to facilitate a discussion about the future of governance for the Hul'qumi'num Mustimuhw (people).

The result was a leadership conference held over October 3, 4, and 5, 2006, with all of the Chiefs and Councils of the member First Nations. Given the diversity of concerns, issues and opportunities around Hul'qumi'num governance, the National Centre chose to utilize Open Space Technology as the facilitation methodology, and invited Chris Robertson, an Open Space practitioner, to facilitate the proceedings on behalf of the NCFNG.

The overriding theme for the sessions was provided by the Hul'qumi'num leadership. A statement outlining the general framework for discussion was distributed to participants. While the breadth of possible discussion was large, the framework held some implicit questions important to that community - questions such as "What does a Hul'qumi'num nation look like?" and "How do you see yourselves in that nation?". Yet rather than prescribe how each issue should be addressed, Robertson merely outlined the characteristics of Open Space for the participants, and then proceeded to let them establish the topics, times and places for their own discussions.

In working with Open Space, Robertson says that one of the biggest challenges for facilitators is in wanting to do too much. Part of the psychology of Open Space is that participants are encouraged to think - and do things - for themselves. Whether it's as simple as moving to another discussion area when a participant feels that they're losing interest, or taking a coffee break without the facilitator's instruction to do so, all aspects of Open Space contribute to a sense of empowerment amongst participants. For facilitators who like

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to control the flow of discussion, not to mention the environment in which discussion takes place, Open Space can be disconcerting.

Similarly, a hands-off approach takes getting used to for participants as well as facilitators. Participants who come from rigidly hierarchical companies or organizations which emphasize structure over free-flowing communication often find themselves on unfamiliar ground. Yet almost universally, when participants begin to understand the process, they adapt quickly and easily and often find themselves contributing above and beyond their own expectations.

This sense of empowerment can have profound implications for participants. Ironically, a technique designed for use in the business world can have decolonizing effects in communities. Participants are freed from the shackles of being told how and what to think, and are given free reign to share their thoughts and ideas in a non-judgemental environment. On a fundamental psychological level, this is liberating. But when utilized in communities in which there are strong vestiges of pain and suffering, the effect can be dramatic.

In Hul'qumi'num, Chiefs and Council were free to create their own personal agenda by selecting which discussion topics they felt an interest in attending. At any time a participant could leave to attend other sessions. The break-out group sessions were un-moderated. And yet rather than being chaotic, these sessions tended towards order as participants regulated themselves. The contents and results flowing out of each discussion were circulated to all participants immediately following the sessions.

Shana Manson, who is tasked with building the Hul'qumi'num constitution, was satisfied that the Open Space facilitation clearly moved the leadership closer to a common vision of governance. "This was truly an amazing experience. Using Open Space facilitation really empowered our leaders to own the agenda and speak to the matters from the heart. We had three days of really good, really intense dialogue. Walking away I knew that through the success of this facilitation the Hul'qumi'num Mustimuhw are moving forward with strength and unity."

The question surrounding Open Space Technology is not how it could be effective, given that most of its underlying principles are straightforward and self-evident. The question is rather why such a simple approach was so late in being articulated by the numerous management gurus engaged in analyzing processes of conflict resolution, mediation and decision making. The answer may lie in the dominant western culture's focus on devising complex approaches to the simple act of empowering people. As First Nations, we might ask why a process which is in many ways an adaptation of traditional cultural practices (such as the circle sharing group) needs to be presented via a European methodological approach in order to find acceptance amongst our people. A legacy of

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colonialism? Perhaps. But regardless, as Open Space Technology continues to be used to facilitate community meetings, it will help break down the barriers to effective communication within our own nations.

And as a facilitation technique for managers and leaders, knowledge of Open Space is worth its weight in gold.

To learn more about Open Space Technology, visit [www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org)

To learn more about the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, visit [www.hulquminum.bc.ca](http://www.hulquminum.bc.ca)

The National Centre for First Nations Governance supports First Nations inherent right to self-government and seeks to engage First Nations communities in dialogue that supports action, particularly in the development of effective and culturally relevant governance structures. To learn more about the National Centre for First Nation Governance visit [www.fngovernance.org](http://www.fngovernance.org).

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