

# Open Space Method

While you may already have a set agenda for your conversation, you may also want the topics of conversation to be entirely participant-led. In this case, the Open Space method is a powerful tool to help you **facilitate a participant-led conversation!**

Open Space is a method that allows participants in the room to decide on the topics they want to discuss, and can be used for a single session of conversation, multiple sessions or multiple days of conversations. It may take up the entire event, or be an engaging session that is followed by a plenary discussion.

## How it works

Open Space has Four Rules, One Law and Two Insects.

### The **Four Rules**

1. Whoever come are the right people
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
3. Whenever it starts is the right time
4. When it's over, it's over

The One Law is the **Law of Two Feet**. It states:

“ If, during the course of the conversation, any person finds themselves in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they can go to a more productive place.

The Two Insects are **the Butterfly and the Bee**:

- Butterflies are the participants who hang out, maybe drink tea, and don't appear to do too much. However, they may just be involved with the most important discussions of the day. Interesting conversations can emerge around them as people find them and pause to chat.
- Bees flit from conversation to conversation, cross-pollinating, bringing new ideas and fresh eyes to each conversation. They can also encourage mingling for those for whom the Law of Two Feet feels a bit rude.

#### Resources you will need for this activity

- Lots of marker pens
- A4 paper on which to write down questions
- Poster paper on which to record discussions
- Prestik to stick poster paper to the wall

#### Considerations about venue

- The venue needs to be large enough to enable participants to sit in a large circle, and also to be large enough to hold several conversations simultaneously.
- Ideally, the venue needs to have walls on which you can stick your poster paper

## The process step-by-step

### 1. The question

- Key to a successful Open Space event is to start the event with a good question. The question you ask and how you frame it will influence the types of conversations that are had. Be mindful that how you frame the question will also influence who turns up for the event. It can be tempting to just want people who agree with you to be there, but this will limit the diversity of your group.
- If you intend on making your entire event Open Space, the question is usually the title of the event. This helps set the tone for what will be discussed at the session. If this is the case, it is important that the question is stated clearly on the invitations.

### 2. Setting up the conversation

- Invite participants to sit in a circle. If the venue has chairs, the format of the space can be set up beforehand by arranging the chairs in a circle.
- Place a pile of sheets of A4 paper and marker pens in the centre of the circle, have a large timetable showing times of conversations and breaks, with blank, open slots, either in the centre of the circle on the floor, or on a nearby wall.
- Explain to participants the concept of Open Space, including the Four Rules, the Law of Two Feet, and the two insects. Also ask participants to record discussions on the poster paper that will be provided.
- If you like, you can also share tips on how to facilitate conversations, since these will be self-led by participants themselves.

**Remember!** Before starting Open Space, go through the 'must-haves' of the agenda, which include introductions, a welcome, icebreakers, and principles for participation! When setting up the conversation, take time to reiterate the principles of participation, explaining how they apply to the smaller group conversations too.

### 3. Question proposals

- Give participants the opportunity to propose questions related to the overall question or

topic of the event. These will become focus points for different conversations.

- If a participant proposes a question, they must host that conversation, and document the conversation themselves or arrange someone else to document.
- Give roughly ten minutes for participants to come forward and propose a question by writing the question on one of the A4 pieces of paper in the centre of the circle.
- Participants who propose a question must also add their conversation to a blank slot in the timetable provided.
- The number of parallel conversations being held will depend on the number of people you anticipate attending, as well as the length of the session. If more questions are proposed than slots available, topics that are similar can be put together in the same conversation.

#### **4. Facilitating the session**

- Once questions have been proposed and transferred onto the timetable, give all participants a few minutes to look at the timetable and decide which conversations they want to join and when.
- Ask participants to go to the break-out space where their chosen question is being hosted for the first round of conversations to begin.
- Once the first round of conversations start, a key facilitation role will include keeping track of time. It is useful to have a bell or alternative sound that signals the end of one conversation session and the beginning of another.
- Throughout the event, ensure each break-out space has enough poster paper and pens available for documenting the conversations
- Remind participants every now and then about the Law of Two Feet.
- At the end of each conversation session, go to each break-out space and collect the notes that have been made. Put them up on an available wall.
- Depending on the number of participants and number of conversations, ensure to schedule an appropriate amount of time at the end of the event to allow one person to give feedback from each conversation that took place.
- The notes that were generated can be typed up and circulated to all participants who attended.

#### **5. Closing the event**

- The way you close the event will depend on your goals.
- You may have wanted simply to hold space for learning and sharing of experiences and ideas, in which case you could close the event by thanking everyone for their engagement and for honouring the principles of the space.
- You might have intended to use the conversation as a means of activating a community for local action, in which case you might want to invite participants to reach out if they are interested in being part of continuing and developing the initiative.
- Provide space at the end of the event for feedback from participants about how they experienced the process: what they found effective, what surprised them, and what they felt could be improved.
- End the event with a brief check out, giving each participant the chance to give a word or single sentence about how they are feeling after the conversations had.

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Revision #2

Created 15 June 2022 15:17:43 by Florie Dumas-Kemp

Updated 15 June 2022 19:39:49 by Florie Dumas-Kemp