

# Open Space — a different kind of conference

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Open Space Technology (OST) is a participant-driven framework for hosting meetings and conferences that thrives on self-organisation. Developed in the 1980s by Harrison Owen<sup>1</sup>, it was inspired by the observation that the most interesting and productive moments of a traditional conference often happen during the coffee breaks.

## The Peer-Led Core

The defining feature of OST is that the agenda is not set by a central authority or planning committee. Instead, it is entirely co-created by the participants on the day. This shifts the power dynamic from a "top-down" structure to a peer-led model where every attendee is empowered to become a leader.

The room is set up with a circle of chairs, and a grid on the wall showing time slots (of between 30-90 minutes) and rooms (or sections of a room) but is otherwise blank. This grid will become the agenda.

- **Agenda Co-Creation:** The meeting begins with a "Marketplace" where any participant can stand up, propose a topic they are passionate about, and claim a time and space for discussion. They write their topic on a card and add it to the agenda. A topic may be a pre-planned presentation, an interactive workshop, or simply a conversation to learn more about a particular topic.
- **Voluntary Leadership:** The person who proposes the session is known as the convenor. For presentations and workshops the convenor will have deep knowledge of the topic they are sharing. For conversations and discoveries the convenor is responsible for starting the session and ensuring notes are taken, but they are not in charge; their role is one of peer-facilitator.
- **Radical Autonomy:** Every participant is trusted to manage their own time and contribution. There are no assigned tracks or mandatory sessions.

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<sup>1</sup> Open Space World: <https://openspaceworld.org/wp2/>

## The Four Principles

These principles describe the natural dynamics of self-organising groups:

1. **Whoever comes are the right people:** The success of a session is not determined by how many people attend or their job titles, but by the passion of those present.
2. **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have:** Participants are encouraged to focus on the present moment and the real-time energy of the group, rather than a pre-determined outcome.
3. **Whenever it starts is the right time:** Creativity and breakthrough ideas do not follow a clock; they emerge when the group is ready.
4. **When it's over, it's over:** If a group reaches a conclusion in 20 minutes, they should move on rather than "filling the time" to meet a schedule.

## The Law of Mobility (originally The Law of Two Feet)

This is the single "law" of Open Space and the engine of its peer-led nature. It states that if you find yourself in a situation where you are **neither learning nor contributing**, you have the responsibility to move to a more productive place. This ensures that every group is made up of people who genuinely want to be there, maintaining high energy and focus.

## The Role of the Facilitator

In Open Space events, the professional facilitator is "fully present and totally invisible." They do not manage the discussions or intervene in the content. Their role is simply to hold the space—providing the structure (the circle, the marketplace, and the timeline) so that the peers can lead themselves.

## Other Roles

While many participants commit to full sessions, others act as **Bumblebees**, moving between groups to cross-pollinate ideas, or as **Butterflies**, staying in the common spaces and attracting others into spontaneous, informal conversation.

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