

# A Facilitator's Experience of Open Space

By Julie Benesh

A couple months ago, I had the great honor and privilege of Opening Space for ODN/C. I was very excited to apply the principles of Open Space, an intervention so dear to me, with an organization that has meant so much to me. Open Space is best done around something hot: time-sensitive, controversial, provocative, and the theme of Opportunities *and Challenges We Face in OD Today* seemed to fit these criteria.

Over the past several years, I have used Open Space extensively in my role as Director of Organizational Development at an academic medical center. I use it with specific client groups, but I also use it in organization-wide forums. It is simplicity itself, which makes it neither easy nor undisciplined. The simplicity itself carries its own brand of facilitative rigor.

Besides embracing the law of two feet or mobility and the corollary of letting go, radically, of control over the content of participants' passions and accountabilities, Open Space requires appropriate framing of the theme. By appropriate, I mean framing that makes the theme as relevant and as inspiring as possible for the participants. This may mean tapping into the participants known concerns and/or eliciting new ones. It may also mean issuing a challenge or two. It usually means talking to people who represent the target participants. An outside consultant who is doing this as a neutral party may have to do a lot of talking to a lot of people to frame the remarks in such a way that may provoke and/or validate as many of participants as possible without appearing to take sides or alienating too many of them!

In most of the Open Spaces I do, I am a part of the system, and not an outsider. This is a unique position to be in, and one I cherish.

The following reprises my opening remarks:

## Opening Remarks

In my 20 years hanging around ODN/C, a lot has changed in the world, in our organizations, in our profession and in our lives. There are many symptoms of these changes, but I want to focus on one that haunts me—how many of my former ODN/C colleagues have left the field of OD, and not for lack of challenge, or even lack of opportunity.

Do any of you ever want to leave the field of OD? *I worry about this because I don't want to...*

To me the nature of the OD challenge is structural, it's a polarity, a dilemma, something to struggle with and manage, and not a problem that is able to be solved.

Our conversation today is an opportunity to share our experiences and see where the energy lies that can move us to action both collectively and as individuals in ways empowering to ourselves, our clients, our organizations and communities, and the world.

Because while the external environment poses inevitable challenges, the environment we have the most ability to influence is our internal one. These challenges manifest in many ways, within ourselves and with our clients, and among our colleagues for a number of reasons:

- Our clients face increasing challenges. A question I've heard come up again and again is how much like them do we need to be? We and they have to relate, if we are going to collaborate, but if we become just like them we risk collusion.
- Because of the amorphousness of our profession, the issue of evaluation comes up a lot.

How do we evaluate our effectiveness as consultants?

By our popularity?

Our earnings?

Our learning?

Our clients' successes?

We can care about all of these, but what then becomes our focus?

- OD is a uniquely interdisciplinary discipline; we come from a variety of backgrounds, and, to some extent, inevitably frame our approaches accordingly. When you are a \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank) everything looks like a \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank). Never mind that something else may be needed.
- Because we are diverse, colleagues can be the bridge between ourselves and the work that needs doing—if we let them. Effective partnering requires the willingness to sub-optimize—and when it comes to ourselves, we OD professionals often value individual self-actualization over cooperation. (A nice way of saying we don't practice the team skills we preach.) Today is a grand opportunity to practice win-win, non-zero-sum, dynamic sub-optimization. If you tend to optimize your own resources at the expense of other—you know who you are, try sub optimizing. If you tend to sub optimize, experiment with taking up a little more space for yourselves.

These are my issues; surely you have others. So, where, oh where, are the experts who can guide us. Look around the circle. We are a nutrient-rich environment and there are no people here more qualified than us to take on our issues.

I then went on to lay out the instructions for proposing topics. The rules and the One Law. The link below provides a great overview.

<http://www.freechild.org/Firestarter/OpenSpace.htm>

I didn't convene any specific sessions at this particular Open Space, although I was open to doing so. Instead, I joined a couple discussions but mostly flitted around eavesdropping in my not uncommon "butterfly" fashion, and took on the Harrison Owen-endorsed role of trash collector. Trash collecting, literally picking up cups and plates and throwing them away burned up excess energy and kept me feeling connected and useful as a space-holder. This was useful in managing my anxiety when at least one person used The Law and walked out, never to return. That is a perfect example of the radical letting go Open Space requires, an incident that in any other sort of class or meeting would be utterly traumatic for me, I had to not only accept philosophically, but emotionally, as well.

Yet far from feeling detached, I always experience Open Space as a flow experience. I feel both energized and deeply relaxed. For me it's more like doing yoga than facilitating a meeting.

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