

# Open Space Technology:

## *An Inviting Guide*

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## Opening Invitation

For some years now, I have taught Open Space Technology as the skillful practice of invitation in organization, for the purpose of getting the most important things done, in the easiest possible ways. This is the briefest guide to how to do that.

This guide can help you put what is most important for yourself and/or your organization or community into a short statement that invites others to gather. If you do that, then many of those "right" people are very likely to show up at the place and time you designate. Once they gather, with a common passion for the issue(s) you raised, most of the logistics get very simple. People get down to work quickly and naturally, to address the issues at hand, the issues you raised. As their conversations progress, strategic "action" happens.

This guide is short. It will get you started. Once you've reviewed it, I'd be glad to discuss it with you. After that, contracting for the facilitation of a meeting or event usually includes (1) preparation time to address the issues identified here, (2) facilitation time for the event itself, and perhaps (3) some training or other follow-up support for keeping the momentum going after the initial event. I'd be glad to discuss such contracting with you, as well.

In Open Space, everything starts with the invitation. So here is mine, to you: Have a look at this guide. Think things through. Talk them over. Pencil some notes, maybe even a theme. Scribble a first draft of an invitation, if you can. Make a list of questions. Call me with that list.

This guide works equally well with any meeting, retreat, workshop, conference or summit event, regardless of size, people or purpose – with or without Open Space Technology. We've used it for hybrid events, as well, held *partially* in Open Space, the only difference being that those events don't have as much room for people to work – directly and immediately – on the most important issues.

Good luck with what's here! And give a call if you like. I'd be glad to work with you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent loop at the end.

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Thank you and good luck!

## I. Preparing for Open Space: An Essential Shift and Some Practical Issues

The best preparation is a potentially messy process of deeper churning, challenging inquiry, and iterative conversation. It's not just the ideas that get churned and changed, it's the people, too. Significant change can and does happen before the meeting or event even happens – and will likely continue, in subtle ways, long beyond the closing circle. Understanding that we are immersed in an ongoing process and flow, rather than simply planning an isolated event, is an essential shift in itself. After that, we have only to keep up the practice of opening, inviting, supporting, and making – more of what works.

In the beginning, it's helpful to name four or five big chunks of practical preparation for an Open Space meeting. Sometimes the first two areas get rolled into one, other times the input of a leadership group is so important that it is addressed as a distinct piece of work. Either way, these are the things to work out:

The Invitation is simply the vehicle (likely a document) that delivers the BIG question, purpose or theme to be addressed, riding atop the cleanest possible story of (1) what is happening, (2) how we got here, (3) what is needed (to make or do or discuss) now, (4) when and where we will gather (to make or do or discuss it). This might be as short as four sentences, or as long as... it takes. Less is usually more. What is important is that when people on the Invitation List read it, they hear the history, happenings, and needs as their own. This is how they know that they belong in the gathering when it happens. The key to writing the invitation is to speak the truth and ask, very carefully, for what is most important at this moment in the history of the group or organization. Good invitations often mix and balance grandness and achievability, passion and practicality.

Special Inputs and Decisions from a leadership group can point out for invitees (1) latest data on conditions, needs and expectations, (2) strategic directions and priorities, (3) assets and resources already available for consideration or application, and/or (4) acknowledged boundaries, obstacles or otherwise non-negotiable parameters within which work must somehow progress.

The Invitation List should include everyone, yes everyone, who might have a stake or interest or contribution to make to the purpose. Anyone willing to show up, learn and contribute to the work can be welcomed.

Program Logistics includes the place, total time, schedule, materials and any sort of food plans. All of these things need to be scoped, scaled, and selected in alignment with the purpose stated in the Invitation and the people on the Invitation List.

Sustainability and follow-through depend primarily on the support provided, assuming the purpose and intention was some sort of *action*. No support, no sustained spirit -- and probably no *action*. Some important supports include documentation, next meeting dates, funding or other resources, and sometimes facilitation support for future meetings. Support lets people keep connecting as long as it takes to make good on the purpose.

## II. (a) Crafting the Invitation: Getting to the Heart of What Matters

Consider the following, not as essay questions but rather like the headings of bulleted lists. What a good invitation needs is the facts, short and sweet, the most important things, that everybody already knows, all swept together in one place, for easy review and action.

What is the "purpose" of this particular meeting/workshop? And for what time period? What qualifies as "action" and what is required in an "action plan?" If the purpose is not "action" then what is that "purpose"? Vision? Strategy? Structuring? Support? Healing conflict? What kinds of things will be accepted as successfully satisfying the "purpose"?

What are the best things we've ever done in this group, that have any connection to the "purpose"? Are they recent enough to be held up as examples to be repeated or exceeded?

What are the current conditions that matter? Survey data? Anecdotal data? Priorities? De-prioritizations? Current crisis? Upcoming changes?

What are the things we know we want/need to do/have/create now or next? What activities must be created or continued regardless of any current crisis, conflicts or shifts?

Who are the people needed to get it done? How soon can they clear the day(s) needed?

What resources and supporting structures are available to leverage? Coaching programs, communications tools, internal facilitators, volunteers, meeting spaces, budgets, etc.?

What sacred cows, "dead mooses" and other lines are not to be crossed? What is still unspeakable or immovable here?

When will we meet, and where? (days, times, location(s))

When will we know that this process is really working? In the meeting? After the meeting? One month later? Four months later? Next year? Next survey? And how will we know... at each point?

What documentation is required from the meeting? Who will use it? Who will distribute it and to whom? Will it be the beginning of a longer record, a formal report, or a one-time announcement?

What support and resources are required for the most important change(s) desired to actually happen? If not available, can they be acknowledged? Invited? Created in the working sessions of the workshop? Who will personally support the ongoing process?

What else is going on in the world, in the community or organization, and in individual situations that seems to matter now?

## II. (b) Crafting the Invitation: So What's the BIG Idea?

Open Space (and any other approach that really does invite and support meaningful and positive change) is fundamentally, on the part of leaders, sponsors and facilitator(s), *a decision and commitment to movement*. The theme tells everyone where to go(!).

The whole of business strategy really comes down to two simple questions: “Where do we go?” and “How do we get there?” The first is for leadership to answer; the second is for everyone. Leaders name the mountains; organizations find the way to get up.

In the BIG PRINT of an Open Space invitation, leaders name the theme. They point in a strategic direction – in a few words that everyone understands. Then they ask the big, open question: How will we get there? What are the issues and opportunities for...? The Open Space format gives everyone room – and responsibility – for scrambling toward the answers.

The theme and question are the heart of an Open Space invitation, just as the purpose is the heart of the meeting. The theme is the simplest possible statement of the largest possible purpose. These give form and scope and direction to the meeting. Everything that happens follows as answer to the central theme and question posed by the leader(s).

The good news is that it's just that simple. The bad news is that it's just that simple. I defer to Harrison Owen, originator of the Open Space approach:

“...I doubt that there is any such thing as a ‘generic good theme.’ But I have found that there are some general criteria:

- Short. Anything more than a half dozen words is usually too long.
- Always stated as a question. Questions open space. Statements close it.
- Stated in the language of the people. Every organization or group of people has its own special language and code words. The theme should be stated in that language/words. This is one reason why a great theme for one group will automatically be a dud for another.
- Cuts to the heart of the matter. There is a place for diplomatic statement, but it's not here. Verbal obfuscation rarely arouses passion -- and you want a lot of passion.

A really good theme will be so specific to that group that others will simply not notice it – or if they do notice, then not be inspired by it. My favorite came from the USWEST Open Space done years ago...

USWEST (the phone company) was in disastrous shape. Everybody knew it, and this was particularly true in the (US) State of Arizona. Theme was: *Fixing Arizona?* Believe me, attendance was not a problem. We were turning them away. As for passion and conflict – we had all that in spades. [Which is exactly what is needed to succeed!]

Lot of folks spend a lot of time working on the theme with the client. I can see the sense of that, as it provides an essential opportunity to explore the issues and, not incidentally, to be very sure that the client (group) really wants to take the trip and is prepared for genuine open conversation with no attachment to specific outcomes. All to the good. But when it comes to creating the theme I have found that (typically) five minutes will do it.

If the reasons for the Open Space meeting are hot, bothersome, exciting, anxiety-producing – the essential words are usually right on the tip of everybody's tongue. They need only be captured. And if there is no heat, no bother, no excitement, no anxiety – then why bother with the Open Space? Likelihood is that it will be Blah.

Once again, Opening Space is fundamentally, on the part of leaders, sponsors and facilitator(s), *a decision and commitment to movement*. Naming the direction isn't usually the hard part. The real daring of leadership is in making the decision and commitment to *invite* some significant slice of *everyone* to deal with IT directly – *and now*. But if not now, then when? And if not the leader, then who?

## II. (c) Crafting the Invitation: What Do You Want Anyone to Do About It?

Once the Heart is opened, the Theme clearly stated, and the Tone and Commitment resolved, the actual Invitation document is a short, practical story that includes all of that, AND... literally asks people to do things. The first and most important action requested is *showing up* – at a specific meeting place and time. Here are some other possible requests:

- Notice what is happening, why this is time to act
- Review survey data, anecdotal data, priorities put forward by leaders
- Talk to others – what are the most important issues and priorities?
- Consider actions needed in your local group or area
- Identify resources that you have and that you need (budget)
- Identify needs for support (people) to address the purpose
- Understand "purpose," and its satisfaction, as objective of the day
- Bring laptop, cellphone, data, notes, and have somebody(ies) on call
- Be prepared for additional input on priorities from leaders (possibly)
- Expect a wide open format for the day, expect to set your own agenda, connect it with others, and commit to the specific next steps that you see as most important
- Expect to take direct responsibility for the things they really want and care about.
- Commit to staying for whole program. Sometimes some sort of "schedule" or explanation of format is included, but that is not required.
- Consider this as first of a series of (quarterly?) sessions for doing most important work that can't or won't happen anywhere else.

The finished Invitation ultimately embodies (and invites) the resolution of all of the purpose, people, logistical, and sustainability questions listed earlier. It captures the essence of the group's history, current conditions, strategic needs, performance indicators, expected products, and all of the other conversations that are leading up to the meeting.

Once it's finished, the hardest (often "invisible") work is done and the "real work" of distributing the invitation, registering participants, procuring of materials, and perhaps developing ongoing support can begin. Notice that the latter of these tasks *could be* specified as *all or part* of what participants are invited to do and create.

More often than not, the invitation document is not the real invitation. It's only a prop for the inviting conversations that leaders and planners will have with the people on the invitation list. The invitation document might go out as a simple letter, poster, or email message. Then many invitees will want to know "...yes, but, what is going to happen?"

The only honest answer is, "We really don't know, except that we're all going to do as much as we can to address and resolve all of the most important issues." And the essential question back to invitees is: "What do you think we should be focusing on now?" This is the real invitation, the real opening, and every invitee can be actively assured that if they come ready and willing to work on the issue(s) they've named, that these things can and will be addressed. The next page offers some *inviting* language.



## II. (d) Crafting the Invitation: Some Opening, Inviting (Sample!) Language

Here are some examples of opening, inviting language. None of this is *right* – but some of it might be useful in framing and finishing your invitation. Best to let it inspire, rather than replace, your own voice:

Please join us for... Our purpose is simple and important...

We need (and want) your deep engagement in the issues and opportunities surrounding the present and future of... toward the resolution of current issues and realization of untapped potential for...

We have done well and we must do better... to serve ourselves, our organization(s), and our communities...

The work of this session will contribute/lead toward...

Because you care about... you have the skills, experiences and insights that are essential to make it better.

Differences of opinion do exist, but it is out of this rich diversity that powerful new futures can be formed now.

...hope that each of you will put it all on the table... no sacred cows... no undiscussables... the only caveats and boundaries are...

...hope to mix past experience, present realities and all our hopes and dreams for the future into new...

Where there is agreement, we can move forward. Where there is difference we can seek understanding, common ground, and workable compromise.

None of this can happen without open, honest conversation and caring from each and every one of us.

What will happen? (1) Before we leave every issue of concern to anybody will be on the table, if they choose to put it there. (2) All issues will receive as full a discussion as you choose to give them. (3) You will receive a written record of the discussions and recommendations before you leave. (4) All issues will be ranked in the priority order determined by this group. (5) And finally, that we will identify working groups and immediate next steps for all of the large group's most important issues and any other issue that you want to pursue. That's a promise.

...if you walk out of here muttering to yourself that we never talked about the really important issues that you cared about, please notice that the person responsible for that is you.

It's time to get to work... what are the issues and opportunities for... that you care about? ...what are your ideas, questions, recommendations, concerns, needs and desires for resolution and future directions... right down to the the level of implementation?

### III. The Logistics of Invitation: Setting the Stage, Supporting the Flow

The hardest work of Opening Space is usually internal – personal and cultural. The logistics, on the other hand, are decidedly simple, if only because we are actively working to *not* make decisions or provide materials that participants can do a better job of making and sourcing for themselves.

We need only to provide the space and most basic tools. Even with the most simple room set-up, it will be immediately clear that leaders and sponsors have prepared for participants' arrival. In all things logistical, less is more.

In the case of meals, for instance, the best solution is often to let participants fend for themselves. This maximizes choices, gives people a chance to take a walk and catch their breath, and makes the planning cheaper and easier. If meals are to be provided, a buffet plan maximizes food choices, timing flexibility, and planning ease.

The next three pages offers a fairly complete list of logistical issues and options to consider when working in Open Space. Take a minute to review the things in this worksheet.

As you work through these details, consider that the most durable support for the meeting probably comes from the connections made between leaders, sponsors, planners, and facilitator(s). This group's collective ability to sense what is happening, to name and agree on key issue(s), to engage others in conversation and decision-making – over and above being able to get practical things done, on the ground, where it counts – *this* is the space into which the participants will be invited. The quality of this space depends on leaders' and sponsors' personal passion -- and their willingness to take responsibility for it.

How to proceed? Use the worksheet and the questions raised earlier, have the conversations with colleagues, do the tasks. Keep talking, keep crossing things off the list, keep refining the focus, and keep opening the inquiry. Begin in Open Space, even before the Open Space. Embody it first. Practice it. Then just keep expanding it – so more and more good work can get done.

## OPENING SPACE: PLANNING AND PREPARATION WORKSHEET

√	ISSUES AND OPTIONS	SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS *	SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES **
	<b><i>Key Meetings and Milestones</i></b>		
	1. Leadership meeting(s) on purpose, framing, support and deliverables		
	2. Input from other stakeholders (interviews, focus groups, surveys, team meetings, public forums, etc.)		
	3. Invitation and invitation list, drafted and approved		
	4. Invitation distributed to all potential participants		
	5. Planning group progress tracking (by meeting, conf call, website, email, etc)		
	6. Deadline for participant registration and establishing final count		
	7. Meeting with hotel or other meeting site staff (for clarifying set-up and service plans)		
	8. Room set-up (when will meeting space be available for set-up)		
	9. Debriefing meetings during event (usually immediately before or after evening news)		
	10. Follow-up meeting with leaders, sponsors and project/issue champions		
	11. Leadership support conference on results, implications, and leverage points		
	<b><i>Participation and Confirmation</i></b>		
	1. Invitation (letter, brochure, postcard, etc. -- from leader, sponsors, co-conveners?)		
	2. Invitation list - whose attention and action is needed?		
	3. Reply to _____ (what info required?)		
	4. Confirmation of registration to be provided to participants?		
	5. Preparatory materials to be provided to participants?		
	6. Registration fee or other payments to be processed?		
	7. Do participants need directions to meeting site?		
	8. Participant lodging information or arrangements?		
	9. Facilitation travel arrangements and/or budget?		

## OPENING SPACE: PLANNING AND PREPARATION WORKSHEET

√	ISSUES AND OPTIONS	SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS *	SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES **
	<b><i>Room Set-up Standards</i></b>		
	1. Meeting room (40% of ppts = diameter of circle, or take 50% of theater style capacity)		
	2. _____ Breakout spaces (not necessarily separate breakout rooms (7 per 100 ppts)		
	3. Tape-friendly walls in main meeting room and breakouts		
	4. One big circle of chairs, or spacious concentric arrangement for larger groups		
	5. Small circles of 3-5 chairs in each breakout space, with _____ extras nearby		
	6. Posters about Open Space and theme question (prepared by facilitator)		
	7. Scheduling grid of post-it notes with breakout spaces and times, (by facilitator)		
	8. Paper for posting issues, usually quarter sheets of flipchart paper		
	9. Markers, Sanford brand (wide) washable markers recommended (40 per 100) ppts		
	10. Blue light-tack masking tape, 1.5 inches wide (one roll per 100 ppts)		
	11. NO tables, except for food and computers, including in breakout spaces		
	12. NO podium, projection or stages, share information via posters if absolutely necessary		
	<b><i>Room Set-up Options</i></b>		
	1. Breakout spaces all in main meeting room		
	2. _____ flipcharts with easels, one per breakout space		
	3. Natural light in or near main meeting space, if at all possible		
	4. Two cordless handheld microphones for groups over 60-70 ppts		
	5. _____ long tables propped on one end to create additional wall space, if needed		
	6. Nametags, stickers, massage, caricature artist, toys (things I've seen, all non-essential)		
	7. Voting software (can be provided by facilitator)		
	8. Voting dots (if setting priorities the old fashioned way)		
	9. Snacks and drinks		
	10. Meal Buffet Table(s)		

## OPENING SPACE: PLANNING AND PREPARATION WORKSHEET

√	ISSUES AND OPTIONS	SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS *	SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES **
	<b><i>Documentation Options</i></b>		
	1. Template page on paper for taking notes in sessions (prepared by facilitator)		
	2. Template page on computes with instructions for typing notes (prepared by facilitator)		
	3. _____ Poster boards for capturing notes in gallery		
	4. Computers w/MS-Word for typing notes after breakout conversations (6 per 100 ppts)		
	5. 6' or 8' tables for computers and printer (2 machines per table)		
	6. One printer (need only be connected to one of the computers)		
	7. Power strips and extension cords for computer set-up		
	8. Wired or wi-fi internet access		
	9. Document parts: cover page, invitation, participant list with contact information		
	10. Copier(s) or vendor nearby to produce printed reports for participants		
	<b><i>Sustainability and Action</i></b>		
	1. Participant list and contact information included in a proceedings document		
	2. Access to website, mailing list or contact person to distribute .pdf proceedings file		
	3. Meeting time allocated for planning actions and changes (usually 2-4 hours)		
	4. Email discussion list for ongoing news and conversation		
	5. Weblog or wikiweb for ongoing documentation		
	6. Coaching and training for distributed leadership		
	<b><i>Footnotes</i></b>		
	* What is required... when, where, how much or many, etc.?		
	** Who will do, decide, deliver, advise, and be informed... leadership, planning group, facilitator, admin, others?		

#### IV. Keeping the Space Open: Action, Practice, and Positive Impact

In most situations first *task* is to produce an effective event, but the *real goal* -- and challenge -- is usually to keep it going. The latter requires more than a planning team, more than a leadership sign-off or pep talk, and more than technical facilitation support. It takes active personal support for opening, inviting, and connecting. Facilitation and planning can produce an endless stream of events. Leadership coaching is often essential for developing the high levels of personal support and conscious practice that will turn meetings and events into positive and sustainable change.

Support and practice of what? On the outside, Bulletin Board and Marketplace. What we create on the wall in an Open Space meeting is a simple bulletin board. All of the conversations that pop up on that board create a sort of Marketplace for ideas, information, resources and actions. Here are some technical things that keep the these things going after the event:

- Publish the list of issues and conveners (the bare minimum record of what happened)
- Create a gallery of session notes poster boards (typed up or just posted in the office)
- Publish the list of participants and contact info (connects everyone to everyone)
- Use computers and have conveners type up their own notes (during longer events)
- Identify immediate next steps and/or resources available in each breakout session
- Use the last 2-4 hours of the meeting for re-opening for action
- Distribute notes to all participants within 24 hours of the close of the event
- Convene a short follow-up meeting (or series) for leaders and project champions
- Publish the notes and enable ongoing posting in a weblog (like WordPress.org)
- Set-up an email announcement list or discussion group, so news can keep getting out
- Offer training and coaching to leaders and others who will support next meetings

As noted earlier, the decision to use Open Space is fundamentally a decision and a commitment to movement and change. Even desirable movements and changes create friction and heat, loss and grief. The less technical side of keeping the space open and moving is keeping company with these difficulties, making and holding space for them to move and change as well. Better to keep moving and growing than grind to a halt.

Inviting is something that effective leaders can *be* and *do*. As detailed in these lists, leaders can *do inviting* by drafting, discussing, and distributing invitations. They can focus attention, connect people, host conversations, create space for action to emerge, and keep it going with technical tools. At the same time, they must also *be inviting...* opening, caring, aligning, attracting, inquiring, listening, supporting, grounding and renewing... people.

## V. The Bottom Line: "Let's Go!"

What matters most is beginning. What must happen now to make the organization work like it should? What can you contribute to making these things happen in the next month, year, or other time frame? What is the most important and challenging question you can ask right now, even if only to a small group of would-be collaborators?

Your questions can be stated in broadly strategic or nitty gritty tactical terms. What's essential is that they make sense to the people who will be invited to participate, and that those invited are actually the people who are ultimately needed to accomplish what is desired. First, draft something. Then test it out on any prospective participants and/or the sponsors or leadership group, inviting minor revisions or complete rewriting, until it "works."

What must your invitees create and do now, based on current conditions, data, news, priorities, resources, needs and all the rest? What is the BIG question, main theme, and deepest purpose? What is the future of [purpose]? What are the Issues and Opportunities for achieving [desired outcomes]? How Can We [succeed] Together Now?

Think of your invitation as a story, or a letter to friends and colleagues. Start it with "Once upon a time..." or "As you've no doubt already heard...", if you like. "Please join us! ...let's go! ...see you there!"

...and good luck!



## Additional Resources

See also the Open Space section of [www.michaelherman.com](http://www.michaelherman.com), especially the following links, which cover a range of issues related to *how to do it* and *how to explain it*.

- Executive Summary
- Conference Schedule
- Role of the Facilitator
- Preparation Checklist
- Sample Opening Script
- Working in Open Space: A Guided Tour
- Essential Elements
- Frequently Told Stories

## About the Author

Since 1991, I have worked as Michael Herman Associates, to support faster and easier learning and change in organization. My work helps effective leaders invite movement, on the most important issues and opportunities, in all kinds of corporate and community organizations.

I have some reputation internationally, as a leader in the practice of Open Space Technology and its adaptations, having led OST training and practice workshops and helped create local OST practice groups, in Singapore, Hong Kong, India, Nepal, Ireland, Australia, Canada, Alaska and elsewhere in the US.

I serve as the founding webmaster for the Worldwide Open Space community website at [www.openspaceworld.org](http://www.openspaceworld.org), as a Director of the Open Space Institute USA, as the author/editor of numerous articles and volumes on how to practice Open Space Technology, and as an active, innovative contributor to the international development of that practice.

My formal training is in Economics, Finance and Healthcare Administration, at Indiana University and the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business. In line with this, I have come to understand invitations as offerings and Opening Space as the making efficient markets, for moving people and information, in organizations and communities.

I'd be glad to talk with you about your work and help you invite whatever movement seems most important now.

