



Open space

Open space is a democratic framework, in which the attendees create and manage their own programme of discussions on a central topic. The number of participants should be unlimited. A facilitator is normally used to guide the opening and closing sessions and to explain the procedure and principles for the attendees. Outside these activities, the facilitator should stand as far away as possible from the discussions taking place. Participants are invited to raise issues that they find essential and on which they want to convene workshops. The leaflets announcing the issues are placed on a matrix of times and spaces available for the workshops. Everyone signs up for their chosen workshop(s). Finally, there is a plenary session where attendees can make any final statements. The most important outcomes, such as ideas, conclusions and plans for immediate action, are documented in one comprehensive report that is circulated to all participants. If there is adequate time the total contents of this report can be focused and prioritised. Open space works best when the issues are complex, the people and ideas involved are diverse and the need to reach resolution is high.

Resources and requirements

Skills

- A skillful, experienced facilitator is needed.

Equipment

- Flexible facilities are required to accommodate numerous groups of different sizes.
- Office supplies are necessary: marker pens, sticky notes and flip charts.
- Refreshments will probably be necessary.

Time

- Time required will vary from one-day workshops to several-day conferences, or regular weekly meetings, but usually last from one to three days.

Useful sources of information

References

- Community planning handbook. N. Wates ed. (2000). Earthscan Publications. London.
- Open space technology: a user's guide. Harrison, O. (1992). Available from Wikima: tel. 020 7229 7320
- Participation works! 21 techniques of community participation for the 21st century. New Economics Foundation (1998). CD-Rom edition 1999. Available from: www.neweconomics.org

Level of engagement

INFORMING:

CONSULTING: ★★

INVOLVING: ★★

PARTNERSHIP:

Strengths

- Open space is a relatively inexpensive way to reach a large number of people.
- Minimal organisation is needed.
- Action is generated in a short time.
- The techniques promote learning and formation of new innovative ideas.
- Participation is likely to be fairly profound.
- An immediate output is gained in the summary of the discussion.

Weaknesses

- The techniques are less useful if the agenda has already been set.
- If discussions are not well facilitated they may be over-dominated by a single point of view.
- The accurate reporting of results at the final stage can be difficult to achieve.

- Tales from open space. Harrison, O. (1995). Abbott Publishing, Maryland.

Web

- www.iadb.org
- www.openspaceworld.org

Training

- Scottish Community Development Centre: www.scdc.org.uk

This toolbox is designed to assist Forestry Commission staff when they are considering which tools they could use to involve the public in the forest and woodland planning process. For more information please visit the website at: www.forestry.gov.uk/toolbox