

Getting “Buy-in” of New Proportions

Case study of an Open Space meeting

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A large department of a government organization had been impacted by changes in policy. Structural changes had to be made in how services were delivered and a new leader was in place. Regional and central employees had to overcome existing operational silos and concern was growing as employees faced another change.

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Three weeks before a planned annual meeting, the new leader inquired about using Open Space Technology (OST) for part of their time together to deal with the challenges. There was a high potential for conflict over complex issues; an urgency to move forward with the changes

as the deadline loomed for adoption of annual plans; and the leader admitted they did not have all the answers and believed they had a shot at creating viable solutions if they all worked together.

An invitation outlining the basic approach was sent to all 65 employees. Participants were asked to prepare simply by thinking about what they wanted to discuss to better meet the challenges ahead. No agenda was attached – they would have to put one together on site.

On the day of the meeting, participants arrived to find a large circle of chairs in the centre of the meeting room with a blank wall on one side under a sign stating “Market Place” and another wall with “Breaking News”. No agenda was to be seen anywhere. As they took their seats, many (later declared) sceptics wondered how they would possibly survive the day and more importantly, doing what?

Within one hour of the leader’s short welcome everything had changed. Each participant who cared to, had identified issues for which they had real passion and which were related to the central theme. They had written it on a sheet of paper and posted it to the “Market Place” complete with an identified time and space where task groups could gather. Raising an issue, included taking responsibility to convene a session on that topic and making sure a report

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of the results was written. Within 45 minutes of the opening, looking at the 19 topics posted, many wondered how they were going to do it all in one day. In no time, everyone was off their seat and at “The Market” to sign up for sessions in which they cared to participate! And off they went to discuss!

Over the following 3 hours, all 19 subjects were discussed. At lunch break, during which animated informal discussions continued, reports were printed and posted at the “Breaking News” wall. Participants came back to read the reports and determine which topics/issues were the top priorities for the organization to address now. Each participant then chose among the 6 priorities, the one most important to them. They met again, a task group per priority, to decide on the next steps for follow up actions and for the sharing of responsibilities.

It all ended 45 minutes later than planned, in high spirit and a low desire to leave.

In the course of the day, all notions of silos between the “structural” working groups had disappeared. New bonds took hold between staff at all levels and the energy sustained itself right through the usual “afternoon lull”. Conversations were lively and focussed on moving forward. Often they extended over the “suggested times”. They had taken charge – it was their meeting and all a facilitator could do is stay out of the way. It all ended 45 minutes late, in high spirit and a low desire to leave.

Worth mentioning is that the decision to hold the meeting in OST format was made only three weeks earlier and that there was only one facilitator despite having twenty five (25) groups that met and produced written reports before the end of the day.

A week later, harvesting of the energy and ideas was still taking place. The level of excitement generated lasted for days after this annual meeting. A task group had self-organized another meeting to continue the work started, and others were planning as the Open Space lived on - beyond the event itself! That’s how OST works!

About the Author:

Jean-Yves holds is an accredited business coach and leadership trainer who specializes in Open Space facilitation. He works as a trusted advisor to leaders who want to achieve great professional and business results in harmony with a sustainable employee engagement culture. He is known for his superior ability to elicit trust from others, bring people together, and develop lasting collaborative relationships.