

How Do Facilitators Describe Open Space Technology?

Open Space Technology is, at the very least, a new way to hold better meetings. The normative experience is that groups, large and small (from five to one thousand members), self-organize to effectively deal with hugely complex issues in a very short time.

Harrison Owen, H.H. Owen & Company
and originator of Open Space Technology
Potomac, Maryland, USA
<http://www.openspaceworld.com>

Open Space Technology has been called meeting methodology, organization transformation, intentional self-organization and surfing the chaos. Since its discovery 20 years ago, it has enabled all kinds of people, in every kind of organization and community, to create inspired meetings and events - and post phenomenal business results. It has also become clear that opening space, as an intentional leadership practice, can create inspired organizations, where ordinary people work together to create extraordinary results with regularity.

Michael Herman, Michael Herman Associates
Chicago, Illinois, USA
<http://www.globalchicago.net/wiki/wiki.cgi?MichaelHermanAssociates>

It is a philosophy, practice and process that enables groups of any size to come together around complex, important issues and accomplish something meaningful.

Peggy Holman, The Open Circle Company
Seattle, Washington, USA
<http://www.opencirclecompany.com>

When I got my training in working with not-for-profit organizations' leaders I began to pay more attention to the process of 'exchange of information'. Especially in a post-authoritarian country. Yes, we do exchange our information, but not always in an effective form. It turned out that we find the interesting method of Open Space Technology as one of the inspiring methods for meeting people, which gives the possibility to all participants to tell their points of view, to discuss the most stirring questions and share opinions and experience in the most enthusiastic way. And more -- you can find partners for your ideas and projects at the same time, and solve the problems which were probably not solved for many years. And what is most important: to make a strategic plan for your future activities with this group of associates. By communicating with the 'right' people, you can discover your hidden potential and feel yourself as a person whose opinion is very important for the decision making of this team -- for moving further into a better future.

Dr. Elena Marchuk, Regional Development Center "Ceres"
Novosibirsk, Siberia, Russia
marco@mail.nsk.ru

For organizations, Open Space is the best orienting practice I have ever seen. It combines a rich collection of other orienting practices like storytelling, silence, way-finding and inquiry to bring together a collective consciousness about where the organization is at. After a big juicy Open Space, suddenly the ground seems a little firmer, navigation seems to get easier and the maps make sense. Or sometimes you discover that the map you have been using (maybe it's a "strategic plan") has been the wrong one all along. It's all good, as Father Brian [Bainbridge] would say.

Chris Corrigan
Bowen Island, British Columbia, Canada

<http://www.chriscorrigan.com>

An Open Space gathering is not:

- A brainstorming session (people discuss their heartfelt concerns)
- A glorified suggestions session (the emphasis is on taking personal responsibility)
- A complaints session (ditto)
- A 'jolly' (An Open Space gathering involves high play, but also high learning)
- Total anarchy (there is appropriate structure and appropriate control)

Martin Leith, Movers and Shakers
Brighton, United Kingdom
<http://www.martinleith.com/openspace>

How Open Space Was Developed

Open Space originated because Harrison Owen designed and planned a conference, and when it took place he noticed that all the best work was done during the coffee breaks. All the networking, deal-making, visioning, and collaboration. All the new ideas and new products and new programs came from small circles of people chatting over similar passions and interests. Just as it happens in life. So for the next conference he designed a process that would be all coffee-break energy, all the time. Thus Open Space Technology was born.

Lisa Heft, Opening Space
Berkeley, California, USA
<http://www.openingspace.net>

It often happens that after a conference, you think: "All well and good, with those lectures, but what meant the most to me were the exchanges with colleagues in the coffee breaks." The same happened to a group of Organization Development consultants after their yearly network conference. Someone dared to wonder out loud what it would be like if the entire conference would be one big coffee break. Harrison Owen was responsible for next year's event and decided to take on the challenge. That is how Open Space Technology started: a minimum of structure and a maximum of space for creative solutions.

Koos de Heer, Aury management advies
Utrecht, Netherlands
<http://www.aury.nl/eng/openspace.html>

And then, in 1989, Open Space escaped. Within a period of less than a month, Open Space was utilized with two vastly different groups in widely separated areas. Polymer Chemists from Dupont wrestled with the future of Dacron in the USA, followed immediately by a group of scholars and executives in India considering the issue of Learning in Organizations. In both cases, everybody sat in a circle, identified what had heart and meaning for them, and collectively organized a multi-session gathering in less than an hour. Something rather strange was taking place.

In subsequent years, the space has continued to open. At this point, the experience described above has been replicated literally thousands of times on all continents with groups ranging in size from 5 to over 1000. Participants have come from Fortune 500's, third world villages, religious communities, governmental agencies, and whole towns. They have been rich, poor, educated and not, labor and management, politicians and people... and all of the above. And in each case that I know of Open Space appeared to do the job.

"Doing the Job" begs for further specificity. In the case of Open Space, it means (at the very least) that diverse, often conflicted groups up to 1000 people, manage hugely complex issues in minimal amounts of time, with no advance agenda preparation, and little, to no, overt facilitation. Typically by the conclusion of a gathering, the following promises have been kept: 1) Every issue of concern to anybody had been laid upon the table. 2) All issues were discussed to the extent that anybody cared to do that. 3) A full written record of all discussions existed and was in the hands of all participants. 4) All issues were ranked in priority order. 5) Critical "focal issues" had been isolated and Next Step actions identified for their resolution.

Harrison Owen, H.H. Owen & Company,
Potomac, Maryland, USA
<http://www.openspaceworld.com>

Since 1985, Open Space gatherings have been used in more than sixty countries worldwide by a wide range of companies and non-profit organisations including Accor, Guinness, Home Office, ICI, Ikea, McCain Foods, National Health Service, Presbyterian Church, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Robert Bosch, Shell, US West and World Bank.

Martin Leith, Movers and Shakers
Brighton, United Kingdom
<http://www.martinleith.com/openspace>

When and Why Open Space Is Used

This is a way to format a group meeting, retreat or conference that generates communication, collaboration, innovation, and other solutions to challenges and transitions. When your organization or community has a complex problem, you are completely out of ideas regarding a solution, you have a diversity of people that you can bring to the process, and the time for resolving this situation was yesterday --- This is a great time for Open Space.

Lisa Heft, Opening Space
Berkeley, California, USA
<http://www.openingspace.net>

Open Space Technology is a group process using the power of self-organising systems. I have used it successfully in many settings. It works best when there is a critical question facing the organisations that the leadership team admits they don't know the answer to and are willing to give free reign to their people within defined constraints

Andrew Donovan, Andrew Donovan Enterprises
Melbourne, Australia
<http://www.andrewdonovan.com.au>

Open Space gatherings are typically held to create a new vision, figure out how to implement a strategy, plan a significant change, solve a complex or intractable problem, invent a new product or prepare for community action. They are also increasingly used by organisations as an alternative or adjunct to their annual conference.

Open Space gatherings are particularly effective when complex or conflict-ridden issues must be resolved very quickly, and when people need to work together as equals to decide how they will bring something new into being or bring about a mutually-desired change.

Martin Leith, Movers and Shakers
Brighton, United Kingdom
<http://www.martinleith.com/openspace>

Open Space Technology is appropriate where a diverse group of people must deal with complex and potentially conflicting situations.

- Nobody knows the answer.
- Ongoing participation is required for success.
- Senior management wants to engage the whole system in finding the answer.
- Response time is "yesterday."

Laurel Doersam
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
laurick@telus.net

Committees, task forces and design teams can take weeks, months and even years to accomplish their goal - or in some cases simply to define their goal. Much of this same work can be accomplished by holding an Open Space of anywhere from several hours for networking, resource sharing and highlighting of key ideas to a 2.5 days Open Space which can include issues, opportunities and action planning, resulting in a complete written report of the proceedings for all participants plus identification and prioritization of next steps.

Lisa Heft, Opening Space
Berkeley, California, USA
<http://www.openingspace.net>

Half day = quick brainstorming

One day = deep discussion with some next steps

Two day = deep exploration of the theme with some action plans and a full book of proceedings

Two and a half day = complete exploration of theme with action plans, book of proceedings and deeper buy-in by participants

Laurel Doersam
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
laurick@telus.net

The Open Space Event

A meeting room prepared for Open Space has a circle of chairs in the middle, letters or numbers around the room to indicate meeting locations, a blank wall that will become the agenda and a news wall for recording and posting the results of the dialogue sessions.

Chris Corrigan
Bowen Island, British Columbia, Canada
<http://www.chriscorrigan.com>

Open Space Technology meeting begins with all the participants sitting in a circle, and no items on the agenda. The meeting opens with an agenda setting exercise following which the group self-organizes into smaller discussion groups. Discussion group conveners are responsible for providing a report of the discussions, which is immediately added to a book of proceedings. At the conclusion of the meeting, or very shortly thereafter, participants receive a copy of the proceedings including all of the discussion groups, reports and any action plans that were developed.

Tøke Paludan Møller, InterChange
Silkeborg, Denmark
<http://www.interchange.dk>

Open Space conferences have no keynote speakers, no pre-announced schedules of workshops, no panel discussions, no organizational booths. Instead, sitting in a large circle, participants learn in the first hour how they are going to create their own conference. Almost before they realize it, they become each other's teachers and leaders.

Anyone who wants to initiate a discussion or activity writes it down on a large sheet of paper in big letters and then stands up and announces it to the group. After selecting one of the many pre-established times and places, they post their proposed workshop on a wall. When everyone who wants to has announced and posted their initial offerings, it is time for what Owen calls "the village marketplace": Participants mill around the wall, putting together their personal schedules for the remainder of the conference. The first meetings begin immediately.

Tom Atlee, Co-Intelligence Institute
Eugene, Oregon, USA
<http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-Openspace.html>

An Open Space gathering is a new kind of meeting or conference in which the participants create their own programme of self-managed discussion groups, experiential workshops and planning sessions. Open Space allows diverse and often very large groups of people to get together, discuss issues of heartfelt concern, pool their knowledge and develop plans for collaborative action. Participants in an Open Space gathering create their own programme of self-managed sessions (discussion groups, experiential workshops, ideas sessions and planning meetings) related to a central theme, such as: What are the issues and opportunities facing the XYZ Corporation? There are no invited speakers, and just one facilitator to explain the procedure and facilitate the plenary sessions.

Martin Leith, Movers and Shakers
Brighton, United Kingdom
<http://www.martinleith.com/openspace>

Essentially an Open Space meeting proceeds along the following process:

1. Group convenes in a circle and is welcomed by the sponsor. The facilitator provides an overview of the process and explains how it works.
2. Facilitator invites people with issues of concern to come into the circle, write the issue on a piece of quarter size flip chart paper and announce it to the group. These people are "conveners."
3. The convener places their paper on the wall and chooses a time and a place to meet. This process continues until there are no more agenda items.
4. The group then breaks up and heads to the agenda wall, by now covered with a variety of sessions. Participants take note of the time and place for sessions they want to be involved in.
5. Dialogue sessions convene for the balance of the meeting. Recorders determined by each group capture the important points and post the reports on the news wall. All of these reports will be rolled into one document by the end of the meeting.
6. Following a closing or a break, the group might move into convergence, a process that takes the issues that have been discussed and attaches action plans to them to "get them out of the room."

7. The group then finishes the meeting with a closing circle where people are invited to share comments, insights, and commitments arising from the process.

Chris Corrigan
Bowen Island, British Columbia, Canada
<http://www.chriscorrigan.com>

After the first hour of an Open Space meeting, the participants are completely self-managing, and natural leadership emerges. Quickly and easily, the process creates an environment for innovation, problem solving, creativity, teamwork, and rapid pro-active change. Chaos, within and outside an organization, is not an enemy but an ally - in Open Space, chaos and order are in a constant creative dance.

Chris Weaver, Springbranch Facilitation
Asheville, North Carolina, USA
<http://www.springbranch.net>

The guidelines for an Open Space meeting or conference include the four following principles:

1. Whoever comes is the right people, which reminds people in the small groups that getting something done is not a matter of having 100,000 people and the chairman of the board. The fundamental requirement is people who care to do something. And by showing up, that essential care is demonstrated.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have, keeps people focused on the here and now, and eliminates all of the could-have-beens, should-have-beens or might-have-beens. What is is the only thing there is at the moment.
3. Whenever it starts is the right time alerts people to the fact that inspired performance and genuine creativity rarely, if ever, pay attention to the clock. They happen (or not) when they happen.
4. When it's over it's over. In a word, don't waste time. Do what you have to do, and when it's done, move on to something more useful.

Harrison Owen, H.H. Owen & Company,
Potomac, Maryland, USA
<http://www.openspaceworld.com>

There is also one "Law" in Open Space: originally called The Law of Two Feet, it can also be called The Law of Motion and Responsibility (because not everyone has two feet):

Whenever a participant feels that he/she is neither contributing nor learning, he/she is encouraged to use their capacity to move to another place of interest. Thus, the Law of Two Feet creates a process of cross-fertilization between the different focus groups.

Dr. Holger Nauheimer
Berlin, Germany
h.nauheimer@snafu.de <http://www.change-management-toolbook.com>

Within the broad definition of "learning or contributing" people have lots of images. I usually refer to it as doing with your feet what you normally do with your mind when attending a conference. If you no longer are giving or receiving energy in the group, then you are taking away from what is possible there. It is better to take full responsibility for your own "state" and physically move, rather than do it only in your head. It encourages people to actively attend to their own mind/body energy and do something about it. Hopefully, when people stay, it is because they want to say.

Larry Peterson, Larry Peterson & Associates in Transformation
Toronto, Canada
<http://www.spiritedorg.com>

The law of 2 feet is about following what has heart and meaning. It is a fundamental reminder of personal responsibility for one's experience. One aspect of this that I haven't seen discussed yet is using your two feet to stand up for what you believe. Sometimes 2 feet let you move, other times, they support you where you are. I think that is the ultimate gift of the law. It requires being very clear about acting from passion and responsibility.

Peggy Holman, The Open Circle Company
Seattle, Washington, USA
<http://www.opencirclecompany.com>

There is such a strong "meeting culture" that prevails where people have gotten used to suffering through conferences. Where they're minds are on what they will do when they leave more than on what they can do while they are there. The One Laws rocks the boat and actualizes personal responsibility, and makes one actually think about what they are about RIGHT NOW.

Don Ferretti
Auburn, California, USA
dferrett@placer.ca.gov

Where [the Law of Two Feet] becomes quite dramatic is when we find people who are unused to experiencing autonomy within organizational or group settings. Finding oneself "in charge" of oneself can be pretty heady stuff.

Richard Charles Holloway
Olympia, Washington, USA

One could also say that you do not always move out with your two feet, you can also move in.

Koos de Heer
Auryn management advies
Utrecht, Netherlands
koosdhr@auryn.nl <http://www.auryn.nl>

One of the more surprising gifts of the Law of Two Feet is the apparent contribution to conflict resolution. I say "apparent" because I have no direct evidence connecting the Law to the resolution of conflict, but it is true that intensely conflicted groups of people find effective and amicable solutions in Open Space without benefit of formal conflict resolution procedure, or even any intermediary facilitators. Apparently they do it all by themselves. By way of example consider 100+ Zulus, Hausa, Afrikaners, and Brits struggling to gain an understanding of each other as they worked to create the New South Africa. Or how about 225 federal bureaucrats, state and local bureaucrats, and Native Americans gathered to work out approaches to building roads on tribal lands.

Observably, participants intensely engage up to the point that they can't stand it any more, and then exercise the Law of Two Feet. They will walk away, cool off, and come back for more. Apparently the common concern to achieve resolution keeps people together, and the law allows them to separate when things become too hot to handle.

Harrison Owen, H.H. Owen & Company
Potomac, Maryland, USA
<http://www.openspaceworld.com>

The Benefits of Open Space

Open Space meetings are:

- Easy to organize, requiring very little lead time
- Effective for small groups (20-500)
- Interactive

- Helpful in bringing leaders forward naturally
- Effective for existing or new organizations, coalitions or associations,
- Facilitated by only one or two facilitators, no matter how large the group
- Less expensive and less complicated than other large group methodologies

Gail West, ICA Taiwan
 Taipei, Taiwan
icataiw@ms69.hinet.net

[An Open Space meeting]

Involves the 'whole system' in dealing with complexity and conflict.

Accesses the collective creativity and wisdom of all your people including vital interfaces with suppliers and customers if required.

Co-create solutions owned by everyone without the drawbacks of top-down cascade.

Open up new communication channels within the organisation and create networks leading to more innovation.

Leadership harnesses the energy, creativity and motivation of everyone in the organisation, gaining the ultimate in competitive edges.

Senior management refocuses on positive to develop futures.

Moves away from outmoded command and control structures to modern participation based on voluntary co-operation.

Kerry Napuk and Eddie Palmer, Open Futures Ltd.
 Edinburgh, Scotland
<http://www.openfutures.com>
 from 'The Large Group Facilitator's Manual -
 A Collection of Tools for Understanding, Planning and Running Large Group Events'
 Gower Press, 2003

Working groups that form in Open Space often carry on beyond the event to accomplish the tasks they set for themselves. This action is shaped by the parameters established by the sponsors before the event. When there is real freedom for taking action, issues can be resolved quickly. Opportunities discovered can lead to immediate results. Good ideas or proposals that are not at the action stage can be identified for further work. A surprising sense of the whole organization or unit, its direction and interconnections emerges for participants during Open Space events. Because action is chosen and breakthrough learning often occurs, performance improvements are real and have been documented. The critical issues and opportunities get on the table. The results of Open Space meetings are often startling. As a "large group" intervention it can shift culture and develop positive momentum. It can enable sponsors and participants to experience a new way of working and leading.

Larry Peterson, Larry Peterson & Associates in Transformation
 Toronto, Canada
<http://www.spiritedorg.com>

With Open Space, there are not ideas that remain hidden or unspoken. Everything emerges.

Kettly Alexandre
 Port au Prince, Haiti
kerlinealexandre2002@yahoo.fr
 and www.beyondborders.net/experiment.htm

One of the "hooray"s from a recent Open Space is that a manager heard a lot of feedback about how the negative and repressive behavior of one of his supervisors (who had chosen not to participate) was affecting his employees. The manager has now found the courage to confront the supervisor with some new requirements about his job performance. We will see what behavior actually changes--but the issue is now out in the open, instead of driving everybody crazy behind the scenes.

Joelle Everett Lyons
Shelton, Washington, USA
JLEShelton@aol.com

An Open Space Technology (OST) event is an environment and an opportunity for space to be opened to people to embody leadership.

Martin Giannini
Dublin, Ireland
<http://www.transora.com>

It's a creative problem solving process where nobody knows the answer and all the participants are experts.

It's a safe space for people to contribute and co-create.

It's a bottom-up process with meaning, because people put their energy behind things that mean something to them in the organisation.

It's driven by individual passion and responsibility.

Kerry Napuk and Eddie Palmer, Open Futures Ltd. Edinburgh, Scotland
<http://www.openfutures.com> from 'The Large Group Facilitator's Manual -
A Collection of Tools for Understanding, Planning and Running Large Group Events'
Gower Press, 2003'

[Open Space is] passion bounded by responsibility: Passion gets you out of your chair, responsibility moves you to action. Things only get done by individuals, and nothing gets done unless people want to do. Passion is great, but goes nowhere until the feet take it somewhere.

Michael Herman, Michael Herman Associates
Chicago, Illinois, USA
<http://www.michaelherman.com>

I can't imagine that there could be a better method for enabling a group to discover its potential.

Yvette Michaud
Port au Prince, Haiti
and www.beyondborders.net/experiment.htm

Open Space has removed tradition bound notions within my attitudes. I am living the spirit of a popular educator. Each of us are learning, one from another.

Antonal Mortime
Port au Prince, Haiti
antonalmortime@hotmail.com and www.beyondborders.net/experiment.htm

The 2 days Open Space that followed were a success, 'a miracle' in the words of the CEO who added: "3 years ago we received a thick report from '___' (a famous international strategic company) that cost 1.5 million, and we could implement only small parts of it. Now we produced something much better at the cost of 1 page of that report, and it seems that we can implement it all."

When NOT to do Open Space?

The answer is already known.

Sponsors think they know the answer.

Sponsors feel the need to be in charge and control, control, control

Laurel Doersam
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
laurick@telus.net

A note -- and a "reality check" -- for clients to consider when using this method and applying Open Space principles to their own organization:

1. 1. If there are organizational boundaries or givens which govern the space which you are opening, be sure those are stated up front and consistently as the results of the opening the space percolate through the organization's daily life.
2. 2. Open Space leads to unpredictable outcomes. If management invites people to take responsibility and follow through with action, you'd better be prepared to follow through on your end of the bargain and trust people and help them be accountable. Backpedaling leads to less trust instead of more.
3. 3. Openness has many levels. Each time, you pat yourself on the back thinking that you have created an open organization, you could be in for big surprises. It requires continuous commitment to learn and explore and act. Flexibility and resilience are important qualities for creating open organizations.
4. 4. Being open does not mean just "hanging out and allowing anything to happen", you need to follow Open Space principles yourself and take responsibility for what has heart and meaning for you as you learn how to maintain the space for others to do the same.
5. 5. Open Space at work can surface conflicts. Trust, mutual respect and the four Open Space principles help you navigate through and out of conflicts. A coach or facilitator helps, too, because sometimes YOU are the person who is an advocate for one side of the conflict.
6. 6. If you are not prepared to look at both shadow and bright sides of your organization, do not implement open space principles at work.
7. 7. Authenticity is definitely increased by following these principles at work. If you are afraid of others questioning your actions and challenging you, then do not put these principles to work.
8. 8. Appreciation and acknowledgment breeds more appreciation and acknowledgment in the organization. It is a powerful path to culture change.

Prasad Kaipa, Mithya Institute for Learning and CPR Group
prasad@mithya.com

Excerpted from his article co-written with R. Sundar of Majesco Software, Inc.,
Open Space at Work in Majesco and Mastek

To sponsor or facilitate Open Space in any organization or community is to decide and commit to be a leader (and servant) of people in motion.

Michael Herman, Michael Herman Associates
Chicago, Illinois, USA
<http://www.michaelherman.com>

The Effectiveness of Open Space

The use of Open Space Technology has been effective in a diversity of settings, cultures and countries. The method has been used by communities working towards peace, chemists designing new polymers, tribal and governmental leaders planning land use, community advocates and local government designing literacy programs, conference organizers holding conferences in this format, architects designing pavilions for the Olympics, an entire town having a simultaneous discussion town meeting, and community workers helping communities rebuild and heal after times of war. This tool can be utilized by groups of 5 to over 1500 and the dynamics and the results are always the same: input from stakeholders at all levels, new ways of thinking and working, large amounts of work done rapidly, bringing perceived competitors together on issues and projects, organizational flexibility, interdepartmental or intercommunity teamwork, a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of passion and energy for the challenges ahead.

Lisa Heft, Opening Space
Berkeley, California, USA
<http://www.openingspace.net>

There is not a better method. I've been facilitating groups all of my adult life. Meeting facilitation is my life. I've been writing a book on the subject. Experiencing Open Space is causing me problems. I have had to rewrite every single chapter in my book. Open Space is forcing me to rethink my assumptions and practices.

Strauss Vedrine
Port au Prince, Haiti
mhdrural@hotmail.com

Maybe the clearest and most defined and effective structures are the ones we create for ourselves. I talk about this a lot, answering critics who say that Open Space is too unstructured. It is not. It is perfectly, elegantly, intricately organized structure, created from "nothing" but initial conditions and sustained by the passion and responsibility of those in the space, who will always move, especially unconsciously, towards structure that is perfect for the moment, in every moment.

Chris Corrigan
Bowen Island, British Columbia, Canada
<http://www.chriscorrigan.com>

...and in response to Chris, above):

Yes, absolutely. Open space is a reflection of the universe's 14 billion year experience of self-organizing. Where did we humans ever get the idea we needed to re-write the planetary wisdom of that much experience?

Ralph Copleman
New Jersey, USA
ralph@earthdreams.net

Open Space Technology is not "owned" by anyone. Its developer, Harrison Owen, considers it to be in the common trust for the common good. It is available for anyone to learn about and use. Open Space Technology is simple in form. And, as with other deep practices of human endeavor, a practitioner's journey to mastery can take a lifetime.

Chris Weaver, Springbranch Facilitation
Asheville, North Carolina, USA
<http://www.springbranch.net>

We need research and reflection to integrate what we are learning about this phenomena [co-intelligent patterns in nature, mathematics and reality] with what we are learning about the more conscious forms of collective intelligence -- such as those... which show up during creative whole-

systems activities like Open Space Technology... There is need for both theory and practice here, weaving together both conscious and unconscious collective intelligence for the benefit of communities and societies. The resulting knowledge would be profoundly useful to humanity as a whole. It is the sort of knowledge out of which a new, wiser civilization could arise.

Tom Atlee, Co-Intelligence Institute
Eugene, Oregon, USA
<http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-Openspace.html>

compiled by Lisa Heft
For more information on Open Space
take a look around this website: www.openingspace.net
or contact any of the facilitators in this article.
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source, including web address: www.openingspace.net Feel free to contact me if you have any questions:
lisaheft@openingspace.net