

A Note to Corporate Clients

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If you are considering using Open Space Technology in your company, please use caution. You may have heard that superior levels of performance are possible with Open Space, that highly conflicted groups are enabled to find constructive resolution, that massively complex design and organizational problems can be solved. Based upon the 25 year experience with Open Space in 100,000+ iterations in 136 countries, what you have heard seems to be true. But still caution is advised. The reasons are several.

First, Open Space Technology is simple. Most other approaches involve lengthy advance planning, highly complex procedures, prior training for participants, and constant intervention on the part of the facilitators. In Open Space, none of that happens. Participant groups, ranging in size from 5 to 3000, are simply invited to sit in a circle (multiple, concentric circles for large groups), create a bulletin board with their issues of concern, open a market place to negotiate time and place of meeting – and then go to work. One might think that something that simple could not possibly work.

Second, Open Space is efficient. Even with very large groups, a single facilitator is sufficient for the task. You may be surprised, however, to discover that even that one facilitator is most obvious by virtue of his or her absence. After a 15 minute introduction, the facilitator largely disappears from the scene and everything runs essentially all by itself. There is no need for constant monitoring, program redesign, or intervention. In a word, Open Space is essentially self-managing, or one might say, self-organizing – which means that management, as an added cost is eliminated.

Third, Open Space violates virtually all principles and practices of standard management. Starting with the facts that there is no Leader or leadership committee, prearranged agenda, or ongoing management control, it might seem that Open Space is a disaster waiting to happen, or at the very least, a failure before departure.

Given all of the above, caution in the use of Open Space is recommended. That said, Open Space has been effectively employed thousands of times, including significant applications in France. In the early '90's ACCOR Hotels found itself engaged in a massive merger/acquisition process. In a very short period of time they essentially doubled or tripled their size with the addition of new brands and the expansion of old ones. It is sometimes suggested that merger/acquisitions are accomplished when the lawyers and accounts have done their work. But those who have actually been through such a process understand that is only the beginning. Getting the organizational mechanics right (rules, procedures, etc) is an essential first step – but the really interesting part is establishing the new complex of executive relationships and building an effective culture to sustain them. Not an easy task, and certainly one with levels of subtle complexity that quite boggle the mind.

Of course there are those who suggest that by careful analysis and planning all of that complexity can be taken into account and brought to a fruitful endpoint. Change Management, I think they call it. I am sure planning and analysis are useful, but given the complexity of the moment and the fact that everything is in constant motion, it is only a beginning. The truth of the matter is that things only work when they work – which means that the organization as a whole, as well as the several executives will be engaged in what might be termed an ongoing action/research project. Academic jargon for that tried and true method called “trial and error” – try something, and if it doesn't work, try something else. The critical key is to find a relatively safe space and time in which the essential players can productively engage each other and the common issues they confront. The normal daily environment doesn't usually provide such space/time. But several days in Open Space can meet the critical need.

The leadership group of ACCOR Hotels met in Open Space for two days. The gathering took

place at the corporate university, south of Paris, and because there was no single room large enough, the meeting place was an elegant tent sited in the courtyard. Festivities started with an evening conversation between the two Chairmen and the assembled body of senior executives. And then on the following morning, everybody sat in a circle, posted their issues of concern, worked out the time and place of meeting – and went to work. The issues covered everything you could think of under the heading of merger/acquisition and a lot that might not have come to your mind. As promised every single issue of concern to anybody was on the table, if they chose to put it there. Creating the complex two day agenda took a little more than an hour, and it ran without a hitch, but there were some interesting detours.

One group had taken on the delicate issue of “cross brand identity” – how could entities as disparate as Motel 6 and the Pullman Versailles (a world renown 5 star hotel) maintain their own uniqueness and still be recognizably “ACCOR?” The discussion was intense, but not very productive, and so the group decided they needed a break. As it happened the Grand Prix was running at the time, and so the group adjourned to the TV lounge to watch the end of the race. When the race ended, the participants engaged in apparently idle conversation – and then one of the members said, “I think I have got it. Theme Bars” Everybody loves the Grand Prix and cocktail lounges decorated on that common theme could be done in a fashion appropriate to virtually any clientele. It would all be ACCOR but in the special flavors of Motel 6, Novatel, Sofitel, and all the rest. I can’t honestly say how many such lounges were eventually constructed, but the concept was surely innovative and just the sort of thing that could bring unity out of the diversity of the new ACCOR.

It would not be fair to say that all issues of merger/acquisition were solved with that single Open Space, but a critical first step had taken place. People were no longer talking *about* the plans and mechanics; they were actively and productively engaged in the actual process of uniting disparate organizations. Perhaps most important, previous strangers, and in some cases competitors, now became friends and colleagues. It is significant, I think, that for a number of years after that first event, Open Space became an annual affair with the ACCOR executives. When contemplating Open Space, please use caution, or at the very least be prepared to have your normal assumptions about organizational management and behavior severely challenged. It is quite possible that the unthinkable impossible becomes a new normal.