

According to Wikipedia, **Open Space Technology (OST)** is an approach to purpose-driven leadership,<sup>[1]</sup> including a way for [hosting](#) meetings, [conferences](#), corporate-style retreats and community summit events, focused on a specific and important purpose or task — but *beginning* without any formal agenda, beyond the overall purpose or theme. In my words, open space is just a better way to meet people.

So why do we have to talk about open space in China today?

First of all, when it comes to openness, nobody would think of China. People may think about America, or New York where we are so close to the statue of liberty. Dated back to history, China has been dominated by feudalism for over 2500 years out of 5000 in history. That's a long time when people live under the control of everything.

How about China today?

It's a tough question. I still remember when I was in school, parents and teachers told us to be well-disciplined. In other words, be quiet, invisible and don't challenge the authority. We are victims. Like in university, sometimes we were forced to be the audience and clapped our hands for some professors in order to make them feel welcomed. And I swear, in all the assemblies, conferences, conventions that I ever participated in China, what I found most interesting was talking to handsome guys nearby or simply took a nap.

I'll complain for a whole day if I have enough time. But better if I just stop here.

6 weeks ago I was having lunch in Washington DC with this 80 year old guy -Harrison Owen, the founder of open space technology. He dared me to be curious about another way: what if thousands of people who cared most about a community could be empowered "live" to co-create solutions

I said what? - he started telling me stories of the open space technology he had invented 30 years ago with 300000 performances in over 100 countries.

Harrison Owen - is he a great storyteller -- but then he said something that made me fall off my chair - I am going to Beijing for **open space china** next week would you like to come?

Of course I do! I am a Chinese in America.

So I went to Beijing and within a few hours i saw something amazingly joyful i had never seen before -- my peoples co-creating solutions to deep community problems with such joy, passion and freedom to think, communicate and experiment.

The participants came from different parts of China and I had great honor to take the same flight with Harrison Owen from Washington Dulles international airport. But he was in the first class. We had a diverse group, from government officers, social workers, non-profit organizations, community representatives, teachers, university students, professors, scholars, social entrepreneurs who came together at the same time sitting in the same conference room talking about the future of China.

I'll tell you what they did and talked about in Beijing.

1. Professors use open space technology while in university for case studies.
- 2.They use open space to redesign communities to help improve elder people's living standard in nursing home. Some retired doctors, teachers could still do some volunteer jobs there.
3. They use open space to think about how to use drama to perform the real stories to educate people so that people could better understand the conflicts among family members and societies. They

call it one person, one story. Or similarly improvisational theatre as psychotherapy.

4. They use open space to build a low carbon emission community– they redesign the community with the big investments of the government. Some farmers even plant organic vegetables on the roof. That’s really a brilliant idea!

5. In autism children care center– they have therapy classes and conversation between children and parents, which also require open space technology to come up with better ideas.

6. Community library project– how to bring more libraries back to community?

These are real challenges. Usually it’s the top people who make decisions for these challenges because they are wise, smart and experienced. But that does not mean they could always make the right decisions. In the nursing center, only the elders know what they need. Why not ask them to join the decision making? People in Beijing, they did it and they made it. The elders are happy and also the government officers are happy. Open space really achieved great success in China. If you want to make innovations in university, why not invite students to have an open space discussion?

What actually happens in an Open Space event? The Open Space event begins with everyone gathered in an open circle. The facilitators briefly introduce the theme and guidelines of the Open Space process, and then invite the participants to identify their passions, needs and interests – all the issues and concerns they want to explore within the Open Space. Participants then choose those issues which, individually, are of most interest and importance, and these topics become the focal point for all the subsequent break–out sessions, dialogue and action planning.

To start an open space, people should really be well prepared. For example,

There must be a clear and compelling theme, an interested and committed group, time and a place, and a leader.

Detailed advance agendas, plans, and materials are not only unneeded, they are usually counterproductive.

Creation of a powerful theme statement is critical, for it will be the central mechanism for focusing discussion and inspiring participation.

It must have the capacity to inspire participation by being specific enough to indicate the direction, while possessing sufficient openness to allow for the imagination of the group to take over.

The group must be interested and committed. Failing that, Open Space Technology will not work.

The key ingredients for deep creative learning are real freedom and real responsibility. Freedom allows for exploration and experimentation, while responsibility insures that both will be pursued with rigor. Interest and commitment are the prerequisites for the responsible use of freedom. There is no way that we know of to force people to be interested and committed.

Participation in the Open Space event must be completely voluntary. The people who come should be there because they want to be there.

It is also imperative that all participants know what they are getting into before they arrive. Obviously they can't know the details of discussions that have yet to take place. But they can and should be made aware of the general outlines.

Open Space is not for everybody, and involuntary, non-informed participation is not only a contradiction in terms, it can become very destructive.

If you are interested in innovation, you've got to try open space once. If you want to try it, I am here to help- and to ask Harrison Owen to help **Open Space Brooklyn and Beijing!**