**Overview and Principles of Utilizing Open Space Technology for part of our Conference Format**

Note to VSA BOD members: The format of a significant portion of our conference this time is based upon the book, “Open Space Technology: A User’s Guide, Third Edition, Revised and Expanded” by Harrison Owen, who is the Originator of Open Space Technology. Here are a few highlights from the book for you to understand . . .

**Harrison Owen (HO)’s Checklist for Open Space (OST):**

* Appropriateness – OST *is* right for our purposes; criteria:
  + There is a real business issue
  + A great deal of complexity
  + Diversity in terms of people and perspectives
  + Real passion and possibly conflict amongst our community and attendees
  + Genuine urgency
* Theme: Focused on the Future (of Living Well with Blindness and Low Vision into 2030 – What will it take?)
* Invitation
  + The Theme: Focused on the Future
  + Background/Rational: We all care about people who are blind or have low vision. The issues our constituents face are oftentimes different than those of their sighted peers. What issues are we most concerned about? What have we learned in the past 5 years that can help shape better education, services & employment for ppl w/bvi? Which public policies most negatively affect ppl w/bvi? How can we improve these? What scientific and/or technological innovations have the greatest promise for improving the quality of life for ppl w/bvi? What are the greatest barriers to ppl w/bvi of all ages to receiving effective and comprehensive education, rehabilitation and employment services? What are the most pressing issues in our collective field? (continue to develop these kinds of questions that will help get attendees juices flowing and prompt their suggestions for Topics/Issues for Discussion Sessions)
  + Logistics: see below
  + Promises: (note; these are essentially HO’s words – can paraphrase)
    - Every issue of concern to everyone present will be raised if they took responsibility for doing that.
    - All issues will receive full discussion, to the extent desired.
    - A preliminary report of issues and discussions will be received by all participants by the time they leave, with a more thorough one a few weeks later.
    - Taking action: VSA will consider acting on some of the issues raised but will not be possible for us to address all; all participants have responsibility for considering the actions they can take in their own organizations.
* Time – adequate time has been dedicated to the Open Space Activities; we will have up to 48 breakout sessions, an hour for each with transition time in between.
* Main Space – chairs after lunch will be arranged in 4 sections of concentric circles; we had a large rectangle in Atlanta, but circle is much preferred.
* The Wall – will we arranged in the meeting space, recreated in Word and shared via the app, email and our texting service.
* Other Spaces – in addition to the 8 break-out rooms we have, there are enough casual spaces for *butterflies* to light. Butterflies are those participants who may not want to spend all of their time in sessions, It is perfectly acceptable to flit from session to session and/or have other conversations in other spaces.
* Food and Drink – breaks and mealtimes are meant to be flexible in case sessions don’t finish right on time – we will do our best to manage this.
* Supplies & Equipment – we will have microphones & runners in the Marketplace session to assist with gathering topics; will we use post it notes again and organize just as we did in Atlanta – staff are responsible for ding this in a very short amount of time; the schedule will be on the wall, and retyped as a Word document and shared with all participants AND all sessions with rooms will be texted every hour; accessible laptops will be available in every room for notetaking – we have a template and system will we use to ensure relative consistency and that all gets saved and shared with full group asap in accessible format. Notes are shared in real time throughout the conference. And staff will compile a cleaned up version a few weeks post conference.

**Facilitation:**

* Facilitator Prep – the Open Space facilitator is really not meant to do anything other than *make and hold space* for the group. This requires being fully present and some intense mental preparation. Re-reading the book, I considered finding another facilitator because I am not sure it will be possible for me to compartmentalize and separate mentally from all the other details of the conference production – my head is typically full of lots of noise on the second day of the conference. However, we decided we could do this by delegating a significant amount of what would typically be my conference duties to others including VSA staff and VSA BOD Members. I may need to skip part of Jane’s session – at least the working lunch just prior to the Opening Session of Open Space.
* Stages of Initiation – how the opening session goes
  + Welcome – a very brief welcome by me (because I am not an external facilitator, they know me and we had other intros and welcomes on Sunday and Monday morning) “Welcome to Open Space” as I walk into the center of the circle . . .
* Focus the Group and State the Theme – talk briefly about the theme, purpose, objectives; more evocative and provocative than descriptive and prescriptive. Get their passion for the subject flowing. Positivity and hopefulness. Let them know we will have written proceedings by the end.
* Describe the Process – Lee will briefly describe OST and that it has been around since 1985 and working well all over the world with groups as small as 5 and as large as 2000. My script will be something like. “ In a little while I am going to invite each and everyone one of you who cares to suggest a topic for a breakout discussion to come to the center of the circle here, take a post it note and write the title of your session and your name on it. If you have more than one topic or issue, take more post-it notes. We have assistants standing at the end of all four aisles as you enter the circle to assist with writing if you would like. Then you will come to the center of the circle near me, take the mic and say, ‘My issue or topic is . . . . and my name is . . . ‘ and then hand to (Wendy) to add to the Wall/Agenda. We will take turns doing this for as long as it takes to exhaust this group’s desired list of discussion topics. Explain what it means to suggest a topic/issue.”
* Four Principles and One Law –
  + PRINCIPLES:
    - Whoever shows up are the right people – we are not concerned about the number of ppl in each session nor the type of ppl. What matters is the quality of the interaction and conversation that ensues, the responsibility of which rests with all participants.
    - Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened – real learning and real progress will only take place when we all move beyond our original agendas and convention-bound expectations. Let go and embrace the unexpected.
    - Whenever it starts is the right time – it’s ok if the session takes longer to start or end – but participants need to be mindful of other groups scheduled for the space and move if necessary to continue their creative conversations.
    - When it’s over, it’s over – it’s also ok if the session comes to a natural conclusion sooner than scheduled.
  + LAW:
    - The Law of Two Feet – If during our time together, you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet and go to some more productive place. DO NOT feel OBLIGATED to remain in a session to be polite.
* Bumblebees and Butterflies –
  + Bumblebees are those ppl who take freedom of the law very seriously and use their two feet, constantly flitting from meeting to meeting. Their contributions are large and direct: they pollinate and cross-pollinate, lending richness and variety to the discussions.
  + Butterflies are ppl who may never get into any meeting. Their contribution lies in creating centers of nonaction, where silence may be enjoyed or some new, unexplored topic of conversation engaged. Its all good. Attendees are welcome to participate however they like.
* Create the Community Bulletin Board/Agenda – Explain this process as simply as possibly. Remind the group of the theme and ask a few provocative questions. Give a minute of silence. Invite the brave to come forward.
* Open the Village Marketplace – Once all post-its are collected, staff will magically organize into no more than 48 breakout sessions, addressing conflicts as neatly as possible. Once the agenda is created, we will share as quickly as possible and announce the start time of the first break out session round. We will email, and text the final results. And announce the start time and get ppl moving towards the breakout rooms. We will have lots of sighted guides available to help.
* Get out of the way!