

IBI Quarterly

vol. 3 – Spring 2003

Dear Reader,

We are happy to introduce you to some new developments at Intercultural Business Improvement.

First of all, we would like to introduce two new IBI Network Members: Doris Gottlieb and Stefan Woudenberg. More information on their background and experience you will find in the section IBI Network at www.ibinet.nl. Doris has also written the new IBI Quarterly on Open Space Technology, which you will find at the end of this section.

Second, we would like to draw your attention to our Licensing Course for the Intercultural Readiness Check (IRC) on June 23 and 24, 2003. More information on the IRC you will find in the IBI Quarterly, 2. If you are interested in this course, please contact us at ibinet@wxs.nl for further information and details.

Third, we can now offer the Meetings and Decision-Making Questionnaire (see <http://www.ibinet.nl> / IBI Interactive) in both English and Italian. We would like to

thank former IBI member Annebet van Mameren for translating the questionnaire into Italian. She will soon start collecting data from Italian respondents on their views and experiences with how meetings are run and decisions taken in Italian companies. For those of you who wish to receive the Russian version of the questionnaire (translated by IBI Network Member Olga Novikova), please contact us at ibinet@wxs.nl.

Last but not least we are happy to present the new IBI Quarterly (3) on Open Space Technology (OST). This article has been written by Doris Gottlieb, OST expert and IBI Network Member as of April 2003. We hope that you will find this relatively new method for large group interactions interesting and relevant to your work, and welcome your comments and ideas.

We wish you a productive and motivating time @ work.

Ursula Brinkmann

Intercultural Business Improvement

Open Space Technology – A New Approach to Working with Multicultural Groups

By Doris Gottlieb, IBI Network Member

One of the challenges of working with internationally operating organizations is to find a way to mobilize the talents and perspectives of their diverse workforce. These challenges may show up in training contexts that are aimed at helping people to function more efficiently by improving their communication with one another, and to bring dilemmas and difficulties into the open where they can be spoken about, understood and worked through.

When difficult problems need to be solved, when tension is in the air, and when there is time pressure, it may become extremely difficult to integrate the perspectives, needs and interests of a highly diverse group of people. Communication can become very difficult; people begin to rely on cultural stereotypes and assumptions, power plays get acted out and groups become dysfunctional. It is frustrating that precisely at these times – when it is so essential to integrate different types of knowledge and perspectives – communication may break down so easily. But people do need to work together effectively after all. Can we help organizations to address the challenges they face and still make use of diversity? Are there ways to intervene in these situations so that

differences in culture, profession and perspectives can be used to enrich problem-solving and cooperation, as is so often promised?

When I have the opportunity to work with organizations that must find creative solutions in an environment of tension, diversity, and uncertainty I have begun to work with a method called Open Space Technology (OST). OST provides a structure where people can meet one another with surprising efficiency. Although it was not specifically designed for work in intercultural settings, it has shown to be very powerful in these contexts – even against people's initial judgment.



Open Space Technology is a form of meeting/learning event that takes place from between _ day up to 3 days depending on the desired goals. On the day of an Open Space event people are invited to enter an essentially empty room. They know about the theme of the day, but not its agenda or schedule, as none has been created. They only know the time slots into which the day is divided: plenary and sub-group sessions, and breaks. Participants may also know that by the end of the event they will need to create a concrete plan of action.

There are no beamers, no overhead projectors – instead there is a circle of chairs, with pens and paper in its center. The circle can be quite large as OST can be done with groups of up to 1000 people. A wall shows a chart delineating times and breakout rooms, and some handwritten posters. There is usually one facilitator (and several assistants), and at times some computers at the back where people can write reports during the event.

As people come in, sit down and are welcomed, the facilitator introduces the day and sets the structure within which they will work. The following elements are always introduced:

1. The concept of *Passion Bounded by Responsibility*, and
2. The belief that when the two are balanced, people will be able to organize themselves around important topics in order to find creative solutions.

People receive a set of ground rules for how to work together: Four Principles and one Law delineating attitudes and behaviors to help the event run smoothly.

The Four Principles of OST:

1. Whenever it starts is the right time
2. Whoever are here are the right people
3. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened
4. When it's over, it's over.

The principles enable people to focus on the here and now, to dwell on and trust what is, and to let go of “what should have been” or “what is not”.

The Law of Two Feet

This states that during an Open Space meeting, if you find yourself somewhere where you are not getting what you want at that moment, get up and leave. Go to where you feel you are useful or where you



think it's right for you ... wherever that may be (including the bar). That means you can leave subgroups and plenary meetings at any time, in search of the place you think is best for you.

People are then asked to take responsibility for running subgroup meetings on topics they feel sufficiently committed to in order to initiate a discussion. They are invited to come to the center of the circle, take a marker to write down their name and topic, and to announce it to the group. There are predetermined session times and available breakout rooms. Participants choose a space and time and put their topic on the wall. When all topics have been posted, the participants decide where to go and then they are off. From this point on people in OST manage their own sub-meetings. At the end of each day there is a plenary session where people can share any news and thoughts they have, and if the OST goes on for more than 1 day the group can also set priorities for future actions and even design concrete action plans.

Does this really work?

People have been using OST since 1985 in all sorts of settings, as a way to tackle problems ranging from how to best organize the re-structuring of a company to how community groups can plan their

activities in such a way as to really get in contact with their target groups. It has been used at times of crisis, and to prepare and avert future crises. Over the years OST has been seen to work effectively across cultures, and between cultures. It is currently being used in more than 75 countries, with highly diverse audiences, and people from all over the world seem to find a way to relate to this method and to use it within their own cultural framework.

It is this cross-cultural functionality that offers a new way of working with diversity in organizations. Environments where people come from different national, cultural, generational and professional backgrounds have always been both exciting and difficult. Misunderstandings are likely; underlying tensions may be strong. People's assumptions about each other may come silently into play and increase the potential for disruptive conflict. In these situations, people often shy away from working with something like Open Space Technology because OST facilitators do not interfere with the behavior of the participants, e.g., to clarify communication breakdowns and the running assumptions in the room.

Decision-makers often fear that an OST meeting with a diverse audience will break down and people will run amok.

And yet time after time, OST has worked



in these circumstances. Why? Because OST allows people to express their personal views on complex issues. It signals trust in their capacity to be pro-active rather than defensive or aggressive. People are free to walk away from situations they cannot or do not wish to handle, and they can focus on the here and now; at what is as opposed to what should be. As they can freely express their views and ideas, they can start listening to each other.

Is OST always a pleasant experience? No. In OST conflicts may arise; people may feel unhappy with how they are seen and about the situation they are confronted with. The challenge then is to give them the chance to address these issues as they best see fit rather than to mask or control them. As a facilitator I always feel the tension as to whether I should intervene, but I am always surprised to see how well people are able to resolve these issues themselves without my intervention.

Using OST in my intercultural work, I learned to examine my assumptions about different participants, about control and cultural norms. One of the effects I have seen with people from different cultures is that slowly throughout the meeting, participants become less identifiable as members of a given culture or group; the individual differences within a given group

become more salient. This is an essential prerequisite for diversity to be recognized as an asset to address dilemmas and confront important issues between groups. There is yet another side effect: Since people have been able to see themselves and each other as individuals, and not just as group members, they become interested in maintaining this new perspective after the OST meeting as well. People become more aware of their needs to improve how they communicate with culturally different others, they become aware of the missed opportunities when team members do not feel able to express themselves, or when their assumptions get in the way of communicating with each other. And they become interested in challenging their intercultural skills in more classic training settings.

If you are interested in exploring the OST method within your own organization, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us:

ibinet@wxs.nl.

