

OPEN SPACE IN CYBERSPACE

LISA KIMBALL, Douglass Carmichael

The worldwide web of interconnected computers and information resources called the Internet is the hottest technology story in decades. But the web surfing and on-line publishing that get all the attention in the media do not represent the most powerful quality of cyberspace: its capacity to provide a place where teams and other groups of people can go to engage in conversation.

Many organizations are now using software designed allow them to hold electronic meetings through the Internet. This does not insure, however, that the meeting reflects any new ideas about group process. To realize the full potential of cyberspace, "groupware" applications must do a lot more than simply apply old thinking about relationships and work to a new environment.

The Meta Network, created in 1983, was one of the earliest on-line communities. Since then, it has provided an on-line environment for purposeful discussions among individuals, teams, and members of whole organizations. The Meta Network is hosted by Metasystems Design Group (MDG), a consulting firm that works with client-partners who want to integrate a holistic approach to organization development with appropriate technologies. A key feature of MDG's work and of The Meta Network is a focus on group process and using technology to support relationships rather than just to provide access to information. There has been a natural synergy between exploring processes like Open Space and designing humanistic on-line environments.

On-Line in Open Space

At The Meta Network, we've been exploring ways to take advantage of features of web-based conferencing to design on-line meetings based on principles of Open Space. For example, we were approached by a client who wanted to do future scenarios with the top 200 officers of an \$8-billion energy company. They had previously done scenarios with the top 15 officers but felt that, to make a real difference, the investigation had to go deeper and involve more people. It wasn't feasible to convene an all-hands meeting, and they were in a hurry. So we decided to use principles of Open Space to design an electronic environment that would support the organization's scenario development. We put the 200 participants on line in a computer conference on The Meta Network, accessible via the Internet World Wide Web. Participants could gain access to this conference at any time from their personal or desktop computer, and catch up with the discussion added since they last logged on simply by clicking a button on the company's internal network.

As in a face-to-face Open Space meeting, anyone can convene a new topic in the on-line conference. This is done by posting an item just as participants post topics on a "marketplace" wall during conventional Open Space events. When participants sign into the conference, they are notified of any items that have been added since the last time they logged on. Participants can always see a current list of all the topics and choose to enter and participate in the conversations that interest them. The greater flexibility of time and space on line means that it's possible to participate actively in all the sessions. Conversations continue as long as there is energy around a topic. And when they're over, they're over—sometimes in a matter of

hours or days and sometimes weeks or months.

Having this Open Space available at all times has profound implications for an organization. For example, when one of the energy company vice presidents met another vice president in the hall the day before the on-line Open Space began, he asked, "How's the weather out at your place?" Three weeks later, when the same person bumped into a director, he said, "Hey, good seeing you. What did you think of that stuff Mary put on line last night?" Having a virtual Open Space available all of the time changed the nature of conversation almost immediately. As one of the participants put it, "For the first time I know what's in the minds of my colleagues on a day-to-day basis."

Free and open discussion in the on-line conference brings out the generosity and concern of the participants. We've found that the group often moves to a deeper sense of value and a higher sense of purpose. The resulting conversation gets more strategic along a broader, more penetrating agenda.

The on-line Open Space conference also provides a way to bring critical issues to the attention of the whole. Two days after we opened the conference for the energy company, a pipeline burst in a rural area and caused considerable environmental damage. Typically, when this kind of thing happens, a small group at the top is charged with handling the problem and there is no opportunity for dialogue within the organization. This time, one of the Open Space participants posted a topic addressing the situation on the electronic wall. Over the next two days we had 200 people talking about why the mishap occurred, how the pipe was made, what was known about surface "worms" in the metal, how this particular pipe differed from the pipe used in more populated areas. People responded with an expression of values and social concern and intellectual depth that shocked those who assumed that their coworkers were oblivious to these dimensions of the situation. In 36 hours, the climate in the

**Open Space need not be
limited to real-time, in-
person interactions.**

company changed to embrace a deeper sense of social mission and identification with the country where the accident occurred.

Models for Meeting in Cyberspace

There are at least three models for using Open Space principles to design experiences for groups in cyberspace.

Virtual Open Space Events. In the first model, a virtual Open Space is created within the framework of an existing organizational endeavor, such as the example of the energy company above. In this model, a kind of contrapuntal dynamic emerges between what is happening on line and what is happening in face-to-face interactions. In a traditional organization it is typically easier to apply Open Space principles to the on-line conversations than to staff meetings. We've found, however, that experience with Open Space in cyberspace carries over into the face-to-face environment as participants become impatient with more limiting meeting processes.

Support for Face-to-Face Open Space Events. Another model is to create Open Space in cyberspace to support and document a face-to-face Open Space gathering. On-line conferences are created to allow participants to upload reports from sessions, comment on reports from previous sessions, and add new thoughts stimulated by the reports. For example, a conference on Access and Travel Management sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service engaged over 200 participants in Open Space for four days. The purpose of the conference was to bring a diverse group of people with different interests together to consider the issues, options, and opportunities for access to and travel in the National Forests. Participants entered more than 70 reports into the on-line conference, resulting in a compendium of 200-plus pages of material that was duplicated overnight so that everyone could take a copy. This document provided a touchstone for participants to use to remind them of the Open Space discussions and ideas for ongoing work.

In some cases, this process can be a way to link groups gathered in different geographic locations or permit people who are not at the gathering to learn what's happening and make comments. However, we've learned that documentation of the gathering—both on-line and in print—is rarely useful to nonparticipants unless they have the opportunity to ask questions and tease out ideas further. The power of Open Space lies more in the experience of the participants than in the information produced. Two aspects of the reports that do seem useful are the table of contents, which shows the range of topics and ideas generated by the group, and captured highlights of key questions and dilemmas. Therefore, it's ideal if the on-line conference associated with the event stays open for at least a few weeks after the event has concluded. This also provides a way for participants to

add more thoughts to the compendium as they have time to reflect on their experience at the gathering.

Free-Flowing Virtual Open Space. A third model is to create an on-line Open Space for a group that has no face-to-face interaction at all. This is challenging because in cyberspace many people experience ongoing message exchanges that are loose and unfocused, don't seem to start at any particular time,

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and often don't seem to reach closure. A free-flowing exchange won't have the qualities of Open Space unless it is designed with the basic principles in mind. For example, if you cannot have an opening circle with the group in physical space, you need to create the virtual equivalent of the ritual of opening the space by walking the circle and making eye contact with each participant. If the group doesn't start synchronously, will individuals who come in later really feel that the space is "open" for them to convene new topics? One of the most powerful parts of an Open Space gathering is the closing ritual. Although it is possible for groups to continue indefinitely in cyberspace, it may be more effective to introduce the notion of closure as an important aspect of the cycle of opening and closing. These and all other critical aspects of Open Space need to be thought through for successful transferral to the on-line environment. We are looking forward to having a chance to experiment with alternative approaches.

Amazing Freedom

Our move to meet in cyberspace has an amazing freedom. Those of us who have been attracted to Open Space tend to resonate with the democratizing and passion-building openness that characterizes cyberspace. There we can transcend the hierarchies, dogmas, and correctness of our old organizational structures and communications patterns—features that hamper our freedom to take on many roles and responsibilities. Much more experimentation is needed to discover how to transfer to cyberspace the strategies we've used to make the Open Space principles operational in face-to-face meetings. But we think there is great potential!

Lisa Kimball (lisa@tmn.com) and Douglass Carmichael (doug@tmn.com) are principals in Metasystems Design Group (http://www.tmn.com/mdg). Both use Open Space Technology to design face-to-face as well as virtual meetings. They can also be reached at 703-243-6622.