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PERSPECTIVES

Turnaround: from breakdown to breakthrough with Open Space Technology

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This interpretive case study sought to fully understand and describe the turnaround experience from an organizational breakdown to breakthrough with the use of Open Space Technology. The turnaround occurred in a Roman Catholic parish. Participant interviews were used to collect the data. These qualitative portrayals provided insights and implications around the effectiveness and impact of Open Space. Four important themes emerged: the experience of breakdown, the deep longing for a breakthrough, the transformation of crisis into a turnaround and the effectiveness of Open Space Technology. This case study provides perspectives on how to effect transformation for an organization in crisis with the least effort and maximum impact within a short time span. It contains insights and implications for leaders and consultants to do the same.

Keywords: Open Space Technology; organization change; case study; organization transformation

Introduction

Well-functioning self-organizing systems are naturally productive of peace and superior performance. (Owen 2008, xvi)

Large-scale change initiatives which are designed to produce quantum changes in a quantum way have a very poor success rate. For instance, recent surveys on the success of Total Quality Management programmes show that over 70% have failed or delivered disappointing results. Data on reengineering, future search and strategic planning programmes are pointing to a similar conclusion. Organization-wide transformation projects, with minor exceptions, attract consistent criticism. Michael Beer and his colleagues captured the problem in the title of their (Beer, Eisenstat, and Spector 1990) Harvard Business Review article on ‘Why Change Programs Don’t Produce Change’, and the same theme is echoed yet again in John Kotter’s article on ‘Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail’ (Kotter 1997).

This case study, on the contrary, focuses on a significant turnaround resulting from an effective implementation of Open Space Technology. Creating an open and collaborative context for engagement and self-organization in the wake of an

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organizational breakdown, participants experienced a breakthrough with minimal effort and maximum results. The organization was a Roman Catholic Church parish in the USA with 1250 family units.

Background

The parish studied here was the result of a merger of three parishes with differing cultural legacies including French, Polish and German heritages. Forming one large parish and serving the community for 30 years, the pastor retired at 70 years, and an older pastor was brought in due to the shortage of priests in the diocese. With the leadership change, many things which the parish considered to be vital and important for the vibrancy of the parish were sidelined. Some ecumenical initiatives to reach out to other churches in the city which were highly valued by the congregation were terminated. Some ministries went underground. The new pastor's non collaborative and authoritative leadership style alienated many parishioners and staff. Unhappy with the new leadership members began to leave the church.

Another priest, who was also a skilled management consultant, was brought in to assist the pastor and to assess the situation. From the new priest's interactions with key leaders and parish members, it became obvious that the parish was experiencing degrading morale and gradual break down. His analysis included issues of staff alienation and a broken relationship between the pastor and the parish community. When the pastor was made aware of these findings, he chose to retire and leave the leadership responsibility to the new priest with experience in organizational development. The new priest immediately conducted a needs analysis with interviews and focus groups involving parish leaders and staff and then proposed the idea of doing an 'Open Space Summit' using the methodology of Open Space Technology. The parish council agreed to hold a summit, even though they were initially sceptical about its effectiveness and the impact it could have on the community which was experiencing such turmoil and chaos.

Methodology

As a qualitative research project, this study used interpretive case study methodology to inquire into the experience of parish members who participated in the Open Space Technology change process. Our research question was: what is the experience of the participants in Open Space? We were interested in the participants' perceptions of the impact of the change event, the 'Open Space Summit'. We wanted to understand their thoughts and feelings related to the kinds of changes they experienced.

Research design

This study falls under the theoretical perspective of interpretivism. Interpretive research is concerned with understanding the meaning constructed by individuals, how they make sense of their world, and the experiences they have (Creswell 1998; Crotty 1998; Merriam 1998; Patton 1990). As the purpose of this study was to fully understand and describe the experience of participants from their perspective, an interpretive approach was the most fitting.

Participant selection

The participant selection process was voluntary self-selection. An open invitation was sent from the priest to all members of the parish family. The 'Open Space Summit' was attended by 140 participants including men, women, youth, elders and some diocesan representatives.

The Open Space Process: maximizing the power of self-organization

The parish needed a process which could transform the community from the breakdown situation with minimum up-front effort and maximum impact. Open Space Technology has the capacity to do that in record time by simply, but very intentionally, creating a clear and open context for self-organization to flourish. It is the only large-scale intervention that not only meets the conditions for self-organization, but also fully trusts its power by resisting the temptation to complicate the process with any prescriptive interventions.

The descriptive principles of Open Space which were communicated at the beginning to help create a mindset of openness and flexibility are:

- (1) Whoever comes are the right people.
- (2) Wherever it happens is the right place.
- (3) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
- (4) Whenever it starts is the right time.
- (5) When it's over it's over.

The Open Space Event: an 'Open Space Summit'

The 'Open Space Summit' was designed around a theme which was deliberately broad, compelling, concise and chosen by the parish leaders. The theme asked the following question: *what are the Issues and Opportunities around Experiencing a Vibrant Faith Life at the Parish?* The invitation stated that *all* issues and opportunities were welcome as long as the person raising the issue truly cared about it and was willing to talk about it during the event.

The 140 parishioners who attended the Summit were not necessarily a true cross-representation of the community. However, they were the ones who cared enough to show up on a Saturday with passion and commitment to transform the parish. They were exactly 'the right people'.

The space was beautifully appropriate: large, attractive, spacious, connected to the sanctuary and nature with plenty of walls and windows ready for all the postings, and breakout areas nearby. Some of the comments heard upon their arrival included: *they've got us a circle, I wonder what's going to happen and it's good to see so many here.* There was definitely some body language reflecting curiosity and anxiety about this unknown process with no pre-set agenda.

However, within one hour, parishioners were deeply engaged. In the first 15 minutes, the priest gave a short prayer and welcomed the facilitator who then reviewed the process, its principles, and the 'Law of Two Feet' which states: if you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet (or the equivalent), to go somewhere else.

During the next 45 minutes, participants announced their issues and opportunities, selected a time period and breakout area for each issue from a grid of post-it

notes, and then signed up for all the sessions which they wished to attend. About 80 issues were initially identified by the participants who then merged similar issues into 24 sessions with six sessions happening concurrently over four time periods.

Thanks to the ‘Law of Two Feet’ participants were able to go in and out of any and all sessions as they contributed to the dialogues. They could also sit out some sessions and have some interesting conversations with others which could also be written up and any ‘next steps’ posted along with the others from the scheduled sessions.

During the dialogue sessions, notes were taken, and every ‘next step’ identified was posted on a wall in the main room. Any parishioner could sign-up to help implement any ‘next step’ even if they had not participated in the session it emerged from. Participants were advised in the invitation letter that any ‘next step’ must meet the following implementation criteria:

- (1) Alignment with the parish mission statement.
- (2) Approval by the pastor.
- (3) Identification of needed resources.

These criteria set by the pastor helped to align the emerging informal self-organized ‘next steps’ with the formal organization hierarchy allowing each system to complement, not compete with, each other. At the end of the day, all ‘next steps’ (listed in the Appendix 1) were approved.

Desired outcomes

The desired outcomes for the Open Space Summit can be summarized into the following categories which are hallmarks of the experience of Open Space Technology:

Collective leadership

- Participation and engagement from the larger community.
- Authentic, shared and heart-felt leadership.
- Emergence of collective intelligence and wisdom.

Constructive conversations

- New connections and surprising collaborations.
- Identification of adaptive outcomes.
- Heart-felt dialogues (meaningful exchanges) and serious learning.

Collaborative visions

- Transformation of potential conflicts into positive problem solving.
- Transformation of cynicism and opposition into passionate involvement.
- Self-organized projects and spirited teamwork.

Inspired performance

- Increased involvement and vibrant productivity.
- Passionate responsibility for new initiatives and innovative ideas.
- Active participation from all who care with continuing team work.

Genuine community

- Deepening experience of heart-felt community.
- Reduction of alienation and antagonism.
- Revitalization of the community spirit.

Increased trust

- Recognition of both the formal and informal organizational systems.
- Transparency in planning for the future and in decision making.
- Support of self-organization and harmony between the hierarchy and laity.

Results

The following four themes: experience of breakdown, deep longing for a breakthrough, transformation of the crisis into a turnaround and effectiveness of Open Space Technology were delineated from conversations with parish leaders, staff and community members.

Experience of breakdown

Before the Open Space Summit, the parish was experiencing breakdown as described by the new priest who found 'issues of staff alienation causing serious distrust between the leaders and employees, antagonizing the leading people in the community resulting in the disharmony and disintegration of the parish organizational system'. The Parish Council President referred to this transition period of apparent breakdown as 'a time when the ministries and the parish programmes appeared to be in hibernation'. And while the ministries and programmes were hibernating, some parishioners were actively leaving the community in search of other parish organizations making the members highly anxious about the future of the parish community.

Deep longing for a breakthrough

The heart-felt responses and commitment to attend the Open Space Summit reflected the deep longing for a breakthrough. The new priest noted the large turnout of 140 parishioners and observed that *the parish was going through the turmoil of command and control leadership, and the people who felt suffocated under that leadership longed for a sign of relief.*

When the new priest was initially called in to assess the parish, people expressed great hope that *the community will regain the lost vibrancy and overcome the depressing morale of the community.* It was noted that parishioners were *looking for a breakthrough especially through a change in leadership by confronting the pastor and expressing their discomfort in a series of complaints sent directly to the Bishop.*

The lay leadership of the parish was very receptive to the process of Open Space and immediately welcomed such an initiative from their new priest. However, some remained suspicious of the process especially since the parish had never before experienced a large group intervention.

Transformation of the crisis into a turnaround

Those who were sceptical and thought that a process so open could not possibly work became quickly engaged in the summit process and helped turn the parish around. One staff member observed:

Within seventeen days of his being named pastor, the new priest conducted an Open Space Summit which invited all parishioners to express their thoughts about what would make the parish more vibrant. Initially, we were skeptical that this would work so soon after his arrival. However, skilled management of the Open Space Summit by a true professional helped the parishioners to speak their minds. Old issues were brought to light, and new ministries were birthed. The beauty of this management style was that parishioners committed themselves to taking 'the next step' in clearing the decks of old concerns while others used their creative and organizational skills to develop new programs.

The new priest called the experience of this transformation as, *breaking the ground and planting new seeds*. With the new teams formed from the breakout sessions, work began with great passion, excitement and commitment.

We began to see smiles and laughter on the face of the community members instead of anger, distrust and sadness, said the employees who worked in the parish for many years. Command and control leadership gave way to trusting, collaborative leadership. Indeed, the concept of leader as a 'hero' was transformed into leader as a 'host' who welcomed people, ideas and active participation in decision making and implementation of community projects and ministries.

The parishioners who were unhappy with the previous leadership began to come back and get involved in the community. People who spent money and kind to build a state of the art facility had been depressed and distraught with the previous administration. Now, they were able to return with *greater enthusiasm and hopefulness*. Instead of turning the crisis into further chaos, danger and breakdown, the change process paved the way for an organizational turnaround with greater agility and vibrancy.

Effectiveness of Open Space Technology

The effect of the Open Space Technology in bringing about the transformation was clear from the statements of the participants. One participant noted that

Three months after the Open Space Summit was conducted, approximately 15 ministries have been developed or are in the process of being developed. The sadness of previous transitions has been replaced by excitement about both new and established ministries. This is truly quite an accomplishment.

One participant was quoted as *getting her life back* when given the opportunity to participate in one of the ministries.

These 'next step' teams were the adaptive, innovative outcomes, and new initiatives that the new priest was hoping would emerge, and they did. According to him, parishioners *planted new seeds* in many areas. These 'next steps' and ministries have been communicated to the entire membership for any and all to help implement whether they were in attendance or not at the Open Space Summit.

Reflecting on the collective leadership experienced during the Open Space Summit one church leader observed: 'This is a change process without any "psychic

manipulation” but a creative change process engaging the hearts and minds of every one who came to the event’. The community experienced increased trust and vibrancy through heart-felt collaborations and shared leadership.

And the Parish Council President stated that *Following the Open Space Summit in September and the subsequent Ministry Fair in October, the parish has become reenergized!* He was simply noting the outcome of genuine community which results when people dialogue freely about heart-felt issues in Open Space. In addition to the ‘next steps’, a key outcome was the deepening of community which continues to revitalize the parish.

The Parish Council President was no longer sceptical of Open Space Technology. He stated:

This new wave of spirit in our parish is tangible. You can see it in people’s faces and it has become infectious! New ministries are being created and existing ones have become focused once again. I think the vibrancy of our parish has now gone to the next level.

The parish leaders were truly amazed to see how quickly the Open Space Summit turned the parish around.

The following closing comments at the end of the Open Space Summit also reflected the effectiveness of the event and the regained trust between the hierarchy and the laity. *The Open Space Summit was a new opening in the life of the community towards vibrancy* said one of the participants. The words expressed were, *wonderful, exciting, enhanced trust and new breakthrough* indicating the powerful impact and effectiveness of Open Space Technology.

Discussion

Even though this case study is a tribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of Open Space Technology, Harrison Owen, the originator of the process, would be the first to say that it is not about the Open Space process per se. It is about aligning with the power of self-organization which is what any organization is capable of when given the time and space to do so. Open Space simply meets the conditions and sets a context for self-organization to happen effectively and efficiently. The truth is we are always self-organizing, just not as powerfully as when we intentionally align with that potential in order to successfully adapt to in an ever changing, complex world.

Margaret Wheatley points out in her chapter on ‘The Irresistible Future of Organizing’ (Wheatley 2005, 32) that ‘we want our organizations to behave as living systems, but we only know how to treat them as machines . . . although self-organizing (living) systems have what all leaders crave: the capacity to respond continuously to change’. The parish was experiencing command and control leadership based on viewing the organization-as-object and not organization-as-a living process capable of self-organizing.

Wheatley concludes her chapter (44) with the question, ‘While self-organization calls us to very different ideas and forms of organizing, how else can we create the resilient, intelligent, fast, and flexible organization that we require? The future pulls us toward these new understandings with an insistent and compelling call’. It was that ‘call’ which the new priest heard and answered by inviting the entire parish to attend the Open Space Summit.

One of the best cited examples of the effectiveness and efficiency of Open Space comes can be found in Harrison Owen’s book, *Wave Rider* (Owen 2008, 58–62). It is

an example of Harrison opening space for American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) to help them seize a last minute opportunity to move their pavilion from the outer edge of the Olympic village to the very centre. This opportunity met the criteria for intentional self-organization: high levels of complexity, diversity, potential for conflict and time pressure. By 'opening the space' for intentional self-organization, what had taken the organization 10 months to design was accomplished in 2 days. The executive responsible for the pavilion expressed his feelings in a quiet mumble: *It's magic. It's magic.*

As with this case study it was not magic, it was self-organization at work effectively and efficiently, and as with this case study, the initial conditions for self-organization had been met. The parish met the criterion of complexity as revealed in the new priest's initial findings. Also, the criterion of diversity included many opinions, professions, talents and experiences, but also incorporated the cultural diversity of three different parishes which had merged into one. Initial observations pointed out the conflicts between the pastor and the parish staff, council and members described by the new priest as *distrust, disharmony, and disintegration*, and people leaving validated a real sense of urgency. The criteria for intentional self-organization and Open Space Technology had been met.

Assessment

Originally proposed by Ralph Stacey as a 'matrix' to help assess levels of agreement and uncertainty and how they relate to effective management decisions, the landscape diagram shown in Figure 1 reflects Stacey's three main fields: simplicity, complexity and anarchy (Stacey 1996). Stacey's matrix was the foundation for an organizational landscape diagram in the publication of Edgeware (Zimmerman, Lindberg, and Plsek 1998, 136–43) which in turn inspired an additional interpretation found in Facilitating Organization Change (Olson and Eoyang 2001, 63). These all contributed to the design of the landscape diagram shown in Figure 1 which represents the three states of organization the parish was experiencing: organized, self-organized and unorganized.

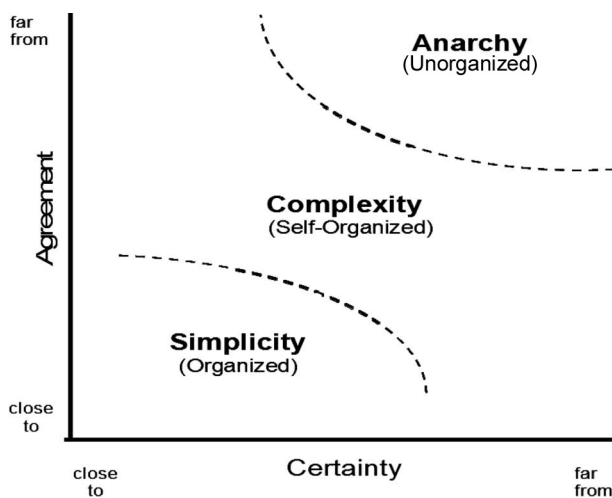


Figure 1. The organization landscape.

Many organizational development strategies which work effectively in the lower left of the landscape diagram simply will not work in areas of complexity which is where most organizations find themselves in these turbulent times. If that is the bad news, there is some good, even great, news: we are learning how to approach living systems whose complexity initially overwhelmed us by embracing the power of 'self-organization'.

The field is now rich with the implications of self-organization as we view our organizations as living complex adaptive systems and value the simplicity of Open Space Technology to create the conditions for intentional self-organization. The 'Open Space Summit' invited parishioners into the middle space, Complexity, on the landscape diagram: the 'sweet spot' of self-organization, adaptive innovation and deep engagement.

The parish had been in disarray and breakdown. Most of their experience was in the chaos or Anarchy of the upper right: far from certainty and far from agreement, feeling disempowered, disheartened, and unorganized. But by deliberately utilizing Open Space Technology, the parish was able to experience the full power of self-organization at 'the edge of chaos' to create and collaborate through new connections, new information and new ways of being together.

Make no mistake; the turnaround from breakdown to breakthrough would not have happened so effectively and efficiently without the leadership of the new priest. With compassionate listening he was quickly able to assess and relate to the community and acknowledge the challenges it was facing. His background in organizational development included studies and experiences of Open Space Technology. He trusted the process, and, most importantly, he trusted his parishioners.

According to Wheatley and Frieze, 'We need to walk out of our reliance on the leader-as-hero and invite in the leader-as-host. Leaders who act as hosts are welcoming, caring, and respectful of the people they work with; they trust that everyone has gifts to offer' (Wheatley and Frieze 2011, 207).

As a 'leader-as-host', the new priest invited everyone's 'gift' and honoured the collective wisdom of the group. He carefully and discretely helped create and enhance the conditions for optimal self-organization to take place by fully honouring the integrity of the Open Space process.

In *Wave Rider*, Harrison Owen points out those wave riders are the leaders who appreciate both the formal and the informal systems; they understand the importance of authentic leadership and cultivate the conditions for new connections and powerful collaborations. He says that *we are all Wave Riders though some do better than others* (Owen 2008, 11). The new priest was an experienced and accomplished 'wave rider'.

Insights

The primary reason that Open Space Technology can work its 'magic' is that it is intentionally and very simply designed to set the initial conditions for complex self-organization and then get out of the way. Any attempt to control the outcomes, to pre-set an agenda, or to organize activities or speak for the group during the event sabotages the 'magic'.

However, the Open Space process is not really 'magic' but is simply the power of deliberate self-organization which the parish experienced during their Summit. Without any pre-training, the parishioners were able to self-organize and self-manage when given the time and space to do so.

In this case study, because of the weekend services, the Open Space Summit could only be held on a Saturday from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm. In order to accommodate all the issues and opportunities, the concurrent sessions were shortened. Concerned about shortening the sessions, the facilitator added on the 'next step' form the time and place for 'continued discussion'. It not only worked, but also, enabled a smooth transition in order to take up, invite others in, and successfully implement the 'next steps'.

Even though Open Space Technology is often cited as a 'large group intervention', it is more about the quality of commitment of those who attend and not so much about having the largest number possible. Of course, the more the merrier for self-organization to be the most effective with more connections, more resources and more information all contributing to adaptive outcomes and a deepening of community.

Participants experienced the paradox of leadership in Open Space: no one person was the leader, yet everyone was a leader. Leadership emerged at the confluence of passion and responsibility. It came and went adapting and appropriate to the needs and challenges at hand.

Implications

The key implications of this case study focus on the capability of a *very simple* process, Open Space Technology, to transform *very complex* organizations and communities. A paradox for sure, but a very welcome one in times of turbulence and uncertainties when organization-wide change initiatives and transformation efforts are failing as pointed out in the section 'introduction'.

Some implications for HR and OD professionals include the importance of:

- fostering a genuine trust and understanding of the remarkable effectiveness of self-organization starting with the formal leadership;
- utilizing and honouring the integrity of the Open Space process without any manipulation or attempt to control it;
- encouraging collaborative learning and whole system engagement;
- inviting all stakeholders to participate;
- remaining open to what emerges;
- designing customized implementation criteria for 'next steps';
- allowing passion and responsibility to stay together during implementation of results;
- developing an appreciation of both the informal and the formal systems.

In this case study for all those who thought they had to work hard in preparation for the event or who had anxiety about the absence of a pre-determined agenda, and/or the lack of trust in the process or people, their anxieties quickly vanished as everyone became passionately engaged. Ironically, with less pre-determined input, more effective output was generated.

The new priest and the facilitator did not need to have the answers; they only needed to open the space, invite everyone in, and hold the space open so that no one person spoke for the group.

Teamwork was seamless and built into the process. There was no need to motivate teams when passion and responsibility were evoked and allowed to stay together. Human resources were connected and unleashed!

The ability of the formal leader to let go and move from achiever to catalyst allowed the parish to experience shared, authentic leadership which was appropriate to the tasks as they emerged. Change agents and champions were newly discovered and identified through the open engagement.

With the support of the formal leader and the active involvement of emergent leaders, the parish was able to revitalize. The Open Space Summit was just the beginning of this significant organizational transformation.

Conclusion

By aligning with the parish's capacity for self-organization, the process of Open Space Technology was able to create a context and space for effective and efficient transformation: from breakdown to breakthrough. It was essential to have a formal leader who trusted and honoured the integrity of the process as well as an experienced facilitator. But in the end, it was the parishioners themselves who self-organized, self-managed and transformed their community and continue to do so with great passion and genuine willingness to take responsibility.

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Appendix 1. Open Space Summit Project Teams

- (1) Creating a Welcoming Environment in Our Parish
- (2) Reforming Pastoral Council
- (3) Transparency/Communication Regarding Financial Matters
- (4) Youth Faith Formation Ministry
- (5) Family Catechism Group for Youth Faith Formation
- (6) Music Ministry Enhancement
- (7) Strengthen Ministry for Sick and Aged

- (8) Start a Sister Parish Overseas Mission
- (9) Marian Devotion Practice
- (10) Help to Maintain Vibrancy of Parish Through Regular Social Events/Gatherings.
- (11) Day Chapel Configuration
- (12) Scripture study sessions
- (13) Lectures by the New Priest
- (14) Adoration (Meditation)
- (15) Seniors Men's Club Formation