

Improbable

HOLDING AN OPEN SPACE

Are you thinking of hosting an Open Space event? The purpose of this document is to introduce the basics of Open Space Technology as well as provide some key bits of advice and point you towards further existing resources.

Who are Improbable?

Improbable occupies a vital space in the landscape of UK theatre. At the heart of our artistic practice is improvisation.

Whether in performance, rehearsal or development, the practice and philosophy of improvisation is at the core of our creative process — even when we're working on classic plays or operas.

Over the past 25 years, we've staged epic outdoor spectacles like [Sticky](#) (which was seen by over 250,000 people); theatrical classics like [The Tempest](#) at Northern Stage and the Oxford Playhouse; intimate puppetry like [Animo](#) in studios across the country; adaptations like [Theatre of Blood](#) at the National Theatre; operatic triumphs like [Satyagraha](#) and [Akhmaten](#) at the English National Opera in London and the Metropolitan Opera in New York; and female-led impro project [Permission Improbable](#).

We're core supporters of initiatives like [Through the Door](#), which seeks to nurture an improvisation culture grown by women and non-binary folks through impro workshops, and [Mothers Who Make](#), an international initiative aimed at supporting mothers who are artists. We've also run vibrant community participation projects such as [Generations](#) and [Impro for Elders](#), introducing our improvisation and creative practice to people don't regularly engage with the arts.

Improbable is also one of the UK's most experienced facilitators of [Open Space Technology](#) events.

With an unrivalled history and scale of practice, we have been nurturing a nationwide community of artists and theatre practitioners since 2006 through our programme of Open Space events called [Devoted and Disgruntled](#) (D&D).

This community has made shows, formed theatre companies, organised festivals and started new venues as a result of the conversations that have happened at Devoted & Disgruntled events. We now also [offer our expertise](#) to a growing number of people outside of the theatre sector, bringing the constructive and collaborate benefits of improvisation and Open Space to the wider world.

What is Open Space Technology?

Open Space — or more formally, Open Space Technology — is a great way for groups to think, talk and take action together.

[Click here to watch the British Sign Language version of this guide.](#)

Open Space Technology (OST) is a process that enables collaborative problem solving, improved communications and better networking. It can work for as few as 5 people, and as many as 500. Open Space Technology was created by an Episcopal priest and civil rights campaigner called Harrison Owen in the 1980s. Over the last 30+ years, OST has been used across the world in an

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incredible range of contexts: to design aeroplane doors, resolve land disputes, address economic, environmental, social, political and artistic issues of every kind.

It's a process that's been at the heart of Improbable's work since Phelim read Harrison's book *Open Space Technology* in the early 2000s. We now use Open Space in almost every area of our work and it's a key part of our creative methodology within the rehearsal room.

How does it work?

Open Space events do not have a set agenda, but they are normally focused around a central question; for example: "How can we make our organisation more efficient and responsive?" On the day, participants self-organise to create their own agenda, allowing a dynamic and immediate response to the issues at hand. Any participant can timetable a topic (or "call a session") on something that they want to work on and nothing is out of bounds. Once all the topics are timetabled, participants move into smaller, flexible break-out groups and get to work on the things that they feel most passionate about.

It's up to the participants how they work - we've seen plenty of chatting, but also action, song and play. Participants are invited to make notes and create reports on their break-out sessions. At the end of the event, the group meets together again to share any observations or action points with each other.

Open Space Principles and (the only) Law

There are five principles that help participants to navigate Open Space:

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 is over, it is over.**

There is only one law in an Open Space event: **The Law of Two Feet**, also called **The Law of Mobility**. This states that if you find yourself bored, not learning or not contributing, use your mobility to take yourself where your time is better spent.

During an Open Space meeting, you might see "**bumblebees**" going from group to group spreading and connecting ideas, or "**butterflies**" hanging out, daydreaming or gossiping. All this collective activity adds up to a system of self-organisation that is highly creative and effective at dealing with real issues in a remarkably efficient way.

Improbable runs a regular programme of free Open Space events for the UK theatre and performing arts sectors called [Devoted & Disgruntled](#).

You can also [hire us](#) to run an Open Space event for your organisation or community.

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RESOURCES

Books:

- Open Space Technology: A user's guide by Harrison Owen
- The Power of Spirit by Harrison Owen
- Engaging Emergence by Peggy Holman
- Wave Rider: Leadership for high performance in a self-organising world by Harrison Owen
- Impro by Keith Johnstone

Links:

- [Harrison Owen Interview](#)
- [Open Space Technology Facebook group](#)
- [Open Space World](#) (There are free PDFs and other resources to support you to use the process yourself)

Guidelines for writing an invitation and inviting people to your event

Writing an invitation

The heart of any Open Space event is the Invitation (or provocation) and the Question. It is these things that bring interested parties along, and act as the catalyst for activity over the event. Getting the invitation right is 50% of what it takes to hold a good Open Space conversation.

Here are some hints and tips to get you started. Please do send us a draft before you go live – we're here to work with you on getting the invitation right, and have lots of tips from over the years.

The Invitation:

Ideally, your invitation should come from an individual person and not from an organisation (though of course someone can write an invitation on behalf of an organisation).

The invitation should come from the heart. Whatever is bugging you, whatever you're really excited about, whatever you can see happening that no one else is noticing. The invitation needs to state the reason you want to bring people together, open up the possibilities of what might happen when you are together, and contain a clear call to arms.

The form is very much down to your personal style, but as a general rule invitations usually follow three steps:

1. Here's my personal position on this issue
2. Your position might be something else, for example...
3. Come to this event and we can share ideas, solve problems etc.

There's no rule about length, but obviously the longer the invitation the more people's concentration span will be tested. More than an A4 page gets tricky.

The Question:

Again, this is your personal style and choice. The chances are you'll find the core issue for you during the process of writing the invitation. However, if it helps to have a question to start writing the invitation, this is also totally fine. The main thing for the question is that it is broad enough to spark off lots of other questions, but has a clear drive or action behind it. Including a verb, and making it a collective statement of some sort, will really help. The classic example is "What are we

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going to do about...” but you may well find a different angle. Again, feel free to chuck us some suggestions if you’re not sure.

You might find it helpful to look at some of the invitations from our past events and see which you respond to. You can find all our past events at <https://www.devotedanddisgruntled.com/Pages/Events/Category/past-events> and you’ll see the invitation copy by clicking through to each event page.

INVITING PEOPLE TO YOUR OPEN SPACE CONVERSATION

One of the best things about Open Space is that anyone who’s there can put something on the agenda. That means it can be a great way to create space for people whose voices are often marginalised – but in order for that to happen, you will need to spend some time reaching out as widely as possible about your event.

In our experience, the process for inviting people to an Open Space conversation feels very different to the process for, say, selling tickets to a show. Inviting people to an Open Space is much more personal – you are reaching out to people to tell them why you care about a topic or issue, and to ask if they would like to be part of a conversation about it. The process for sending these invitations will take a fair amount of time.

For some Open Space conversations, the group of people that you want to invite might be really clear and pre-defined – for example, all the staff of a given organisation. For others, the invite list might be broader – for example, everyone who cares about affordable housing in your local borough.

For Open Spaces where the invite list is broad, we strongly recommend creating a basic communications plan for how you’re going to share your invitation. We find this is a useful exercise in helping to think deeply about who the event is for and how you’re going to reach them. This doesn’t have to be complicated – you could use a basic template such as this:

Who would you like to be there?	How could you reach that person / people?	Who is responsible for contacting them?
Local councillors from X borough council	Collect email addresses from the local council website and email them the invitation	Joe Bloggs
Local residents of X borough	Write to X housing association; Post on X local residents Facebook group; Write to X Neighbourhood Watch Group; Post on X Nextdoor App group; Put a poster on X Library noticeboard.	Jane Bloggs
The MP for X borough	Contact form on MP’s website	Jill Bloggs

Some tips about building a comms plan for an Open Space event:

- **Aim to spread the invitation widely.** You are not building a list of target customers to consume a product; you are building a list of people to invite to a conversation. You might know those

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people already or you might not. You might be surprised who cares about the thing you care about. You might not know why someone cares about your question. Aim to spread the word as far and wide as possible – and trust that whoever comes are the right people.

- **Allow plenty of time to share the invitation.** Sometimes, the topic for an Open Space conversation is so urgent that you don't need much time to get people there. Other times you might need longer for word to reach beyond the usual networks. Generally, err on the side of allowing more time than you think you'll need to market the event.
- **Think about what happens after the Open Space conversation.** What will happen with the reports from your event? Can you make a commitment to sharing that with the people who attend?
- **Talk to us.** We're not communications experts, but we do have lots of experience in communicating about Open Space conversations – and we're here to help.

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