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## Round-Table Meetings With No Agendas, No Tables

By CLAUDIA H. DEUTSCH

JAMES W. DEVLIN was baffled when he walked into the Rockport Company's distribution center for a companywide meeting in October. The meeting had been billed as a powwow to discuss Rockport's mission, one considered important enough to shutter the footwear company, a subsidiary of Reebok International, for two days.

But here was this cavernous room some 20 miles from the company's Marlboro, Mass., headquarters, with nothing in it but hundreds of chairs arranged in a circle and an empty bulletin board. No keynote speakers, no agenda, no reading materials, nothing.

"All I could think was, how is this possibly going to work?" Mr. Devlin, a traffic and shipping supervisor, recalled.

Most of the 350 Rockport employees who milled into the room had the same reaction. And when Harrison Owen, a Potomac, Md., management consultant, stepped into the circle and described the meeting's ground rules, the skepticism and bafflement increased.

Anyone with a "passion" about any company-related subject, he told them, should write it at the top of a large piece of paper and tack it to the bulletin board. Other people could then sign up for a discussion group about it.

Looking back, Rockport people are astonished at the many people who did, indeed, suggest topics, attend meetings and come up with ideas that have, in many ways, changed how Rockport is run today.

"We now have a book of ideas that vary from how to get suppliers to send shoelaces on time to how to find out what our competitors are doing to how to help Rockport's women succeed better," said Richard Roessler, the human resources executive who set up the meeting.

Probably the only person who isn't stunned by the Rockport meeting's success is Mr. Owen. An Episcopal priest and self-described civil rights activist, he held various governmental posts before becoming an organizational consultant 15 years ago. And he developed the concept of "open space" meetings -- where attendees break into ad hoc groups to discuss anything they think is germane -- after years of hearing people wax eloquent about the good experiences they had at meetings outside of the prearranged sessions.

"The only times when people held adult conversations seemed to be the coffee breaks," Mr. Owen said recently, not even slightly in jest. "So I created a meeting format that was like one long coffee break."

Open-space meetings are unlike conventions, in that there are no predetermined speakers or workshop topics. Nor are they like executive retreats, which normally are a mix of prearranged topical sessions and unstructured "getting to know you" time for high-level executives who have been sent off to some remote enclave.

Open-space meetings can be held on site, provided there's a big enough room, and typically throw together executives and blue-collar workers. They operate on two basic premises: the best people to discuss a subject are the ones who want to, not the ones who are forced to; employees who have the chance to discuss things are the ones most likely to improve them.

"People worry too much about motivating workers," said Seymour S. Rao, chairman of the marketing department at Long Island University's C. W. Post campus, who recently changed his faculty evaluation policy after an open-space meeting he held with his staff. "Workers start off motivated. You have to get rid of whatever is demotivating them."

Mr. Owen has made a tidy business out of his concept. He and a handful of other consultants he has tutored have held open-space meetings for such diverse clients as the Presbyterian Church, Honeywell, the World Bank and emergency medical services groups.

Most of the meetings are part of larger organizational consulting assignments. But in the last year, Mr. Owen has done about a dozen stand-alone meetings like Rockport's, at prices ranging from \$6,000 for one day to \$10,000 for three days. And he has begun training corporate executives to hold their own open-space meetings.

The logistics of an open-space meeting, if not the agenda, are quite carefully controlled. First, there is the circular layout of the chairs. Mr. Owen got the idea from work he did in African villages, where meetings were always held in a circle.

"Who ever heard of a family square, or a rectangle of friends?" he said. "The circle is the natural form of communication. You are not looking at the back of people's heads, or ignoring people at your sides."

Then there is the meeting's length. Mr. Owen says that a one-day session can set the groundwork for interdepartmental communication. If a company wants a comprehensive report, like at Rockport, two days are needed. And if it wants employees to immediately form groups to carry out their ideas, Mr. Owen recommends three days.

Mr. Owen concedes that open space is no panacea. "It won't work when management is attached to a particular outcome," he said. "And it's a great way to design a new billing system, but a lousy way to implement it." It also cannot guarantee that ideas won't be sidelined if the employee who thought of them loses interest, or if management does not provide support to carry them out.

And it won't work for a management that is allergic to bad news. Mr. Owen tells this cautionary tale: "I held an open-space meeting for one company that wanted to discuss its future. The consensus after the meeting was that there was no future." The company has since liquidated.

BUT when open-space meetings do work, they can yield astonishing results.

Within a few minutes of the Rockport meeting's commencement, employees started scurrying to write down topics. One wrote, "Who are Rockport's people, and what do they really do?" Another asked why the headquarters group had a better fitness program than the distribution center. Another asked how compensation was set, another about the attendance policy. Someone asked whether Rockport should have a formal management training program, another whether paperwork could be reduced. Mr. Devlin, the shipping supervisor, set up a workshop on writing a statement of goals for the company.

Within 30 minutes, more than 100 sign-up sheets were tacked to the wall. The impromptu groups formed, with the people who wrote down the subjects choosing the meeting times and serving as group leaders.

Afterward, the leaders typed into computers the recommendations that came out of their meetings. Later, back at work, many of them spearheaded committees to see their recommendations through.

Since that meeting, Rockport has hired a training specialist. It has gotten discounts for distribution center employees at local health clubs. It has put in E-mail, in part to eliminate paper memos.

There's an employee directory, listing everyone's name, title and phone number. Company newsletters, which someone complained arrived haphazardly, are now delivered with paychecks. And while Mr. Devlin's high-minded idea of a corporate goal statement has fallen by the wayside, he has worked on one for his own department.

"The meeting brought to the forefront ideas on people's wish lists," Mr. Devlin said.

And it continues to have ramifications. "The departments are inviting people over to see how they work, what they do," said Kathleen A. Preville, a human resources clerk. Moreover, Rockport people keep referring to the book in which all of the suggestions of the meetings were printed out.

"It's not a dead document at all," said Mr. Roessler, the human resources executive.

For Rockport, which has a history of informal meetings and retreats, open-space meetings were a natural evolution. They are a far more radical approach for bureaucratic organizations, where support staffs are often left out of the decision-making process.

That certainly was true at the quasi-governmental World Bank. "They had been trying for years to figure out better ways to use their resources," said Giles Hopkins, a consultant in Bethesda, Md., who with his wife, Robbins, has held about 20 open-space meetings for World Bank divisions.

World Bank executives, citing sensitivity to any publicity in their 50th anniversary year, declined to talk about the meetings. But the Hopkinses offer numerous tangible proofs that the meetings yielded results.

One World Bank department responsible for helping a third world country develop power resources recognized that the money it was funneling through the country's Government would be better invested in helping the Government privatize the power system.

Another restructured its own bureaucracy so that projects that were once assigned to individuals are now assigned to teams. That way the person in charge of, say, enhancing a country's power supply cannot accidentally sabotage the work of the person in charge of environmental protection.

Yet another group ranked the progress of continuing projects, back-burnered the ones that seemed unwieldy and concentrated on the two that seemed winners.

"At a conventional meeting, the idea of putting a low priority on a project that the board had once approved would never have even come up," Ms. Hopkins said.

Sorting through projects and setting priorities can be as difficult, albeit for different reasons, in newly merged companies as in entrenched bureaucracies. That's why Corporate Express, a rapidly growing office products distributor based in Broomfield, Colo., has adopted open-space meetings.

In February, the eight-year-old company bought Hanson Office Products, a competitor that was, in fact, larger than its new parent. It set up a three-day open-space meeting at Aspen Lodge in Estes Park, Colo., mainly to shift the competitors-turned-colleagues in the same direction.

Computer issues, compensation issues, all the problems of combining disparate company systems, were discussed and tentatively worked out. "They said, 'We won't change our name to yours, but everything else is fair game,'" recalled Gary Gonsalves, a former Hanson executive who is now vice president of sales for the Southern California division of Corporate Express.

Mr. Gonsalves, one of 10 executives whom Corporate Express has sent to Mr. Owen for training, recently held an open-space meeting in Tennessee, where three Corporate Express branches were being consolidated.

"The fidget factor was high at first, like it always is, but we soon had 39 issues written on the wall," Mr. Gonsalves said.

The meeting ended with the skeleton of a new system for reducing installation costs by having sales representatives and installers visit a client's work site together, and with a workable compensation program that combined the best of all three branch systems. Mr. Gonsalves also believes that some problems were smoothed out without ever making it into the book of recommendations.

"Someone would state a problem, and someone else would say, 'Hey, I can solve that for you,'" he said. "One thing you discover with open space is your people know what changes they need to make. All you have to do after they've made their recommendations is say, 'Go.'" **BREAKING AN ORGANIZATIONAL LOGJAM**

CONVINCING people that an agendaless meeting will work requires a leap of faith that often is not made until desperation sets in.

For years the Presbyterian Church USA, the Chicago-based umbrella group that sets church policy, held annual meetings of some 600 elected church officials from around the country, with the idea of setting priorities for the church for the coming year. And every year the meetings would end without any long-term decisions being made.

"No one could seem to decide what the church's priorities should be," recalled Ruth McCreath, until recently the church's coordinator for planning and resources.

So in 1992 Ms. McCreath and her staff arranged for about 500 church members to gather for an open-space meeting in the ballroom of the Westin Hotel near O'Hare Airport. One by one, topics were written on the board -- redevelopment of local congregations, survival of small churches, ending discrimination against gays and lesbians, defining a mission to the Muslim world. There were 143 topics in all, resulting in 349 pages of raw reports and 250 pages of edited ones.

The church has acted on many of those reports. It has gotten different presbyteries, or regions, to cooperate on such things as bundling services like insurance. It has set up spiritual retreats. It is setting up ministries in inner cities.

"It used to be that if you didn't get something on the agenda in advance, it never got discussed," Ms. McCreath recalled. "This way, everything got discussed, and finally acted on."