

**Dr. Barbara Kozok**

## **The Power of Open Space**

Prior to my freelance activities I delivered corporate leadership trainings for many years. I found out that participants' most frequent demands in the feedback evaluation sheets were

1. sharing experience with colleagues and
2. discussing issues further than those on the set agenda.

But the time table was packed with key note speeches, presentations, theory input about leadership models and - of course - group work sometimes including after dinner events. There were rare exceptions: once we invited a group of 90 managers to put their matters of concern on the agenda and instead of following another beforehand prepared group task they could self-organize a discussions with colleagues who shared the same interest.

The morning after a participating lawyer happily announced that since last night his colleagues fully understood the principals of the German works-council and its role in a merging process. Another participant proudly presented a new product which could be launched company-wide, designed overnight.

These are tangible results of a two hours Open Space in homogenius groups. But what happens when people with different backgrounds meet to discuss or try to solve a problem?

The management of a shoe factory decided to run a two-days Open Space in its production premise. The plan was to gather the staff from every department during a weekend. But they missed out to inform the cleaning personel. Turning up as usual the cleaners curiously noticed the unusual activities and simply took part in the ongoing discussions. As one result of this Open Space the shoe factory started to produce a brand new shoe designed for the needs of cleaners.

There is more to come. The authors of 'The Second Machine Age' state that 'expertise far away from apparent domain (is) more likely to submit (a) solution to complex problems' and they continue to show examples where companies 'open up their innovation challenges and opportunities to more eyeballs' [84].

This is in sharp contrast to most HR departments' everyday practise. 'Having won the war for talents' they put the newly acquired experts into their declared work environment. These experts accomplish all performance scores, and tailor made HR processes care for them: once a year they receive an appraisal evaluation sheet documenting their performance and at the same time defining new goals with development targets for the next year. That's it.

These talents will rarely be asked about their view of the company, its products or processes, its challenges and opportunities, about what is working well and where they would suggest improvements. No one seems to be interested to learn more from their high-performers. So much work experience, knowledge and know-how lies idle in the company. Why? Is it a lack of interest?

No, I learned, it is a matter of fear. Top managers are afraid of being challenged regarding

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their status and recognition in the company. Open Space works against hierarchies in their opinion. And big decisions should still be made behind closed doors at board-meetings.

But research shows that nowadays innovation is rarely based on a stroke of genius but rather on re-combining and a mix and remix of existing good ideas, especially when groups of experts from different disciplines meet personally and swap ideas. Companies should make use of the human advantage of 'Ideation', which describes the ability to create new ideas collectively [ibid. 191].

So - are you prepared for the future?

Are you eager to unleash the power of creativity and innovation?

When are you inviting your workforce into an Open Space?