

# Leading a Good Open Space Session

By Richard Lawrence

Unless you're an experienced facilitator, it can be quite intimidating to be responsible for helping a group discover or learn something on a new topic in less than an hour with little preparation.

Two of my favorite kinds of open space sessions are:

1. A group exploring a topic, problem, or question
2. Someone sharing an experience report

Here's a simple approach for each of these that you can use to increase your odds of facilitating a valuable session.

Whichever approach you take, don't forget to capture the highlights of your session on a poster or two to share with the rest of the conference participants.

## Exploring a Topic, Problem, or Question

Many open space sessions are formed around exploring a topic or answering a question. For example, "*Who does what when in BDD around here?*"

For these sessions, it works well to answer four kinds of questions in a particular sequence.<sup>1</sup> I'll use the example topic above to illustrate each of these.

**OBSERVATION—Questions about facts and data.** Collect any data that might be relevant to the topic so you can use it to make sense of the topic and discover new things. Sometimes, you can bring data as the facilitator and have the group add to it.

- *What roles do we currently have?*
- *What are the people who hold each of these roles uniquely qualified to do?*
- *What are the major activities in BDD?*
- *What information does each of these activities require/produce?*
- *What other data might be useful for us to think more clearly about this topic?*

**REFLECTION—Questions about your internal response to the data** (feelings, motivation, etc.).

This is just another kind of data. If you don't talk about feelings in some way, they'll come out in strange ways later in the conversation. I like motivation as an easy way to reflect on your internal state without having to talk about feelings directly, which can be clumsy for many people.

- *What do you find most motivating about your role?*
- *What do you find most demotivating about your role?*

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Art of Focused Conversation* by R. Brian Stanfield for more on this.

**INTERPRETATION—Questions about patterns and meaning.** This is where you take all the data from the previous two sections and make sense of it.

- *Which role(s) can contribute to each BDD activity?*
- *What patterns do we see in our motivation?*
- *How might we use BDD to make our work more motivating?*
- *What existing activities could the BDD activities replace?*

**DECISION—Questions about drawing conclusions and taking action.** This section boils down to some form of "Ok, so what?" Make sure you manage your time to leave at least a few minutes for this so the session doesn't feel like it stops in the middle.

- *What experiment do we want to run with this?*
- *How should we continue this conversation?*

## Sharing Your Experience

Some open space sessions are about the facilitator sharing something they've learned that they think might be useful to others. A different approach is effective here.

1. Briefly **describe the problem** you had. Do your best to objectively describe symptoms. In particular, avoid characterizing the problem as the lack of the solution you ended up with. (E.g., "Our problem was that we weren't doing BDD." No, it wasn't. That's not anybody's problem. Your problem was something else related to collaboration or quality or speed or something and BDD might have fixed that problem. Describe the actual problem.)
2. Describe **what you tried** to address the problem. Include things you tried and rejected. Describe what happened, both intended and unintended effects. Explain how you avoided or mitigated negative side effects.
3. **Interpret what happened.** Why did some things work and not others? When might someone else get different results?
- 4a. **Take a similar problem from the group** and do a thought experiment together on what would happen if they tried your solution in their context. Capture what you discover from the thought experiment.
- 4b. Alternatively, depending on the experience of the group, you might **have others share their experiences** trying to address the same problem and look for patterns across your combined experiences.
5. **Draw conclusions and define next actions.** What are session participants going to do with what you talked about in the session?