Building powerful community organizations: A personal guide to creating groups that can solve problems and change the world

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Building powerful community organizations: A personal guide to creating
groups that can solve problems and change the world, by Michael Jacoby Brown,
9780977151806

How do you change the world? Michael Jacoby Brown urges readers to consider his approach, that
you can change the world by building powerful community organizations. The author described
his book as “a practical, step-by-step guide to starting or strengthening a community organiza-
tion” (p. xxiii). Brown has crafted a true workbook, in the most literal sense. The volume begs to
be used again and again.

The author has worked as a community organizer, and he opens with a historical background
and theoretical overview of the community organizing field. The description avoids scholarly
jargon and is written in a straightforward manner. The writing style is engaging, informal, and
accessible. I was excited to discover a book that could be shared not only with members of neighbor-
hood groups in my home city of Roanoke, Virginia, but also with upper-level undergraduate
students in my public policy and community involvement courses at Virginia Tech.

Chapters cover fundamental concerns in community organizing and group development,
including topics such as forming a core group; developing mission, goals, and objectives; recruit-
ing members and supporters; developing leaders; facilitating meetings; raising money; and taking
action. In other words, there is much you might expect to find in a book on developing community
organizations. Brown uses exercises and emphasizes practical application. He refuses to offer
generals and theories, instead imbuing the text with a refreshing specificity.

Section one, for instance, covers the basics of getting started. Readers learn how to approach
community members about their group and how to describe an idea. Brown includes details on
selecting a name, conducting focus groups, and gathering letters of support. He offers sample
letters, outlines, and guided questions. Individuals wanting to foster change in their community
could pick up this book and proceed sequentially through its chapters to form an organization
likely to be effective.

Brown shares anecdotes, usually from groups he has worked with or from his experiences as
an organizer, interspersed throughout the chapters in brief, visually distinct sections. I found this
highly effective, since it introduced narrative elements in addition to the practical information.
The author adeptly employs these vignettes to illustrate points and reinforce areas of emphasis.
For example, when Brown urges group leaders never to refuse an offer of help, he writes vividly
of an instance when a stranger offered to help him carry his daughter’s stroller down the stairs
in a subway station. He began to refuse the gesture, but decided to accept and was thus able to
make a valuable personal connection.

In three areas, the book might have been more comprehensive. First, the author could have
discussed more substantively the role of technology and its application for organizing groups
and making change. Brown alludes to the internet in a very brief, two-and-a-half page section
near the close. With the rising attention to social media and digital technology applications,
the relative lack of content on these topics seems glaring, though the 2006 pre-Arab Spring
publication date partly explains this gap. Brown places a priority on face-to-face interaction in
community building. Nonetheless, technology, from Facebook to Dropbox, digital storytelling
to crowdsourcing, can be powerful to organizers and groups.

Brown’s work might have been strengthened by a more extended discussion of the complex-
ities of community-based work, including the problem of defining community. While the book is
intended primarily for practitioners rather than academics, community-based work necessarily
entails contested concepts and competing theories. In addition, communities are sites of multi-
plicity and difference and as such are neither uniform nor united. Brown does delve briefly into the
political aspects of organizing and the sometimes conflicted positioning of organizers. He does not, however, devote much attention to the complexities of working across areas of entrenched difference, or among people and groups with seemingly intractable positions.

Lastly, while the anecdotes greatly enhance readability and effectively reinforce points in the text, I was hoping for even more self-reflexivity from such an experienced community organizer. Brown might have shared even more of his personal struggles, values choices, and leadership challenges.

*Building Powerful Community Organizations* remains an interesting, useful, and highly important work. As Brown describes, it fills a critical gap since building community groups is a subject that “popular culture, the media, and public and professional groups ignore” (p. 271). Moreover, the book contains critical reminders for those of us engaged in community-based work: those closest to a problem have to be included in the problem’s solution and a powerful ongoing organization can significantly aid that process. Readers in the community development field or who belong to a community group will likely find themselves dog-earing pages and passing copies along to colleagues and friends.

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