



## 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, Arlington, Massachusetts, Long Haul Press, 2006, 424 pp., US\$19.95 (paperback), ISBN 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 organization” (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 neighborhood 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; recruiting 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 generalities 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 complexities 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 multiplicity 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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