

Title: "Book Review: Engagement Organizing: The Old Art and New Science of Winning Campaigns"

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Book Review: Engagement Organizing: The Old Art and New Science of Winning Campaigns

By Jillian Witt

Engagement Organizing: The Old Art and New Science of Winning Campaigns, by Matt Price. Vancouver, British Columbia, On Point Press, 2017, ISBN 9780774890168

Most articles on social impact mention the importance of engaging those most affected by an issue in creating solutions. Unfortunately, in many cases in the non-profit sector, we've professionalized the community out of the community sector. Often times, professionals in the sector are creating and delivering their own "expert" solutions, with limited involvement and feedback from the communities most affected. Not only does this perpetuate social exclusion, but it can lead to ineffective and sometimes harmful outcomes. Engagement organizing is a tool to build relevant and dynamic organizations and movements that engage large groups in meaningful ways.

In *Engagement Organizing: The Old Art and New Science of Winning Campaigns*, author Matt Price describes how combining community organizing approaches with digital tools and data can increase public engagement and build influence. Engagement organizing, to Price, is about winning campaigns. Although the book focuses mostly on campaign organizing, Price insists, and I agree, that any organization working with people at scale can benefit from its lessons. Price provides more than a dozen case studies to illustrate this, including examples of campaigns in the non-profit sector, union organizing, and electoral politics.

Engagement organizing includes online and in-person communication and relationship-building, with both approaches informing and supporting one another. The book provides several examples of campaigns that employed engagement organizing, with details about how each combined specific digital tools with frontline tactics.

It starts out with an overview of community organizing principles and tactics, describing the work of Saul Alinsky, Marshall Ganz, and others who shaped the organizing theory and approaches of the 20th century. Prices summarizes their works to explain how community organizing depends on face-to-face relationships, knocking on doors, supporting and training volunteers, and distributed leadership approaches such as the "snowflake model" that allow many people within a movement to spread the

message, persuade, and recruit others to a cause. The book distinguishes between organizing individuals versus mobilizing organizations to grow a campaign: both have merit in different circumstances.

Community organizing is one half of engagement organizing, the other is digital. The second chapter introduces how digital tools and practices and good data management help win campaigns. Digital tools allow for new ways to engage and communicate a message as well as ways to test the effectiveness of a message, allowing for rapid adaptation of messaging and tactics. For example, campaigners can create segmented lists to manage the needs and interests of different audiences and test emails and social media posts to see which ones bring about the most donations, petition signatures, etc. Other tools can help an organization crowdsource policy positions. Case studies include details such as the campaign's choice and implementation of specific software, such as NationBuilder and Plone.

Engagement organizing is necessary, to Price, because of a changing media ecosystem. As he explains throughout the book, for a long time, campaigns were won through "air wars:" capturing and persuading the broad public over television airtime rather than engaging potential voters at a more personal level. As a result, campaign strategy focused on media relations rather than a ground game of meeting constituents and recruiting volunteers. This approach no longer fits with our media consumption and participation online.

The value of engagement organizing might also be explained in terms of changes in the non-profit sector. As it has matured, many organizations have shifted from grassroots community groups made up of primarily community members volunteering their time to an issue, to organizations with "expert staff" working on behalf of a community. One detrimental outcome of this shift is the limited engagement of citizens and the lack of representation of those most impacted by an issue. Organizations are more likely to rely on professional staff for their most crucial work and only engage volunteers in limited ways. However, the benefits of more meaningful representation for these stakeholders are ever clearer today. We know that those most affected by an issue are essential to the creation and delivery of solutions. We also see the power of citizen movements in shifting narratives, behaviour, and policy. So what is stopping an organization accustomed to a more hierarchical, "expert" model from shifting to one that truly engages and mobilizes its community?

Price describes four areas that hinder established organizations from adapting to these practices: staff, systems, culture, and governance.

Legacy organizations will require significant change to be able to embrace engagement organizing practices. They often use multiple systems that don't "talk" to each other and staff roles reflect this disconnect. Marketing and fundraising, community outreach, media relations, and government relations are often managed by separate systems and staff. For example, an individual may be a donor, volunteer, or participant in a program and interact with different staff and communication channels for each of these activities. This lack of integration is not only confusing to a constituent, but likely limits the data collected and therefore the strategy of the organization to respond and reach out to its community, the public, and media in timely and effective ways.

However, Price found that organizations that embrace engagement organizing practices have the following attributes:

- **Staff** roles are dynamic and require skills and experience in building relationships, sharing and exchanging knowledge, and fostering leadership and action of constituents;

- **Systems** are integrated across an organization's functions to track, learn, and communicate with its constituency;
- **Culture** focuses on working with, rather than on behalf of, its community; and the
- **Governance** model distributes leadership and decision-making beyond senior staff and board.

The book wraps up with how to get started. It shares current challenges and trends, and a recap of the recommendations for campaigns and organizations to implement.

At a time when the sector is grappling with how to better affect public policy, represent the communities it serves, improve volunteer engagement, raise money, and shift public attitudes about a host of issues, *Engagement Organizing* is a relevant and useful resource. It is an accessible mix of theory and practice, with relevant case studies that provide learning for organizations. The number of Canadian examples is particularly useful. As Price notes, while organizing in Canada is greatly influenced by practices in the United States, the context, culture, and scale are different.

At times, the case studies focus more on telling a story than analyzing what worked and what didn't. This can result in a limited distance between the narrative and the examples, which makes it difficult to understand how much is the perspective of the organizers being profiled rather than an outside analysis of the impact of the campaign described.

It also would have been helpful to include an example of a registered charity that adopted engagement organizing techniques. Price mentions that this is possible, but doesn't elaborate. Given that charities have particular laws to follow in regards to political activities, an example would demonstrate how charities can navigate this challenge. Similarly, an example of a legacy organization that transitioned its staff, systems, culture, and governance in order to adopt engagement organizing practices was missing.

Engagement organizing will not fix the participatory issues facing the non-profit sector. Engagement and shared leadership have to be virtues prioritized and reflected in all levels of the sector. But if organizations commit to change, then *Engagement Organizing* provides practical examples of what it means to synchronize an organization's systems and share power with community.