

ENGAGEMENT ORGANIZING

The Old Art and New Science of Winning Campaigns

Matt Price

With a foreword by Allan R. Gregg

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Foreword

I first came across Matt Price in 2012 when a colleague forwarded a paper that he had written, titled “Revenge of the Beaver,” and delivered at the Stonehouse Standing Circle Annual Summit earlier in the year. My colleague also informed me that the paper had caused something of a sensation and was now considered required reading among members of the progressive NGO community. In it – as he does here – Price wrote about a new way of engaging and organizing volunteer citizens that was effecting real, on-the-ground change.

After reading the article, I was surprised that Price wasn’t writing about some sci-fi approach to engagement but was actually advocating for something that had always been – but seemingly had been lost and forgotten – the historical centrepiece of activism: namely, encouraging individuals to exercise control over their lives, and where they live, by empowering them to make decisions on their own and then taking responsibility for their execution. Far from being futuristic, this involved techniques such as door knocking, house meeting, petition circulating, and good, old-fashioned protesting.

What made this all different – and relevant – was that Price was providing some compelling theoretical context about why this approach is particularly appropriate and effective in the twenty-first century. He wrote about “distributed leadership,” in which an organizer’s role was not simply to recruit

more and more volunteers to a cause but also to identify, teach, and motivate “organic” leaders and then move on, creating a “snowflake model” of networked interactions among volunteers rather than a traditional, hierarchical, command-and-control structure. The other obvious difference was that the pioneers of engagement organizing, such as Saul Alinsky and Cesar Chavez, didn’t have the Internet or other digital tools that would allow them to scale their organizations rapidly and, even more importantly, allow volunteers to interact with, energize, and learn from one another – making hierarchical, command-and-control structures unnecessary.

On many levels, I was intrigued.

In the dozens of political campaigns that I was involved with in the 1980s and early 1990s, the universally accepted operating principle was that elections were won or lost based upon the “air war” – using paid advertising and the earned media generated through the leader’s tour, speeches, and press conferences – and that a “ground game” – involving canvassing, making candidate brochures, and identifying local voters – was something to keep volunteers preoccupied but otherwise of little consequence.

Against this experience, however, I had noted Barack Obama’s remarkable and sophisticated 2008 campaign, which had attracted over 1.5 million volunteers (and, as Price reminds us here, had been preceded and inspired by Howard Dean’s run for the 2004 Democratic nomination) who had used digital tools to drive local data into central servers and allocate resources according to algorithmic-calculated opportunity. In 2012, while Senate and House Democrats were being defeated, Obama was re-elected using the same techniques but this time supported by 2.2 million volunteers.

I had also become aware of new grassroots organizations such as the Dogwood Initiative, Leadnow, and Open Media (all of which, and many more, Price writes about here), recruiting and signing up literally hundreds of thousands of activists defying authority and the status quo – rallying to ban oil tankers from the Strait of Juan de Fuca, signing petitions to challenge mandatory minimum sentencing legislation, and lobbying to maintain an open and neutral Internet.

Price’s writing and these mounting examples also got me thinking about other non-political research, which caused me to question some of my earlier assumptions about behavioural change. Surveys that I had conducted on philanthropy, for example, demonstrated that the best predictors of charitable

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giving were not attitudes – sentiments such as “we have a responsibility to help those less fortunate than us” and “we are all each other’s keepers” – but things such as attending church, making donations a part of a monthly budget, volunteering, or making payroll deductions for charity. This suggested that charitable giving was not a function of being charity *minded* so much as a structured act in which a certain kind of *behaviour* begat behaviour – in other words, the more charity was embedded in an individual’s life, the more frequently she or he gave and in greater amounts. What made this conclusion surprising is that it turned normal persuasion theory on its head: it suggested that changed attitudes do not necessarily lead to changed behaviour; instead, changed behaviour will lead to changed attitudes. If you get someone to *believe* something, that person will not necessarily *do* anything; however, if you get someone to *do* something, you will likely also get that person to *believe even more strongly in what he or she is doing*.

And this is precisely what Price writes about when he introduces the reader to the “iron rule” of engagement organizing: “*never do for others what they can do for themselves.*” Volunteers are empowered and given responsibility to execute their own plans because it develops their own sense of agency. By *doing* something (instead of merely being *told* to believe in something), their attitudes – their loyalty and commitment to the cause – will intensify and expand. Price makes the point concretely and simply when he quotes Jamie Biggar from Leadnow: “It’s amazing how a not very political person will go from signing a petition to hosting a rally. It’s because we ask.”

So I began a correspondence with Price, and we met and discussed this phenomenon in more detail. And I learned from him that citizen engagement was evolving in response not only to growing frustration among activists with the responsiveness and representativeness of our leaders but also to changes in how citizens desire to be engaged and take more control over their lives.

When I was actively involved in politics, we practised what might be called citizen engagement 1.0. All communication was one way (relayed through media and news) and emanated from the inside out – you spoke, and the intended audience listened. The goal was to make people behave in a certain way (e.g., vote for your side) by telling them something credible, relevant, and salient. Again, this approach was based upon traditional persuasion theory – change attitudes and you will change behaviour. Engagement

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1.0 worked well as long as the electorate was passive, trusting, and deferential to traditional authority. As Canadians shifted from deference to defiance in the late 1980s and 1990s, and as we witnessed a wholesale erosion of favourability of and trust in politicians, this inside-out messaging lost its effectiveness because hardly anyone believed the messenger – let alone the message – anymore.

It soon became apparent, however, that this loss of trust was not limited to politicians but extended to all traditional authorities, including the media. Picking up on this, elites then pivoted to citizen engagement 2.0. This newer model recognized the less deferential – and thus less hierarchical – relationship between citizen and authority and therefore offered more of a dialogue and an opportunity for the citizen’s voice to be part of public discourse. Engagement 2.0 then featured things such as town hall meetings, citizen assemblies, and media series such as “It’s Your Turn” that featured everyday citizens offering their solutions to problems in the community and society. Although all of this “consulting and listening” recognized the frustration of citizens, engagement 2.0 was likely doomed to failure.

Like that old saying “What’s the worst part of asking for advice? Listening to it,” inviting uncoordinated citizen advice largely led to nothing more than incoherence, for it was impossible to quantify or even aggregate this input. It also raised expectations that led to even more public alienation from authorities who asked for citizen advice but had no intention of acting on it.

Then came September 11, 2001. In the next seven years, North Americans’ outlook changed in a way that hadn’t been witnessed before. In our polling, we noted the largest number of Canadians ever saying that they were better off than they had been ten years earlier and the smallest number ever anticipating a recession in the “next year,” yet levels of optimism were stuck at post-9/11 levels. Neither new concern about personal safety nor “joyless prosperity” did anything to repair the broken bond between citizens and their leaders, but it did seem to put a temporary halt to the two-decade-long erosion of trust.

But the financial meltdown of 2008–9 took the public finger off this pause button, and mistrust of “elites” started to take on a whole new form. Following citizen uprisings such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, by 2011 *Time* named “the protester” as its “person of the year.” At the same time, Price was writing “Revenge of the Beaver” and noting a quantitative and qualitative

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difference in the level and nature of activism around the world. Since then, we have witnessed the almost spontaneous emergence of other activist movements, such as Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, and, most recently, the Women's March on Washington. Price gives context and understanding to these developments and introduces readers to many lesser-known groups organizing citizens to take control of their lives by practising this new, digitally powered form of citizen engagement 3.0.

There are still many current examples of messaging that triumphs over organization (as Price acknowledges). When one side of a contest has an overarching message that taps into the raw nerve of public opinion more viscerally than its opponent's message, what happens in a local area or on the ground matters little (just ask Hillary Clinton, who faced the anger and desire to "Make America Great Again," or the dozen well-regarded, urban, NDP incumbents who went down to wholesale defeat in the wake of the Justin Trudeau juggernaut in 2015). But even in these cases, it still strikes me as undeniable that something new and different is happening in the fundamental relationship between citizens and leaders.

In the introduction, Price claims that "this book is primarily intended for campaign practitioners, amateur or professional." After reading it, I think that he is being far too modest. As he quotes Nicole Carty of SumOfUs, "the more we can create structures where regular people can plug in, connect to each other, stand up for what matters, the more possible it will be to transform the deepest injustices in our society." This is the subject that Matt Price explores in *Engagement Organizing*, and anyone who cares about justice, equality, and democracy will find much to learn in the pages that follow that will be inspiring.

Allan R. Gregg
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Introduction: Failing Well

**While you are looking, you might as well also listen,
linger and think about what you see.**

– Jane Jacobs

Everybody fails sometimes. The question is whether you fail well. A big failure of mine took place several years ago when I was working with the group Environmental Defence in Toronto. We were trying to protect Ontario's renewable energy program against attacks by groups who disliked wind power. The public was broadly onside with closing the province's coal plants and shifting to cleaner energy, but there was concern in rural areas where new wind turbines were being built. Anti-wind groups popped up, led by people making a mixture of arguments about health risks and property rights. The conservative opposition party, itself rurally based and ideologically skeptical about renewable energy, also gave voice to these concerns. The provincial election of 2011 became in part a referendum on wind energy, particularly in less urban areas.

On paper, our campaign had everything going for us. Compared with the anti-wind groups, we were relatively well funded. General opinion was on our side. Science both supported the shift to renewables and indicated that anti-wind health arguments were bogus. We had the legitimacy of both

the government position and a growing renewable energy industry helping to create jobs. But when the dust settled after election day, the governing party had been reduced to minority status based upon losses in anti-wind areas. Our opponents had won. We had failed.

Campaigns are complicated things with lots of variables and with human unpredictability at the core of each one. After some months passed, I began to settle on why we had lost when we should have won, and more importantly I began to apply this lesson to the future, to fail well. I realized that while we had been in our downtown Toronto office writing reports, calling journalists, running ads, and posting on Facebook and Twitter, our opponents had been on the ground in rural communities talking to people face to face, recruiting citizens to their cause, and turning them out at key moments with decision makers. We had been talking to the public in general in a shallow way while they had been focusing on deeper engagements with specific people.

This wasn't a fresh insight, but it was a timely one. Often the conditions need to be right to learn from failure and to be moved to do things differently. I had been active in a range of advocacy causes for about fifteen years and was ready for something new. A shift was under way in how campaigns are waged and won, driven in part by innovations in US presidential races and spilling over into campaigns of all kinds in Canada and around the world. My experience doing what didn't work led me to ask what did work, and I found others also asking this question. In fact, the very act of asking the question consistently was becoming incorporated into campaigns as a permanent feature.

In 2012, Sasha Issenberg published the *Victory Lab*, a book that has helped to transform modern campaigns. It describes the trend toward campaigns not only asking what works but also applying the kinds of randomized experiments to campaign tactics that have been called "prescription drug trials for democracy."¹ Do you have a million dollars to spend on a campaign to convince people of something? You could take a tenth of that money and experiment whether leafletting gets you more converts than phone calling and then allocate the remaining resources accordingly. The questioning itself is part of the shift. It's not something that ends but gets built into all campaigns. Some of the answers, though, take us back to why I failed in Ontario and to what came next.

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Academics Donald Green and Alan Gerber are leaders in the emerging field of applying randomized experiments to campaigns. They have participated in dozens of experiments with political candidates and third-party groups seeking to boost voter turnout or to influence issues. They have systematically measured the use of various tactics, such as canvassing, phone banks, leafletting, and print, radio, and TV ads. Their core conclusion is common sense at one level but quite disruptive at another. Overall, they say, “the more personal the interaction between campaign and potential voter, the more it raises the person’s chances of voting.”²² They find that canvassing is more effective than phoning and phoning more effective – particularly when done by caring volunteers – than leafletting. Part of the reason that the anti-wind groups won was because they got out there face to face with citizens and we didn’t. They were personal, and we weren’t. Again, this isn’t rocket science, but the conclusion hits harder when it’s confirmed by academic testing.

This is disruptive in the campaign world because, for the past few decades, we convinced ourselves that television and newspapers were king and designed our work accordingly. My first day on my first campaign job I was trained by a colleague on how to do things, shaped by the mission of the organization and by how it had gone about that mission in the past. When you are new on a job, it’s not your role to question those assumptions. I started working with advocacy groups in the mid-1990s. Although we had policy goals, the main way that we measured day-to-day success was whether we were in the newspaper, on radio, or on television. We believed that this was the best way to influence decision makers, so we spent time writing reports, staging creative events, and generally trying to convince reporters to cover our issues. We were submerged by the broadcast media era, albeit near the tail end of it.

At the time, I didn’t reflect on the fact that it hadn’t always been this way. The groups that I worked for shared an advocacy model that emerged only after the 1960s. Sociologist Theda Skocpol traces the emergence of this model in a trend “from membership to management.”²³ Since the 1800s, there have been many large volunteer membership federations active both in local civic life and in politics at all levels of government. Citizens were directly involved in these efforts as active participants. Then the 1960s brought the civil rights movement and an explosion in new rights-based groups organized more

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around specific issues such as women's equality and environmentalism. The growth of direct mail and foundation fundraising allowed these new groups to headquarter in political and media centres without the need or desire for active supporter engagement beyond writing cheques. Politicians and advocates alike hired experts to shape policy, media consultants to place stories, and pollsters to tell them what people thought. Average citizens stayed home. With no organized following, self-proclaimed representatives became "bodyless heads."⁴ Hundreds of organizations, including the ones that I worked for, operated based upon this model until a series of shocks began to shake it up in the 2000s.

One shock in the electoral realm was Howard Dean's improbable but groundbreaking run for the 2004 Democratic Party presidential nomination, based upon leveraging the Internet for significant engagement of supporters in person and for fundraising. This showed that a campaign could in fact recruit volunteers at a scale to help conduct more personalized contacts, as Green and Gerber recommend. In 2008, Barack Obama built upon this lesson by training and structuring a massive volunteer army to help him win. Other shocks to the model were major policy setbacks, particularly regarding climate change. The failure to pass a US climate law in 2010 solidified the perception that the NGOs involved were failing because they were not mobilizing citizens, with the instructive exception of fierce grassroots opposition by the Tea Party. In Canada, the failure of international climate talks in 2009 in Copenhagen led advocates to doubt that their advocacy model was working. At the same time, Stephen Harper's aggressive record as prime minister was shocking to many in Canada, which, in turn, motivated campaign innovation.

In sum, by the time of my failure in Ontario, circumstances were ripe for a shift in how campaigns are designed and won. The core of this shift was a return to engaging people directly with grassroots organizing. And, though that wasn't new, the changed campaign landscape forged by digital tools was. I joined my friend and colleague Jon Stahl to study a handful of organizations then starting to marry grassroots organizing with new digital tools to build power and to win campaigns. Some were calling the approach "engagement organizing," and we circulated a paper describing it. The paper struck a chord in campaign circles. The feeling that we were facing new realities that called for new approaches seemed to be widespread. At the same time, the paper

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just scratched the surface. Today there is more from which we can learn. Campaigns have been innovating and learning practical lessons. Digital tools have become more pervasive and powerful and have continued to push the boundaries of organizing. There has been greater sharing among practitioners of challenges and solutions. There is now a more common vocabulary.

This book is therefore a deeper dive into engagement organizing to better capture the historical context in which it is emerging to uncover its core elements and to show how it is being practised today through case studies that span NGOs, unions, and political parties. This book draws predominantly from Canadian examples to explore the roots and current practices of engagement organizing, with relevance for campaigns of all kinds in Western democracies. One thing that I have realized in researching and writing this book is that we don't tell campaign stories enough. We are so busy on the campaigns themselves that we don't take time to catalogue what goes into them so that we can learn what to do better next time.

Some divide campaigns into the elements of "message" – what's on offer and how it's communicated – and "mechanics" – the nuts and bolts of what a campaign does to win. This book is focused primarily on the latter, though the mechanics of any good organizing campaign begin with listening for the message to emerge, so it's not black and white. Issues, candidates, and how they are framed will come and go relatively frequently. Campaign best practices will evolve more slowly. It's not that there aren't better and worse ways to tackle messaging, but they would take a whole book of their own. Meanwhile, as the disturbing election of Donald Trump over better-organized Hillary Clinton demonstrated, the message can still beat the mechanics – no amount of clever campaign methods makes up for an issue or a candidate that people just aren't enthusiastic about in the face of another dominating public attention and tapping into a mood for change.

This book is primarily intended for campaign practitioners, amateur or professional, working in a variety of sectors and on a variety of issues. I hope that it will be useful not only to those new to campaigns but also to those with some experience. Indeed, in researching this book, I saw more clearly the shifts under way as the broadcast era gives way to something more participatory with digital tools and the new culture that comes along with them. Although there are distinct chapters on NGOs, unions, and electoral campaigns, it is worthwhile for practitioners in any one field to check out the

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work in the others because there is common DNA in all three areas and things to be learned from stepping out of one's own sector. Overall, I hope, this book will serve as a high-level guide by situating campaigns in the context of recent history and by exploring real-world examples from which to draw lessons. However, this book is not a manual of the important in-the-weeds activities such as how to organize a house meeting or how to use social media. For those activities, there are more specific resources online that stay up to date more than a book can.

Here is a definition: *engagement organizing combines community organizing practices, digital tools, data, and networked communications to engage people at scale and win campaigns.* Engagement organizing can benefit campaigns of all kinds, whether political or not, and in multiple sectors – basically anywhere that directly engaging more people would help to achieve a campaign's goal. But this isn't an easy shift for many to make. Directly involving supporters or members requires trusting them and giving up some control. Having the hundreds or thousands of conversations necessary to make this happen takes time. Applying technological and data methods to the work means learning new systems and changing organizational cultures. All of this challenges how we have always done things, a powerful inertia. In my observation, innovation in engagement organizing often comes not from existing groups but from new initiatives or from organizations facing a big enough internal crisis to require a shift. Newness comes with less baggage, and discomfort is motivating. Nevertheless, campaigns can get there with intention and perseverance, and this book can help them.

Chapter 1 distills organizing principles and practices from the tradition and case studies of community organizing. These are core building blocks of engagement organizing. There are better and worse ways to directly involve people in a campaign, to help them organize to build power. Any campaign has at least an implied theory of change, and organizing puts people at the centre of it. Organizing identifies and develops leaders to own the campaign and to carry the mission. The process of cultivating leadership is never over, and leadership training plays a key role. We will look at case studies of the Metro Vancouver Alliance and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, two successful community organizing groups thriving in Canada today, and Organize BC, a leadership training group for organizers.

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Chapter 2 looks at how technology and data have changed the campaign landscape. It's not enough to talk just about "digital tools." Tools are part of it, but more important for campaigns to understand is how the underlying conditions are shifting with the erosion of the broadcast era. People's relationships with information are changing, the boundaries between private and public spheres are getting weaker, and now there are new opportunities to rapidly define and reach new communities to organize. Moreover, this shift has made easier the use of data to inform organizing. The case studies of Open Media and SumOfUs show how new online groups have taken advantage of these new conditions to achieve rapid growth, and the case study of the Dogwood Initiative shows how new systems help organizing scale up.

Chapter 3 describes how campaigns that are scaling up structure themselves and communicate via networks. Engagement organizing goes through a cycle of engagement with three overlapping phases of issue (re)alignment, mobilization, and distributed organizing. As the cycle turns, there is the opportunity to add people and resources to grow. Distributing leadership requires a structure that lets teams emerge and lets organizers, leaders, and team members hold one another accountable within a shared theory of change. We will look at one such structure called the "snowflake" model. Campaigns are dealing with a hybrid media environment of older broadcast outlets that are still influential and newer networked communications that require a new logic. There is a shift from *talking at* to *talking with* supporters, and to get to scale campaigns need to learn how to let supporters themselves own and carry the message by facilitating *talking among* them. Case studies for this chapter include recent US presidential campaigns, which are laboratories for scaling, and another look at the Dogwood Initiative to see the engagement cycle in action.

Chapter 4 shifts into a sector-by-sector exploration of how engagement organizing principles and practices are being applied, in this case the NGO sector. NGOs have the fewest legal constraints on what they do and how they are structured, so it's no surprise that some of the earliest adopters of engagement organizing can be found in this sector. The passing of the broadcast era is a form of disruption forcing innovation as more nimble, digitally driven NGOs compete for relevance and support. At the same time, several forms

of inertia inhibit many NGOs from moving toward engagement organizing. Attitudes toward power also affect whether NGOs embrace this shift, including views on the role of power within organizing and its relationship to leadership. Case studies of Leadnow and Ecology Ottawa explore two NGOs practising engagement organizing in Canada today.

Chapter 5 examines the relationship between engagement organizing and unions. Labour is struggling today both with member engagement and with structural change in the economy that make it harder to unionize workplaces. A challenge is the postwar legal framework that has been good for unions in many ways but has also institutionalized a culture of servicing members rather than organizing them. Unions also lag behind other sectors in their use of digital tools. But there are successes to learn from in the case studies of UNITE HERE Local 75 with regard to organizing and the BC Government and Service Employees Union with regard to technology.

Chapter 6 looks at engagement organizing and electoral campaigns. In one key way political parties are more hard-wired to respond to societal shifts, such as the passing of the broadcast era, since they receive regular and disciplined feedback in the form of votes lost or gained. Chapter 6 adds to the US presidential campaigns with examples from Europe and Canada, where parties are opening themselves up to digital tools and practices and ultimately asking the question “whose party is this anyway?” Legal structures play a role in shaping such campaigns, including voting and election finance systems. Case studies include the 2010 mayoral election in Calgary and the 2015 Canadian federal election.

In the spirit of honesty and reflection, the Conclusion explores some of the challenges for and trends in engagement organizing. Practitioners are better served with eyes wide open to barriers so that they are better prepared to overcome them. I then end with thoughts on getting started and recap the lessons drawn from the chapters. Campaigners might need to make a “stop-doing list” to create the space for a shift to engagement organizing practices.

At any given moment, there are thousands of campaigns under way in Canada and around the world to try to shape public opinion or public policy, and during elections our environment seems to be full of them. But what separates those that win from those that lose? The answer to that question is a moving target. What worked yesterday might not work tomorrow. We

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are entering an era when the broadcast media model that has dominated the past few decades is being eroded in a digital evolution in which direct engagement of citizens at scale is now possible, both online and offline. It is not that TV will cease to be a powerful campaign tool but that it will increasingly fit side by side with a range of tactics that engage people directly. Campaigns that win today are those that understand this trend and design themselves to capture it, to practise engagement organizing.