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Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind The Burning Man Event



Synopsis

In the summer of 2008, nearly fifty thousand people traveled to Nevada's Black Rock Desert to participate in the countercultural arts event Burning Man. Founded on a commitment to expression and community, the annual weeklong festival presents unique challenges to its organizers. Over four years Katherine K. Chen regularly participated in organizing efforts to safely and successfully create a temporary community in the middle of the desert under the hot August sun. *Enabling Creative Chaos* tracks how a small, underfunded group of organizers transformed into an unconventional corporation with a ten-million-dollar budget and two thousand volunteers. Over the years, Burning Man's organizers have experimented with different management models; learned how to recruit, motivate, and retain volunteers; and developed strategies to handle regulatory agencies and respond to media coverage. This remarkable evolution, Chen reveals, offers important lessons for managers in any organization, particularly in uncertain times.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Katherine Chen immersed herself in the world of Burning Man, the fascinating community that gathers annually for a week-long arts celebration in the Nevada desert. Her marvelous portrait of this unusual collective provides a rich template for considering how organizations of all varieties strike a balance between flexibility and fairness and creativity and security. This is one of the best organizational ethnographies I've seen in many years." (Walter W. Powell, Stanford University)

"From open source software to the 2008 election, organizational research has not yet come to terms with the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of these new organizational

forms. Katherine Chen has succeeded in writing an engaging ethnography of Burning Man and skillfully developed its implications for organizational theory and managerial practice. Bravo. (Rakesh Khurana, Harvard Business School) "Enabling Creative Chaos describes an organizational mutant which is part community, part business. It is the ultimate hybrid form, and Katherine Chen lays bare all of its qualities and contradictions. This is a rich qualitative case study of a phenomenon that many know, some have experienced, but few understand." Joseph Galaskiewicz, University of Arizona (Joseph Galaskiewicz) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Katherine K. Chen is assistant professor of sociology at The City College of New York and the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

I read this as material for a business school assignment on managerial styles, and this book was the answer to my prayers for insider research. The Org and its history of flowing around obstacles, changing shape and redefining itself, is a welcome change of pace from the linear, efficiency-focused approaches in most "real" businesses. Emotional and chaotic though the Org's decisions making process of complete consensus is (or is meant to be, anyway) makes adoption of change extremely rapid and successful, and maintains the faith of the 2000+ strong volunteer network that actually makes the event happen. Interesting stuff for the academic Burner or corporate thinker looking for something different.

This book was a great way to study organizational behavior. Interesting and easy to read, learned a lot about burning man.

Wow, this book covered a lot more ground than I expected. Its a bit heavy and I think a second read is in order. But I guess the fact that I'm going to read it a second time is a good sign.

Great book for a brief history of Burning Man and an explanation of how its organizers and administrators formed, evolved and grew into the well oiled organization it is today. It is all about management but it also explains how it almost disintegrated in the late '90s. Especially good discussion of volunteers - how to attract and maintain them. Parts of it can be a little too academic for we commoners - it is a dissertation after all.

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