

New Book Shows How the Organization Behind Burning Man Has Evolved, Transforming Society

As the countercultural Burning Man event enters its third decade, author Katherine K. Chen identifies lessons learned from the organization behind Burning Man's transformation from a small beach bonfire with 20 friends and family into a week-long city of almost 50,000 "Burners" in the Nevada Black Rock Desert. *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event* examines how a small group transformed themselves into an unconventional corporation with a ten-million-dollar budget and two thousand volunteers. Chen, a Harvard-trained organizational researcher who participated in organizing activities during four years, shows how organizers experimented with different management models; learned how to recruit, motivate, and retain volunteers; and developed strategies to handle regulatory agencies and the media. Burning Man's development offers important lessons for the management of organizations, particularly during uncertain times.

Although much research has documented how organizations tend to ignore or even suppress their members' interests, few studies have examined how organizations can evade such problems while still pursuing organizational survival. Chen therefore sought a counter-example of how organizations could survive, produce, and still support members' interests. She interviewed 81 past and present organizers and volunteers, and she both observed and participated in the organization during its transition from ad hoc organizing into a more formal organization. In sharing lessons drawn from the day-to-day efforts of an organization devoted to expression and community, Chen hopes that others will be inspired to start or refashion organizations more to their liking and interests.

Other books and writings have documented the history, artwork, and spiritual significance of Burning Man. However, Chen is the first to extensively reveal the inner workings of Burning Man, including internal clashes over the event's direction and organizing practices, as well as often challenging relations with other organizations. Her research identifies implications for other organizations, including non-profit and for-profit organizations and voluntary associations, and demonstrates the powerful potential of organizations to influence society in small and large ways.

Book information:

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Reviews of *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event*

“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 (author of *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs*)

“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