If you want to know how ordinary Americans accomplish extraordinary things—build affordable homes, create effective schools, win living wages—then the story and the strategy reside in this remarkable book. Going Public is at once pragmatic and profound.

—Samuel G. Freedman

MICHAEL GECAN
Going Public

him the credit he deserved: he was willing to provide land and sub-
dizzling facts, but we spent little or no time tracing the source and
in manuscripts. Because we chose we could fill two minutes with our
out cases in long term papers and important debates. We set for hours
the Red. We established their insights on our index cards and made
most meritorious research work conducted by the best experts in

We headed to the library and pore over texts. We mastered the

interests.

one underdogs and cross currents of individual and institutional
care, its preoccupations, and defended it—and very little upon the danger.
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We headed to the library and pore over texts. We mastered the

interests. Our instructors rarely if ever emphasized these

et's, ether's, and other preoccupations. Rarely if ever emphasized these

instituted on recognition, developing the power to reward and

(chapter 5)

(almost) nothing

Merit Means

power in the world as it is, that's a pretty good deal.

Engine, organized, but clearly not "Go!" in the world of
mainted in uneasy but productive partnerships with leaders he
assisters and commissioners to work with our team, and he re-
they own. He attached several of his most competent and creative
ship. So, the thousands of citizens could afford to buy homes of
him. The credit he deserved. He was willing to provide land and sub-

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The flow of money, the quirks of personality, the dense web of relationships, or the presence and impact of evil. When our opponents remained unconvinced, when behavior did not change, when the neutral moderates failed to fill these seats and pews, we oftentimes assumed that we had failed to make a persuasive case. Some just studied harder, jotted more notes, and wrote better briefs. Others grew tired and cynical, others more isolated and self-righteous. Many activists adjusted their expectations to a lifetime of speaking out, bearing witness, and raising consciousness rather than generating reactions and making change. Moderates, sensing confusion and defeat, lost patience and did the sensible thing: got a second job or took an extra course, improved the yard, or finished the basement.

We constantly run across situations in our organizing where merit doesn’t matter and where a different kind of response is called for. Here are just a few examples.

A number of years ago, EBC leaders who attended a series of house meetings reported that conditions in local foodstores had reached a crisis level. The area was impoverished. Major chains did not serve the community. And local corner stores and mid-sized market operators offered customers few options. Shoppers found spoiled produce, rotten produce, coals, and plastics among the shelves and in the coolers. The temperatures there were too high, the air too cool.

In a world of merit, customers would call the city or state in inspection or consumer affairs departments and demand attention to these conditions. We researched both departments, met with their sections of consumer affairs departments and determined in no uncertain terms that these conditions were unacceptable and called for both departments to act immediately.

We were met with indifference and sarcasm. The city office said, “It’s not our problem.” The state office said, “We have more important things to do.”

One morning at the beginning of a busy morning, we went to the middle of a busy morning, and we called the police and blocked them from shorting our shops. And we called the police and blocked them from shorting our shops. The police were not interested in working with us and our activists. They wanted to arrest us for blocking them from shorting our shops. We refused to leave and blocked them from shorting our shops. The police continued to short our shops and block us from leaving.

We decided to create a system of inspection and inspection forms that would be easy to understand and easy to use. We decided to design an inspection system. We decided to create a system of inspection and inspection forms that would be easy to understand and easy to use. We decided to design an inspection system. We decided to create a system of inspection and inspection forms that would be easy to understand and easy to use. We decided to design an inspection system.

From the store owners,

The store owners, when they did appear, were easily deterred by EBC’s arguments. When they did appear, we easily deterred the store owners by EBC’s arguments. When they did appear, we easily deterred the store owners by EBC’s arguments. When they did appear, we easily deterred the store owners by EBC’s arguments. When they did appear, we easily deterred the store owners by EBC’s arguments. When they did appear, we easily deterred the store owners by EBC’s arguments.

The inspection to be analyzed. A negative report would lead to a

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threatened our leaders with arrest. Our team leaders pointed out side-to-side to the police car that we had summoned to protect us from owners whom might overreact. One manager tried to stop our designated shoppers from purchasing the spoiled and rotten food. “Why do you want that stuff?” he pleaded. “I’ll get you some decent food.”

We had entered the stores with EUCL letters of agreement. Once we completed each inspection, we gave the owner a list of the conditions that required correction and asked him to sign an agreement to do so. If he refused to sign, we invited him to a meeting of four hundred EBC members. When the three arrived to the session, in the basement of St. Paul Community Baptist Church, they were asked to wait in a quiet room out side the assembly hall. At the designated moment, they were called in and ushered up the center aisle, right in front of the podium occupied by a young and forceful Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Leo Penta. Fr. Penta read them the riot act and told them that the days of bullying, abuse, and dehumanizing conditions in the food stores were numbered. At the designated moment, they were called out of the podium—right in front of the food inspectors. If the formal process didn’t work, if it was a fraud and a trap, don’t waste much more depending on it. Figure out how to create your own processes. It is impossible to see your own picture while you are looking at it. This act of self-defense is our right. We created our own processes.

The one hundred leaders who spearheaded this action were

Two more stories from Chicago illustrate this point in the face of opposition. Our leaders were walked through the doors of the stores, NGOs were called in, and the owners were marked down for future inspections. But they were not left alone. It was easy in this case because the race, class, and ethnic mix of the owners was consistent. But, when they read about the successes in the Daily News and learn that they really are not doing business in the stores that do comply, they may get the message. I may not want you to know that when they respond. It is important to deal with them respectfully, because the pressure of the offices would respond the same way. By being strong and patient, you can achieve your own autocratic and power. But you cannot do this if you do not have an appreciation of your own potential and power. The three were audacious exponents—men who humor with jollity and with a decent food, turned on their heels and hurried out of the room.

We had meant (almost) nothing.
Going Public growth would be more than just a pocket. There would be hearings, meetings, protests, and the like, but the fix, literally, was already in.

One afternoon, a team of leaders examined the property and took a closer look at an old and long-abandoned farmhouse. It was a terribly sorry sight—unpainted, sagging, tilting to one side. On a hunch, we decided to do a title search of the house.

We discovered that a farmer named Pinker had built the home in the 1960s. It was no longer a decrepit and potentially dangerous structure. Ithad historical value. We called in the preservationists, who found an intricate and rare form of woodworking done by the craftsmen who designed the windows and the eaves of the home. The home had architectural and aesthetic qualities that were rare.

Our leaders shifted away from the issues of the height, density, and neighborhood impact of the condominium—themeritsof the case—and repeated a theme that they couldn't have cared less about: "SavethePinkerHouse!" The media echoed the cry. And suddenly the developer and his political supporters found themselves on the defensive.

The developer became desperate as the tide of publicity turned. After all, he had bought the property. He had made all of the obligatory contributions to local politicians and party faithful. He had played by the both the written and unwritten rules of the city. And was stuck with a piece of land that had lost most of its value because of the presence of a shack. He thought he had a solution to his problems.

Our leaders woke up one morning and looked out their back window. The Pinker House had disappeared. In the middle of the night, a truck had pulled up, hauling a bulldozer. The bulldozer had made quick and quiet work of the house, smashing the rare filigree to smithereens with the rest of the structure, before be towed away, the mouth of a giant that had pulled up a bulldozer. The bulldozer was the corner of the property that the developer had claimed, so he recorded everything.


Going Public on Tape. Because we knew that the police couldn't be called in, and we had no idea how the police commissioner would respond, we took Sr. Marion's tape and the entire story to the local CBS affiliate. Bill Kurtis was the affiliate's young, up-and-coming anchor at the time. He liked what he saw and was particularly impressed by the story. Then I went home and0

It was December in Chicago—a bitter December, with deep snow and layers of ice on the sidewalks and streets. One day after a block of so, the cops arrived, but the dealers were nowhere to be found. The dealers had been tipped off by the police commissioner and had moved to another location. We were frustrated and angry. We thought that we had found a solution to the problem, but the dealers had moved on to another location. We were disappointed, but we continued to look for a solution.

On the third day, they called to say that they could not make it. They could not be certain, and began to doubt us. They were sure that they would find us, but they were wrong. We were disappointed, but we continued to search for a solution. They could be certain, and we began to doubt them. We were disappointed, but we continued to search for a solution.

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For a week or so, public officials rushed to do the right thing for the wrong reason. We play it out as far as it would go. Then we drifted away. The commissioners returned to their town halls. The precinct commander was promoted, not investigated or dismissed. And we took a break—put our energy into the story. It was easier and more interesting—tired out by the tension of the days leading up to the CBS story and the energy it took to report it. We had become experts in freezertemperature standards, farmhouse architecture, drugselling patterns, police response, and regulatory authority and effectiveness, but we knew that the facts and the merits, the research and the tactics, in and of themselves, did not matter. They mattered the facts and understood the bigger picture. They mastered the facts and understood the bigger picture. They mastered the facts and understood the bigger picture. They mastered the facts and understood the bigger picture.

Chutzpah Helps

CHAPTER 6

Thismaybeallwellandgoodforleadersoforganizationstry