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The Lessons of Generation Dean

Amanda Michel

Amanda Michel had recently graduated from college when she joined the Dean campaign. She turned out to play a central role in the development of Generation Dean, the official youth outreach arm of the Dean campaign and the most successful campaign effort to organize young people since the McGovern campaign more than thirty years previous to it. Although the story of Generation Dean has not received much broad public attention, it has affected subsequent efforts, helping to transform the tactics and tone of college Democrats and shaping the sensibilities of a generation of future political activists. The story of Generation Dean is a quintessential example of the tactics and techniques that made up the grassroots character of the campaign, welcoming outside efforts and self-presentation on the web as distinct individuals, not as a nameless organization. Another key move Amanda and her coworkers made was to redefine the effort as youth outreach instead of student outreach, thereby greatly expanding the possible audience beyond the traditional groups of students at elite colleges and universities.

Amanda Michel, who is now the director of “Off the Bus,” a new media collaboration between the Huffington Post and NewAssignment.Net, emphasizes how the complex if often creative tension between the inside and the outside efforts and events—especially chaotic growth—presented novel organizational challenges of which those planning future campaigns should take heed. Finally, she tells how her experiences on the ground in Iowa gave her a sense of how important non-Internet-based activities remain in political campaigning.

In Line

The lunch crowd at New World Tortilla had begun to dissipate. It was mid-December and people lingered in the Burlington eatery’s warmth before venturing back out to work. Since graduating from college the previous spring I had worked there while

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trying to decide between applying for a Peace Corps position in the Balkans or the Foreign Service.

A few newcomers stood waiting at the counter. One of them cautiously stepped forward. I recognized her as Sarah Buxton, a high school acquaintance of mine, and quickly walked over to say hi. The last time I'd seen her was more than a year before, when she was collecting signatures for Governor Dean downtown. Since then, she told me, she'd continued working for him and had recently joined his campaign staff.

That night I mentioned the encounter to one of my closest friends. He quickly became insistent that I volunteer for the campaign. "When does a presidential campaign come to your town?! You always talk about how awkward you feel walking in the antiwar marches. Do something useful with your frustration. And time." I had met Governor Dean twice at summer camp and supported his run for the presidency, although I strained to see such a familiar face as my president. Even so, I agreed to visit the campaign once it transferred to Burlington from our state capital, Montpelier.

One month later, in the first week of January 2003, I waited to speak with a staffer after filling out volunteer forms at the campaign office. Zephyr Teachout bounded into the room, eyes bright and face completely engaged in a conversation she had already started in her head. After Zephyr found out I didn't have a personal computer I could use for volunteer work, she motioned to Nico¹, another early-bird campaign volunteer, and asked him to delegate one of his responsibilities to me—reviewing the recommendations sent in to the campaign. They were strewn in a box in the corner. I pulled what was on top off the pile and stuffed it into my bag before heading out to my favorite coffee shop.

Unknowingly I had volunteered myself to read "Click on Democracy: The Internet's Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action."² According to the authors, successful campaign strategy revolved around the concept of "interactivity." Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura had been the most innovative, asking supporters to post photos of themselves on his website during his state tour. Supporters would direct friends to the site and some friends-of-friends would attend his rallies, thereby creating what is now referred to as online buzz.

The book was immediately interesting to me even though I'd never used the Internet for anything more than e-mail or reading the news. A medium that I'd never thought of as anything more than transactional suddenly revealed itself as a whole lot more than that. I drafted notes on the book and passed them on to Nico in our next meeting. If *this* was campaign volunteer work, I'd definitely stay on through the campaign. Perhaps my college major, philosophy, would come of use, I mused. Later I'd look back on this first volunteer opportunity as an auspicious sign of what was to come.

Unbeknownst to me, Nico passed my notes to Zephyr, who passed them on to other campaign staffers. A week later, Zephyr reappeared and asked me to work with her on some Internet projects. Several weeks later Zephyr announced that I would organize students for the campaign, an offer I didn't recognize as official until she suggested we celebrate by going out for falafel.

The next month flew by. All e-mails sent to the campaign by students were forwarded to a DeanStudents@hotmail account I created. The volunteer coordinator

also delegated the task of answering the campaign's main line to me. Sitting on top of a plastic tub, I worked from a donated computer so slow it frequently crashed when sending my e-mails. Occasionally the screen would go dark and I'd frantically pound the top, thinking it had crashed again mid-e-mail before realizing someone had tripped over its power cord. Hundreds of people called daily, asking me about everything from Dean's stance on health care to the national security risks of jello. In the evenings, I continued working at New World Tortilla.

In March the campaign field staff asked me to organize students in California for the California Democratic Convention, where Dean emboldened the crowd and took the national press stage with his "We need to take our country back!" The student leaders I'd come to know over e-mail swarmed the scene. The fervor Dean generated brought hundreds of e-mails from students to the campaign daily, many of which began to stack up inside my inbox. I couldn't wait to move on from phone duty and looked forward to the day I'd be given a real desk and chair. As with the Internet, I'd assumed I'd have a transactional relationship with the campaign and, instead, I was connecting to it. If I continued to learn enough so that I could participate, I thought, being on the Dean campaign would be an exceptionally meaningful experience.

Throwing Myself into the Fire

Like most army brats I know, I learned to adapt and adapted to learn. On the campaign I developed and honed my strategies as carefully as I assimilated new material. Intensely curious about this new world, I enjoyed discovering and understanding the campaign's methods. While stuffing envelopes for the finance team during an especially hectic fund-raising cycle, I peppered Larry Biddle with questions about finance's direct mail operation and learned from him that we had to ask people often for money. After I read several historical accounts of student organizing efforts and assembled a list of new organizing ideas I wanted to try out, I went to Field Director Tamara Pogue. She dealt with my enthusiasm well, wisely cautioning me to "not put the cart before the horse. Before you can organize a large rally," she said, "you need many supporters and not the other way around."

By March 2003 the word was out—the campaign would begin communicating and organizing via the Internet. I learned of this from Zephyr, who announced to me one morning that, as of today, she had a new position on the upstart Internet team. Since I worked for her, I, too, would need to begin experimenting with the Internet. Like Zephyr's announcement to me that she changed positions, the campaign's way of signaling our new approach revealed itself in miscellaneous decisions. There was no edict except that everyone was to support the Internet team's efforts. There was no central force dictating an overarching strategy. It was something to discover, to realize, and to learn from. Motivated in part by my desire to gain a paid position on the campaign, I knew I had to keep up with the innovation occurring at its edges.

A strategy at my disposal was Google. In March 2003 the campaign buzzed over the hire of Matt Gross. “Who is he? What is he going to do?” I asked a coworker. He told me Matt Gross was going to start our campaign blog. “A b-l-o-g?” I asked again, not even sure I’d heard the word correctly. Why someone would move from Utah to Burlington to “blog” about a campaign was incomprehensible to me. What was it? To get my answer, I put “blog” in Google and hit enter.

Sometimes I learned by force that I needed to operate outside of my natural comfort zone. Early one morning Zephyr bounced over to me, inquiring why I hadn’t yet set up a web page for my group. Until recently e-mail had seemed ideal; I researched student organizations on the Internet and then introduced myself over e-mail to student leaders. I answered everyone’s questions one on one and enjoyed the involved conversations. Fearing that I’d lose contact with my leaders, I pushed back against Zephyr’s request. “Isn’t this the work of a professional?” I asked. She insisted I do it anyway, reminding me that it would cut down on my e-mail correspondence and that I could continue to improve upon the page after we put it up. Several days after I’d submitted a draft of my website to Zephyr, I came across it online—someone had put it up even though it wasn’t finished! I confronted Zephyr and she confirmed she’d done the deed, telling me “The good thing about the Internet is that you can keep improving it. You gotta sack your perfectionism.” A few weeks later, I realized I’d begun to distance myself from my tendency to procrastinate, an evil habit I’d picked up to shelter me from my perfectionism, and began reveling in drafting.

Yet another strategy was to seek guidance from those with more experience. In May, Moveon’s director of online organizing, Zack Exley, came into the office for a few weeks to consult us. Just two weeks prior the campaign had relocated from its crowded headquarters to a business complex out in South Burlington and by chance, Zack decided to sit in the cubicle I shared with Michael Silberman of Meetup. I promptly took the opportunity to ask for a lesson in writing “real e-mails.” Zack seemed sympathetic to my cause, but told me he didn’t have time outside of answering Trippi and Zephyr’s requests. By then I already knew I had to be creatively self-reliant in this campaign to survive, so I returned to my desk and searched through my files for my worst attempts to write “professional mass e-mails.” I printed them out and held them in front of Zack. “Could you just help me improve these? Please?” Zack grabbed the papers and rifled through them. “Amanda, you need a stronger lead. You need to have an explicit ask. You need to restructure these.” From Zack, I learned that e-mail was the most important tool we had at our disposal. Moveon, he explained, didn’t even have a website at first. If I had just one hour to organize people, I should send an e-mail out to supporters rather than put up new website content. A good e-mail is difficult to write, but I could improve my e-mails if I constructed them around a single “ask” or request.

My first few months on the campaign showed me how my approach to work needed to change. Campaigns aren’t easy places for people unused to blunt blows of criticism or waking up to decisions made overnight that easily erase a month’s work. I was doing my best to shift my sense of gravity so that I could easily stay upright as people piled random bits of work on my back.

Bringing the Outsiders In, and the Insiders Out

Zephyr stopped by my desk. “Let’s talk about bringing Students for Dean in. Should we go out to the picnic table?” Unlike the campaign office, where people sat three to a table and private conversations were impossible, the picnic table in the office building’s backyard guaranteed privacy.

Two months prior we’d discovered “Students for Dean,” a flourishing online effort begun by Michael Whitney, a freshman at American University, and Yoni Cohen, a senior at Washington University in St. Louis. At StudentsforDean.org the two organized several thousand students, an impressively high number for the time. The Students for Dean website organized its members via the Internet and operated a much wider range of tools than the official campaign did. Students belonging to the same school belonged to online chapters and the system offered e-mail and calendar tools. Recently they’d been joined by Ryan Beam, a programming student at Ohio University.

Inside the campaign, groups like Students for Dean were labeled “the grassroots.” According to Trippi, the grassroots were absolutely indispensable because Dean was an insurgent candidate and did not have the support of the Democratic insiders, especially after he criticized them for their handling of the Iraq War. On a practical level, supporting the grassroots meant we had to do our best to service their work by, for example, fostering good relationships with their leaders.

Until then, Zephyr and I had casually entertained the idea of inviting StudentsforDean.org onboard. Now that summer was approaching and Michael had accepted a student internship, we needed to decide. The thinking behind a merger between Dean’s official student effort and Students for Dean was simple—combining our resources and membership would vastly improve our size and strength. Recently we’d discovered that our memberships didn’t overlap and that together we reached 4,000 young supporters; Students for Dean attracted activists while DeanStudents appealed to College Dems and Young Dems members. The two organizations complimented one another; Students for Dean represented the grassroots and DeanStudents represented a more traditional student base. Although I’d gotten support to send e-mail and put up a web page, there were few resources—like the time of developers—to be devoted to student outreach; by merging with Michael, Yoni, and Ryan, we’d gain a new website and webtools. Students for Dean wanted more direction, and having direct access to campaign information was extremely appealing to them. Not only that, but we enjoyed working together.

A difficulty lay in reorganizing two separate organizations into one without sacrificing the goals and identities of either. Yoni, Michael, and Ryan were accustomed to making their own decisions and refused to merge if it meant relinquishing their autonomy. They were also intensely proud of their website and work. If merging meant becoming anonymous and losing relationships with students they’d worked so hard to create, they’d prefer to remain outside of the campaign.

At the picnic table, Zephyr and I came to the conclusion that preserving their independence would have to mean creating more autonomy for DeanStudents. We would

gain valuable resources, such as Ryan's programming skills. If we were autonomous, we could send out e-mails and put up website content without running it through the campaign's normal vetting process. If we were successful, we believed the campaign would want to support our efforts. In the end, independence meant a great deal of convenience and control without any significant loss of benefits. Only later would we come to realize that the stigma of organizing students would place us at the kids' table and that independence without money or income leads to dependency.

By June, Michael and Ryan were in Burlington.³ Ginny Hunt, Middlebury's student government president, also joined the team and shared management responsibilities with me. Her involvement in student government, College Dems, and various campaigns brought a great deal of insight into the more formal world of organizing and activism. Jeff Horowitz, a recent graduate of Pomona College, drove to Vermont from California to help out. Jan Insel, a student at UVM, devoted countless hours to student outreach, from answering e-mails to doing research. We also had student interns, like Tim Singer, who assisted in general outreach and strategy.

We now attempted the marriage of the grassroots with the official campaign. We faced the uniquely challenging task of melding a centralized campaign operation with a decentralized and ever-changing grassroots. Balancing the differences between the two meant preserving the integrity of our team. Tying these two together—ideologically and organizationally—was our ongoing focus and challenge until the end of the campaign.

When I was appointed director of student outreach in February, I learned that student outreach usually amounted to the recruitment of students from elite, liberal arts colleges. Elite schools generously support student activities, which means that campaigns spend less money and time organizing students there. When I realized this, I felt immediately uncomfortable. I had attended my state university, the University of Vermont, on a four-year scholarship. I also knew many people who had never attended college, either because they planned to farm or because they were disillusioned by their high school experience. Research on youth demographics offered a solution. I learned that "youth" were untapped—many more people attended smaller, public schools and colleges than elite institutions; people between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-five and young people also had a lot of time to give. Besides that, speaking to the concerns of young people—instead of "students"—seemed far more appropriate and appealing. I quickly pulled together a memo and sent it to several senior staffers, suggesting that we broaden our outreach efforts to small, public colleges and to young people generally. They acknowledged that student outreach in the past had been too narrow, but noted that campaign resources were slim at the time. I could begin branching out, but needed to make sure the effort was affordable.

When I began working closely with Students for Dean in May, I shared with Michael parts of the memo I'd written in February. We both felt strongly about the impacts of Bush's policies on all young people, and began discussing ways to broaden our outreach efforts. Alex and Robert, two extremely committed students in South Carolina, had created a vibrant group called "Generation Dean." We asked them permission to use their name for our umbrella effort, and they agreed. I think of the

morning we became “Generation Dean” as the day when the youth organizing phenomenon popularized by the media officially began.

In early fall we planned a four-day, six-state national Generation Dean tour for Governor Dean, which we called Raise the 'Roots. Michael called me from the road during the tour, telling me “You wouldn’t believe it! There are thousands, I mean, THOUSANDS of young people rallying around Dean here in Wisconsin! It’s madness. All the reporters want to know about Generation Dean. Even Trippi looks amazed.” By the time he’d hit Wisconsin, Dean had visited Washington, D.C., South Carolina, Oklahoma, and Iowa. According to later newspaper reports nearly 5,000 people crowded the space outside the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Kohl Center. Nearly every major daily paper, and the *Daily Show*, covered the tour. Even Rush Limbaugh gave ten minutes of his show to an excoriation of “Generation Clueless.” (The next week Rush entered rehab.)

It was hard to believe just how far we’d come. Just months ago we ran Students for Dean and now we’d just introduced a new way of organizing young people through a national tour, which was—as far as we were concerned—the kind of thing only rock stars did. We’d also learned the preliminary lessons of online organizing as we designed our new website and developed a strong set of chapters. What we didn’t foresee were the future challenges of balancing the grassroots and the official campaign, as well as the tremendous costs of supporting an independent brand.

When companies spin off departments, they spin them off for good, sending them off to become their own businesses with their own leadership and income. In politics, such a clean break is almost unimaginable because constituents of the new organization still share ideas and values with the former. In our case, spinning off Generation Dean meant we decided what our website looked like and how we fund-raised, but we still reported to the same bosses and got paid by DFA. Looking back, we misunderstood what would truly make us autonomous and underestimated what support we would need. If we’d only seen how we could build off their resources instead of forking a new community, we may have met with greater success.

We’d gotten our first glimpse at the problem early in the summer when the campaign’s revolutionary online fund-raising efforts took off. Immediately thereafter we were asked to test our own fund-raising savvy. Knowing that many students are financially dependent and cash-strapped, we created a fund-raising appeal in sync with a student’s budget:

What better way for students to spend their first summer paycheck than to give it all to the campaign that’s going to take back America?

Can’t find a job in the Bush recession? Use that money from end-of-the-semester book buyback instead!

Either way, there should be no excuse to not participate in Going for Broke, Students for Dean’s financial contribution program. The end of the second fundraising quarter is approaching quickly, and Howard Dean needs to make a strong showing. In order to track student donations, add \$.18—18 is to signify the voting age—at the end of your contribution.

Here are some suggestions for how much to contribute:

- \$25.18 Starving Student
- \$35.18 Mom Slipped Me \$50 for Food
- \$50.18 Thank Goodness for Financial Aid
- \$79.18 Average Student Contribution
- \$100.18 Sold My Bike for Democracy
- \$150.18 Trust Funds Rock

Join hundreds of students across the country on Wednesday, June 18, to donate to Dean for America. The average student contribution is already an incredible \$79, and with your help, we can push this higher. We've already established the largest student network supporting a presidential candidate this election cycle. This is our chance to show the media, the Democratic Party, and the nation that Howard Dean is our generation's candidate.

Make your contribution by visiting www.deanforamerica.com/students4dean.

The fund-raising initiative was a surprising success. One female student from Students for Dean at Penn State University reported that she literally "sold her bike for democracy" and contributed \$100. Going forward, though, it was never as simple or as effective. Since all of our students were also on the DFA e-mail list, we had to convince them to give through us instead of DFA. Oftentimes we had no idea that the Internet team would be sending out a fund-raising appeal and would scramble to send out a tailored version to our e-mail list hours later.

In late summer Michael, Ryan, and I began merging our student memberships and redesigning our website. The finished site was attractive and practical—it allowed users to create their chapters automatically; group leaders maintained membership lists and e-mail administration, and were given a new calendar feature to manage events; and the website differed enough from DFA's website to validate our semiautonomous relationship. What we didn't realize at the time was that maintaining our own website forced us to be competitive with DeanForAmerica.com. If young supporters registered as supporters at DFA, they wouldn't join our list and we would lose credibility with the campaign. DFA's frequent publishing and high-speed development set expectations for our online operations. We were expected to have every tool in DFA's repertoire and yet we were also expected to be different. Our supporters clamored for the new tools available through Dean for America. Occasionally we outperformed DFA, which we always celebrated as an enormous success. In early fall, we launched our e-postcard tool, which made it possible for supporters to send photos with customized messages to friends. In less than a week GenDean members had sent more than 10,000 postcards. DFA created an identical tool a few weeks later. Like a grassroots group, we saw the co-opting of our tool by DFA as a sign we'd arrived.

At the end of summer, the team split up as our student interns returned to high school and others, like Ryan, returned to school to finish their studies. Also determined to finish his schooling, Michael returned to D.C., where he worked for the campaign part-time from his American University dorm room. When Michael brought Students

for Dean on board in June, the media paid little attention. Just three months later, hundreds of stories had been written about Dean's focus on youth and Michael had become our team's celebrity. CBS Evening News even requested an interview with Michael in his dorm room. Sitting atop his bunk bed in front of a wall of posters, Michael explained why he joined the Dean campaign and why Dean should be the candidate of choice among young people.

The Fork in the Road

Generation Dean existed as a general organizing and media platform. People signed up because they wanted to generally get involved. On our website they could connect with other supporters by starting or joining their local chapter. They could donate money. They could share ideas and feedback. They could sign petitions, forward e-mails, send out e-postcards, and more. Our chapters were organized mostly by schools, and all were hyper-local. Our day-to-day work involved talking to local chapter leaders.

Immediately after the Raise the 'Roots Tour we were instructed to appoint GenDean state coordinators and begin designing and implementing state-specific get-out-the-vote plans. This radical shift from a flat, media-Internet organization to a hierarchical and centralized organization stressed our capacity, not to mention our knowledge and skills.

Official state campaign operations organized supporters to ID voters by ranking them on a scale of one to five. Campaign staff and volunteers huddled over call sheets in their local offices, calling whole neighborhoods to inquire about their political opinions and favored candidates. Every day the state director reviewed the campaign's progress, noting where in the state its supporters were and in what numbers. At the crux of this operation is data—the ability to store and parse data, the ability to share data for ID calls and get-out-the-vote operations, and the ability to overlay such data with commercial/campaign information. Accustomed to broadly serving our membership, we were unprepared to design and drive specific state plans. We were not set up technically nor organizationally to coordinate the minutiae of voter IDs, canvasses, and vote goals. But we tried.

By mid-October we had a network of two dozen state coordinators, mostly from early primary states. Nearly everything we organized offline and online started to be done with, and through, the state coordinators (with the exception of Iowa and New Hampshire.) Our state coordinators started being the people talking to local chapter leaders.

At the same time as our workload increased, our staff decreased. Trippi turned his attention to Iowa in early fall and wanted to commit as many resources as possible. As part of the first shipment of campaign staff there, Ginny left to coordinate the Hawkeye State's student efforts. Like Lex, New Hampshire's state GenDean coordinator, Ginny took marching orders from the state staff and no one else, and quickly grew distant from Generation Dean. Our volunteer capacity shrank, too. An increasing number of GenDean state coordinators were hired by the state operations. Because GenDean's field plans and the state's field plans developed independent of each other, there was little room for negotiation and collaboration so late in the game.

Our state coordinators took this in stride, but many remained personally conflicted about abandoning Generation Dean. In many other cases, young voters recruited by our state coordinators were quickly assimilated into state operations and had little sense of being a member of “Generation Dean.”

From then on we would never be the same. Resources strapped, we struggled to make do between two distinctly different operations and to meet all of our bosses’ needs and demands. State coordination meant staffing rallies, shipping out signs, working with the advance team to prep for events.⁴ Sometimes these could take one person an entire week to do, especially when the event was as far away as Colorado. We were no longer focused on building connections with local volunteer chapters.

Staying Connected

Back in late August Joe Trippi had sat down between Michael, Ryan, and me to review the website we had slaved over throughout the full summer. The months leading up to this moment were filled with great anticipation, but now we fretted over his reaction. Would it be good enough? Trippi was silent as we showed him the new features and tools. Just when we thought we were done, he pointedly asked us, “Who wrote the mission statement?” Confused, Michael and I both said incredulously, “We did. We all did.” “Then sign your names. We’re not one of those campaigns that sends out generic crap because no one would dare to sign it. If you write something that’s worthy of others’ reading it, you sign it. That’s all. Good job.” Trippi got up and left.

We took Trippi’s advice to heart, closely reviewing our mission statement a second time and then adding our names one by one. Michael became more liberal about injecting his personality into e-mail text. We listed our e-mails on our bio pages. In early September we created campaign alias instant-messenger screen names for ourselves. I was GenDeanAmanda. Every day countless young supporters would instant-message me, asking quick questions and telling me stories. When it became impossible for me to keep up with my work, I initiated instant-message office hours. We started a Generation Dean blog so that we could have conversations more broadly with our membership and recruited our members, including Ian Hines, an engaged and politically deliberate high school student, to write for it.

Originally we heeded Trippi’s advice because we wanted to follow DFA’s lead and because we believed in its authenticity. Some wrote to make sure I really existed. “You’re Amanda, right? You are a real person?” Soon we came to realize that open communication also opens up conversations about bad leadership. Just days after we profiled our instant-messenger screen names, people began messaging me about their problems. Until then I had heard primarily from group leaders, who oftentimes wrote to tell me about their successes and to share tips with other leaders. One girl told me that her group leader left after a power struggle and refused to turn over the group tools to the new group’s leader. Another person messaged me that we wrongly profiled only the largest of Generation Dean groups, like Tony Cani’s Arizona group of more than four

hundred. She lived in North Dakota and, regardless of how much time and effort she invested on behalf of the campaign, her group would never swell past 20.

The picture our full membership painted was of an organization that had quickly outgrown itself and never properly scaled its operations to size. When I first started organizing students, I communicated with all of them—members and leaders alike—by e-mail. After we merged with Students for Dean, we merged databases and began defaulting to mass communications. After that our membership swelled to more than 20,000 students and our shrinking staff size made it difficult to keep up. All along we'd assumed things were going well because we didn't know any better; now that members could bypass their leaders and share problems directly with us, we began to realize the quality of leadership varied dramatically across the board and that some of the tools we'd so carefully designed weren't up to par. Although direct communications with our members successfully revealed the problem, there wasn't an easy solution. With little time to remedy the problem before the election, we relayed the problem directly to our membership and began seeking out a middleman solution.

In late October a D.C. supporter named Sean Gunn approached me, telling me, "It could be as simple as educating members about good leadership." I knew he was right and enlisted him to work with me on what I called the Generation Dean Help Desk. Staffed by group leaders, group members, and staffers, the help desk welcomed all new GenDean members and provided them with guides on managing groups and getting press, and information about GenDean. By educating everyone we believed that group members would have more realistic expectations for group leaders and bad group leaders would be forced to improve. In essence, the help desk inverted the power relationship between leaders and members. I was proud of the fact that we'd come up with such a creative yet simple solution but worried over our ability to implement it. Ginny had left for Iowa almost a month ago, and I believed I'd be next.

Internal Conflict

Situations involving group conflict or confusion occurred frequently, especially in an organization like ours that promoted peoples' niche affiliations. We were a home for Punx for Dean, an organization started by Kimmy Cash. In just a short time, Cash had proven herself to be an organizing wonder and touted the fact that she managed more than 13,000 volunteers. We were also home to the Young Professionals for Dean, a subbranch that sprouted up almost overnight in multiple U.S. cities. Unlike the Punx, who dropped leaflets all over town and ambushed potential supporters at concerts, the Young Professionals liked to talk politics over happy hours. We were also a home to Chicks for Dean and Snowboarders for Dean, as well as Disney Employees for Dean and American University for Dean.

The truth was, some Punx didn't like the Young Professionals. Some Young Professionals didn't like the Punx. The Young Professionals wanted to fund-raise. The other groups did not. The high school groups felt overlooked. The Law School Students wanted to help the campaign with legal matters, despite the fact that none had taken the bar nor completed

law school. The College Dems wanted to do things the College Dems way. Big groups wanted big attention. Little groups wanted to be seen as what they were: big fish in little towns. Grassroots groups wanted independence from state-coordinated campaigns. And sometimes, groups wanted to take over the national Generation Dean.

I found out about one coup attempt by e-mail. Unknowingly someone included on the e-mail chain had copied me in on a related conversation without realizing that I'd scroll down to read about the planned coup. It was planned for March and people had already chosen and agreed upon their titles. It would be just in time for the presidential cycle and would save them effort in case Dean didn't make it that far. I sighed. Some of the people on the list were quite dedicated. I reread the e-mails, looking for criticism of what we'd done. There wasn't anything of the sort, just a very aggressive and positive assertion of power. Some of them were longtime organizers and, from what I understood, this was an issue of entitlement.

Admittedly I was never entirely comfortable with having found myself at the top of an organization by a great deal of luck. Although I couldn't and wouldn't ever claim I'd have been the most likely candidate from the outset, I believed I'd contributed to our effort in significant ways and met the challenge.

I quickly wrote the participants involved, asking them to report to me on their most recent efforts. One by one, I then called them. I brought up the e-mail and asked them what they'd like to see improved. Some had genuine frustrations, which I promptly wrote down and later addressed. Others didn't and I called their bluff. To each, I let them know that they were free to do as they pleased on their own time, but that staying in good standing with the campaign required getting their work done. As we approached Iowa, we'd need them more than ever. As far as I know, they dropped their coup plan, embarrassed by the fact that I'd found them out and, even worse, discovered it had more to do with them than with us.

Group conflicts weren't always so easily resolved. Unknowingly we had designed a website and an organizing platform that lent themselves to special interests' games. With the help of the Internet, group leaders were more apt to share their frustrations and conflicts with me. Some of our members planned on careers in politics and competed ruthlessly for opportunities. Fortunately for us, we could divert our members' attention to Iowa; having a singular, looming goal reunited our membership when we needed it most.

Website Redesign

"Hi Amanda, this is Sean Gallavan. I'm a member of the D.C. Pride Group and I'm coming to Burlington to help you with the website redesign. Would you call me back?" I listened to the message again, thinking that I missed hearing when Sean would arrive given the noise in the campaign office. Nope. I picked up the phone and dialed. Sean answered and he sounded really groggy, as if he'd been sleeping. In fact, it sounded like he was standing in the middle of a busy road; his voice was barely audible over the noise.

“Sean, this is Amanda, Generation Dean. I got your message that you’re coming up to Vermont. When?” I propped the phone against my shoulder and returned my focus to my computer screen. “Hey, sorry; I’m sleeping at a rest stop in Jersey. I’ll be there in about four hours. Will you be there? Did you get my other messages? I left you two other voicemails saying I was coming up.” It took me a second to process all this information. I received so many calls that my voicemail frequently built up. I returned as many calls as I could in the evenings, but the truth is that I often fell behind. “Oh! Do you have a place to stay? Wow... We need help with our website. Guess you could tell, too!” I laughed. Sean answered, “Yeah, I need a place to stay. Will you be there when I get in?” I couldn’t believe our luck. We’d been fretting over our website dysfunction for months now and DFA had recently stolen the programmer I’d selected to work with us. My strategy of teaching myself all the basic web skills, like html, helped us keep pace and me to keep face, but didn’t suffice for a website redesign. We were bitter over the fact that we couldn’t compete with DFA’s pay and offer to provide webbies a full team with which to work. Since DFA’s priorities always trumped Generation Dean’s, I consistently found myself at the end of the campaign’s development queue. “I’ll stay around until you get in. I’ll find you a place to stay in the meantime. I can’t wait for you to get here!”

Less than a week after Sean’s arrival, a whole posse of DFA programmers and volunteers committed themselves to working on our new website. By then Generation Dean had achieved real credibility inside the campaign and some younger staffers working in other departments felt a real personal allegiance to our mission. Fascinated by the synergies between architecture and behavior, I looked forward to this task more than anything else. With the help of Zack Rosen, the founder of Deanspace and the youngest of Dean’s web staff, Justin Pinder, the programmer we had recently lost to DFA, and Hunter Weeks and Josh Caldwell, two Arizona GenDean members whom I had met later in the summer, we quickly set to work. Knowing that our needs had now become a priority for so many was tremendously redeeming.

Within two weeks time our team finalized plans for our new website. We wanted our new website to represent a form of e-democracy—with architecture like a system of checks and balances on power, including our own authority. The stories told by some of our members about their power-hungry or lazy leaders convinced us that systems permitting lateral and horizontal synergy, collaboration, and exit were the only solution. In many respects, we saw our website as a corrective to the natural imbalances between local organizers and the hungry beast of a national campaign. Fired by adrenaline and relief, we worked around the clock to realize our goal. Everything was on track until I was asked to go to Iowa for the caucus.

Iowa

The subject line said it all. “Depart for Iowa.” I saw it as I scrolled through the e-mails in my inbox from the previous night. My heart dropped and soared. All of the experienced campaign hands told newbies like me that we wouldn’t understand campaigns until

we'd experienced them from the ground up. "Iowa is where it's at," they'd say. "We'll win or lose this in Iowa, not Burlington." I also felt real allegiance to the members of Generation Dean. I'd worked so hard with my teammates to correct for our failures and ride our successes, and hated to just duck out.

My destination in Iowa was Dubuque, a postindustrial town in the northeast corner of the state. Hit hard by industrial downsizing, downtown Dubuque is a motley collection of well-kept office buildings and boarded-up storefronts. To calm my nerves, I reassured myself that I'd done everything possible to prepare myself for this moment. I'd been in contact with the Dubuque office several times and already acquired a log-in for the state's voter file. I'd also started reading the local newspaper.

The mood in the Dubuque campaign office was impossible to miss. People were tired. People were frustrated. The Kerry campaign, they said, had been in full swing and had recruited nearly all the Catholics and teachers right out from underneath them. Edwards was everyone's second favorite. No matter what was done, people couldn't be convinced of Dean. "Would Dean visit soon?" they all asked me. "I don't know," I replied. "Aren't you from the national HQ? Shouldn't you know?" was the most frequent retort. What was the value of being sent a national staffer, they thought, if the national staffer couldn't divulge the information they really needed? At one point, my friend Joe called from Burlington. "You arrived yet?" he asked. "Yup, I'm here." "What about getting us a blog post? People want to see what's going on. Could you do that?" I turned my head away from the phone and repeated the request to the people in front of me. It was met with blank stares. "I've got to ID voters." "I've got to help the in-house volunteers." "What about? We haven't done anything special today." That's when I knew that I'd spend the next few weeks unlearning and learning everything I thought I knew about campaigns.

The first lesson started with a simple phone bank. All I had to do was call people and inquire about their political position. If they were open to Dean, I needed to try and convince them. "Why should I vote for Dean? Tell me exactly why I should vote for Dean?" the man at the other end of the line demanded of me the first night. I was the third person calling him and he wanted answers. "Because he opposed the war in Iraq from the get-go." My mind began to waver. For months I'd drafted content for our organizers explaining why Dean was THE candidate. The truth was, however, that I'd only had experience with supporters because it's supporters who visit your website. What we—online organizers—didn't experience was the tremendous courage and power it took for every one of our supporters to stand out in public and bare their political souls to passersby. I wished I'd gone out in the field earlier in the year.

Several days later, I panicked. I didn't see any possible way of winning Dubuque for Dean. I'd scoured the voter file sheets instead of running up and down the town's hill to campus to organize students like I was supposed to. There weren't enough 3s to convert to 4s, not enough 4s to be counted on, and not enough 5s to help find 4s and 3s. Everyone else seemed to know it, too. They viewed any word of upcoming Dean visits as a chance to give hard-working volunteers the thank you and goodbye they deserved. In a moment of real angst, I called the state HQ several times in a row, adamantly requesting that senior help be sent to the area or that I be sent somewhere else in the state. Several days

later I received a call telling me that two volunteers who happened to be senior political operatives would arrive shortly in Dubuque. What a relief.

Carl Wagner and Tick Segerblom came the next day. Within hours, everything began to change. What I didn't know at the time is that I'd been blessed with an opportunity to work with two extremely accomplished organizers. Over the next few weeks I would learn as much from Carl about organizing as I'd learned during the entire Dean campaign.

Carl, ever curious about the Dean campaign's Internet operation, frequently demanded of me, "Can you use the Internet to get people to vote?" Almost as if I'd been slapped while sleeping, I stood still and quiet the first time he asked me and set my mind to work. The people on our website were identified Dean supporters, the types of people motivated to organize. We shared with them information about registering to vote, including their state's rules and links to important information. I hadn't had consistent access to the Internet since getting to Iowa, but I remembered that DFA had requested that our Iowa supporters confirm they would vote by e-mail. Still, I knew this wasn't an adequate answer to Carl's question. Were these people voting because of the Internet? What about the people who weren't members of Dean's online operation? Could the Internet be used to get them to the polls? We were sharing information with people about voting locations, hoping that they'd distribute the information in their areas. In this case, the Internet was one step removed; we were using it to organize people who would organize others to vote. I was stumped. The crazy thing, I realized, is that while we successfully raised a ton of money, generated tons of attention in the form of free press, and connected supporters nationwide, the Internet campaign didn't have a functioning solution to what seemed like the simplest and most obvious of questions. Over the course of those next few weeks, I kept thinking about Carl's question. No answer I gave myself nor Carl was ever satisfactory enough. Just when I was about to give up, Carl asked me, "Where are the online Iowa supporters?" Yet another question that I didn't have an answer to.

When he first got to work, Carl met with all the office's organizers, asking pointed questions about the area's grassroots efforts and supporters. Over lunch his first day I described to Carl what I'd felt from the town, pointing out the numbers and the ways volunteers and staffers carried themselves. Carl nodded his head and shared with me the information he'd been given from state HQ. It was true; Dubuque was in bad shape. They'd counted on winning this part of the state, but now it looked like an impossibility.

By the next day, Carl and Tick had a plan. We needed to air out the town's organizing operation and give it new life and vitality. At times like these, Carl said, we shouldn't disperse. We needed to bring people together, to identify shared solutions, and then to get to work. It was going to take, he said, an aptitude for motivation and celebration. Transforming our operation required a new office space where people could congregate in larger groups. It was my responsibility to find it. "Huh," I remember thinking. This task wasn't exactly what I'd expected.

Five minutes later I'd found one. The campaign had rented an office down the road for our out-of-state volunteers and it wasn't being used. The space was a former

sporting goods store that had gone out of business. The most charming feature was the stuffed animals in the window, some of which we ended up decorating with Dean paraphernalia.

Every night Carl invited people from town, like teachers and other educators, to sit down and talk. He would ask them how they thought their peers would vote and then constructed a simple plan for identifying others who supported Dean. To someone who had primarily organized online, Carl's work was new to me. I watched countless people—many of whom came in looking like they just wanted to do a good deed to assuage their conscience before heading home for dinner with the kids—sit up in their chairs, reinvigorated with ideas and energy. With each group, it was important to plan, to follow up, to revise the plan if necessary, and to track progress. It was a work in progress, a continual feedback loop that perpetuated itself. I enjoyed its dynamic simplicity and reveled in my newfound human connections. I'd gotten used to thinking about things in terms of open rates, click-through rates, and signups.

By the end of the week, we'd met enough people to have a party. I went out with volunteers and got decorations for the space, and spent the latter part of the afternoon blowing up balloons, recruiting people to make signs, and hanging streamers. That night, people milled around, excitedly talking to each other about their experiences on the Dean campaign and revving up for the election. They were all nervous like me, I could tell, but there was no other place people wanted to be that night. This, I remember thinking, is chemistry. The party couldn't have been better timed or planned. It made me realize that in order for people to successfully bring others into the campaign, they need to have a good experience inside the campaign first.

Generation Dean had shared successes with people through the Internet. Sometimes, it had been a quick blog post from Trippi. Other times, we had sent out e-mails, written blog posts, and featured the best work of supporters, but no time I could remember had ever felt like this. In fact, I wasn't sure how we could have achieved such a gathering. Would it have to take place in something like a virtual world? Where people could synchronously stand next to each other, stare each other in the face, and grin ear to ear? Would we toast each other with virtual wine glasses? Would that be enough? No, but we could use the Internet to organize get-togethers in our local communities and that is of tremendous value. Suddenly I understood the real magic of Meetups, these synchronous get-togethers among strangers at their local bars and coffee shops. Chemistry, I kept repeating to myself before going to sleep, this is all about chemistry.

Despite our best efforts, we lost Iowa. Dubuque, reported to be the worst county in Iowa for Dean, moved up to above average on Election Day. Devastated by our loss but motivated by the immense outpouring of passion and discipline and astounded by the success of our local operation, I was comforted by having done my best. I said goodbye to everyone I had met and began the long drive back to Vermont.

When I finally pulled into the parking lot at DFA, I expected the building to be falling down, imagining that DFA was a bit like the Titanic. Lights glared from the

windows and I could see people trekking back and forth in the hallways. I wouldn't know for sure until I got back inside, so I parked and walked in.

Aftermath

When I walked into the office, I noticed that almost everyone had their eyes glued to our few televisions. I had never seen this before. Usually people were staring down their computer screens, charging between rooms on an errand, meeting in our empty hallway spaces, or peering over everyone's head in search of an important someone. I heard a strange sound and looked up. The television showed Dean gesticulating and then, after taking in a deep breath, letting out a "yawlll." The commentator pointed this out to viewers as "the Dean scream." I looked around the room. No one looked surprised. They looked disgusted. "When did this happen?" I asked the person next to me. "Election night in Iowa." I looked back to the TV. The program replayed it again. Not thinking that much of it, though, I moved on.

The office looked grayer than I remembered and oddly small; I'd gotten used to ducking streamers and stepping on balloons while winding through crowds of volunteers. There were lots of wires and cables everywhere. I hadn't used a computer consistently since I left. And it looked drab and corporate.

When people asked me about my time in Iowa, I told them about chemistry, about witnessing people coming together and celebrating their shared visions. Once, someone interrupted me, telling me that "The election was all rigged. This is about the media attacking an insurgent. We were misrepresented." Immediately, I came to life. "No, the operation in Iowa wasn't strong. We got beat at our own game."

At the same time, I sympathized with everyone who stayed in our Vermont HQ. I was lucky to have seen things as they were so that I didn't have to overcome my own disbelief. Winning the hearts and minds of people is hard work, I'd realized. It wasn't nearly as straightforward as I'd believed it to be while working in HQ. During my long cross-country trek I'd made peace with our loss. What I couldn't come to terms with, though, was my uneasiness with how the campaign had depicted a sure win in Iowa. What is more, I couldn't make sense of the undue reverence for the media, for money, and for glamour when, in the end, none of that seemed to pull through.

I went out to New Hampshire and worked with our state coordinator, Lex. On Election Day I ran around a school, directing people to vans waiting to take them to their voting locations.

When I returned to Burlington I found the moment I'd waited for—Sean had finally finished our new website. I ran to my computer, hitting "refresh, refresh, refresh," until the site appeared. I scrolled down through the pages, admiring the smoothness of the functionality and the elegant text.

The site permitted users and groups to sync up so that they could collaborate and share tools and resources. Grassroots groups that joined the campaign would receive campaign communications directly, like a blog post from the state coordinator. The state coordinators could e-mail groups, and their personal calendars depicted all events

created by individuals and groups that had opted in to the campaign. We would offer group leaders the tools they'd requested—a blog, a calendar, additional resources, guides, e-mail, and different user permissions. We also designed what we termed our “killer app”—a website-accessible voter file. All individuals and groups could load contacts into the system and tag them with important information, such as whether or not they were Dean supporters, their addresses, and their affiliations. Only the contact, the group leader, and our national team had access to this data directly. The Generation Dean homepage would also feature a calendar, a blog, tools like e-cards, and a resource center. All of these features would be populated by content produced by groups and individuals synced up with the national campaign.

But the admiration was bittersweet—the election was basically over. And we'd become erratic online organizers. We had stopped using e-mail to communicate to our list and had over-relied on our blog while Michael and I had been in Iowa. Instead of spending time devising creative content, we had talked with state coordinators about their plans.

Did we fail because we overreached ourselves? Or did we fail because we couldn't plan for what we didn't know was ahead? The lessons learned with our website were hard for me to swallow. I realized that regular communication with your membership is absolutely essential, no matter what the cost. Assuming that information will trickle down through multiple layers of leadership is dangerous. I also realized the hard way that we hadn't entirely fulfilled our role and responsibilities.

As I mulled over our next steps, the campaign's vibe changed once again. By then, we'd all become astute at sensing internal changes. Dean announced a meeting at which Trippi declared his departure. After Trippi left, the campaign's administrators also announced a series of staff cuts. A few days later, I learned I was on the cut list.

I packed up my things, said my goodbyes, and called Mike, the same friend who had told me to join the campaign. “Can I stay with you in D.C.? I want to help out the Democratic nominee, no matter who it is.” Monday I was in Washington, D.C., with \$250 to my name and a credit card. Six weeks later, I took my place on John Kerry's Internet team, along with Zack Exley, the Moveon consultant to the Dean campaign, and other survivors of the primary season.

It only took me a short while to realize just how special the Dean campaign had been. As one of the first Dean staffers hired on to the Kerry campaign, I was called on to answer any and every question about the Dean campaign. To peoples' curious questions about how the Dean campaign would approach a problem, I disappointed them by saying there wasn't any one answer. I'd spent the whole time trying to adapt to the Dean campaign, which, in retrospect, had been adapting to the new terrain of technology and tools it had been afforded almost by chance. The questions presented to us by the technology, the grassroots, and our accessibility to innovation and change taught us very valuable lessons, many of which we'd come to realize over time and through conflict or chance. With the help of the Internet, small-dollar donations can be contributed and processed at little cost and consequently regular people can be stakeholders. The Internet makes innovation accessible, even when it occurs at the edges. Campaigns can talent scout discoveries, tools, and people online, making it easier to influence the party. For the first time, the campaign and party could hold an

ongoing conversation with its base using communications tools like blogs, e-mail, and web TV. Campaign communications are no longer available to only select listeners. The Dean campaign didn't necessarily invent these developments, but it demonstrated their potential to the public at large.

As for me, I'd survived a hell of a ride with a man I'd always known as my governor, and I'd come into my own. Politics was no longer abstract. I'd pushed myself far beyond my comfort zone and my home, sometimes putting up with the greatest resistance from my Burlington friends and neighbors who didn't know what to make of Dean's personal changes or mine. Better yet, I realized that I, too, could make a difference.

Notes

1. Not to be confused with Nicco Mele, who arrived in May.
2. Steve Davis, Larry Elin, and Grant Reeher, *Click on Democracy: The Internet's Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002).
3. Yoni opted not to come and instead accepted a job on the New Hampshire field staff.
4. In political operations, the "advance" team plans and advertises public speaking engagements for a candidate.