How can people and businesses thrive in an open-source world?

Mitchell Baker knows. The high-minded lawyer and CEO of the public nonprofit Mozilla Corporation became a champion not only of putting vital source code, the inner workings of a computer program, into public hands but also of helping build dynamic communities of developers around it.

What does it take to steer a small volunteer-run organization to success in a world of vastly larger for-profit competitors? What roles do policy decisions play in the ultimate success of a new and improved technology? In Mitchell Baker’s account of the making and managing of Mozilla, passion, persistence and cool practicality all play a role.
Project managing any grassroots organization is a challenge. The women’s suffrage movement is one case in point.

It took firm but open leadership to blend many voices into one voice, compelling and impossible to ignore.

Today, on a playing field called the Internet, another grassroots movement is underway — the open source movement.

Among its leaders is a woman as engaged and focused as the most ardent suffragette.

Left: About 6,000 women marching in a Women’s Suffrage Parade in New York City, around 1915. From the collections of The Henry Ford ID# THF9043. Right: Women’s Suffragette parade in New Haven, Connecticut, about 1915. From the collections of The Henry Ford ID# THF9044. Upper right: Votes for Women section in the With Liberty and Justice for All exhibit in Henry Ford Museum.

Based on a verbatim transcript of an interview at Mozilla Foundation in Mountain View, California, conducted September 22, 2008 — www.OnInnovation.com
Mitchell Baker, CEO of Mozilla
Attorney, student of Chinese history.

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I have an eclectic path. My undergraduate degree is in Asian studies — Chinese studies at a time before China was an economic powerhouse and when it was crazy to study in China. And then law, which was all about, for me, how do you — how do people create structures and institutions that they’re willing to live in. And then Mozilla. So this question of who we are and how do we interact and how do we create the world about us, I think will always be a piece of whatever I’m doing.

Making what works.

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If all we can do with the Internet is consume, then we’re actually quite limited.

But what we’re trying to do is say, “Okay, that’s great. But when any one of us wants to go beyond consuming to building or participating or creating or making something that works for me, we at Mozilla want to create a part of the Internet where you can do that.”

Innovation with parameters.

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Innovation is always a tricky thing. You know, it’s easy to stifle innovation, first of all. So the first thing you have to do is not stifle it. And because we have a product that’s got, coming up on 200 million users, that’s a large amount of people, many of whom are not technical. We have some conservatism in what we do with the product, because you can’t change it too much, or you can’t change it so much that, you know, 50 or 100 million people don’t know how to use it.

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We have to make sure that we have outlets to be innovative despite the limit on the product. And so we do that through providing lots of different ways to experiment, whether or not something gets in the product.
You have to provide mechanisms for experimentation. You have to be receptive.

The value of a good browser.

What the browser actually is — it’s the piece of software that lives on your machine so you, as a human being, are in control of it. And it is the mechanism through which you can talk to the rest of the Internet. And it seems very mundane and very obscure and sort of abstract, like who would care?

But it turns out it’s like if you don’t have a good steering wheel on your car, it’s hard to drive well. So in that same way, this seemingly obscure piece of software called the browser is really fundamental.

Open sourcing Netscape.

As Netscape’s market share declined, it became clear there was no way to compete in a traditional method.

And so the untraditional method that Netscape chose was to take all the code for its product and make the code available to the public, free of charge and free of use restriction. And that was named “Mozilla.” Mozilla was launched in 1998. And — at that time it was a very radical thing for a commercial organization to do.

The rationale for doing that was thinking that would allow many people to join together and voluntarily, together, produce a work product. And then be able to use it afterwards.

“It turns out that although we all have the freedom to go make competitive products and use it on our own, it’s much more efficient, as a development method, to work together.”

— Mitchell Baker
Why it’s successful.

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It turns out that although we all have the freedom to go make competitive products and use it on our own, it’s much more efficient, as a development method, to work together. Sometimes it’s called, “the logic of open source.” And in engineer-speak, which isn’t always polite, it’s called “the stupid tax,” meaning it looks really appealing right now to be able to take this giant asset and go off and take it behind closed doors and do what you want with it. And not really share your work back. Or not join in the general shared effort.

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A lot of people try that. But it turns out that you fall behind. And then they come back and they realize, “It’s much better for me to take my effort and contribute it to the shared work product, so that the general result that everyone’s using has the things I want in it.”

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And that’s why organizations like Mozilla and other open source projects are so successful. If you run a good community and you attract people and you make enough decisions well enough of the time, then together you go further faster than any one organization can do. And so that’s what Mozilla is about, is having a goal, improvement of the Internet, and a way of working that draws in people and process and technique for allowing us to work effectively together. And producing great results.

Mitchell Baker has a lot more to say. Visit OnInnovation.com to see her full, unedited interview, read the complete transcript and connect with other visionaries thinking out loud.

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