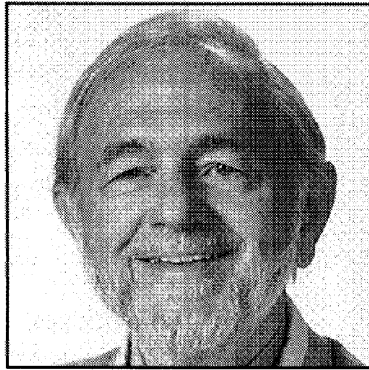


## From Community to Business—Another Path

*Pat Barrentine*

"Community is people, not systems. It is based on morality, fairness, and generosity combined with common sense—working together for a common good." On the basis of this simple, direct philosophy, J. Donald Walters founded Ananda, considered one of the most successful intentional communities in the world.



Ananda Village, near Nevada City, California, has more than 450 members plus another 500 members in six city centers: Sacramento and Palo Alto, California; Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; Austin, Texas; and Assisi, Italy. The community will celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1993.

The community is founded on spiritual principles and beliefs. Walters began his study of the ancient science of meditation in 1948, when he first met Paramhansa Yogananda, author of the classic *Autobiography of a Yogi*. He lived with Yogananda during the last three and a half years of that spiritual leader's life.

Walters, widely known as Kriyananda (meaning "Joy in Action"), and I talked in a comfortable sitting room at his residence. He met me as if I were an old friend, talking warmly and openly about his deep respect and love for people and the importance he places on leadership. Clearly, that has been the key to his ability to create not only the community but the businesses it owns. "Genuine leadership," he says in the first chapter of *The Art of Supportive*

*Leadership, "never loses sight of the most important principle governing any project involving human beings: namely, that people are more important than things."*

It's important not to confuse this intentional community with what most of us think of as a "commune," in which everyone contributes all his or her money and possessions. The Ananda community strongly supports free enterprise and entrepreneurship. There are thirteen community-owned businesses and nineteen privately-owned businesses within the community. The community's financial stability is based on these businesses, which provide employment for members of the community and funding for the community itself. And these businesses are financially successful. Following are some examples of community-owned businesses:

- Crystal Clarity Publishers, founded in 1968 to publish the writings of Walters, currently lists over 300 of his books, plays, audio and video cassettes, and sheet music. The company now employs sixteen people and enjoyed a 30 percent increase in sales this year in an industry that typically shows only 1 to 2 percent annual growth. One of their most popular titles, *The Art of Supportive Leadership*, is used by Kelloggs Company in their Managers Training Workshop, because "it is brief, hits the points, and has a lot of common sense to it."
  - Earth Song, a restaurant and health food store in Nevada City with twenty-three employees, has been the most visible connection with the surrounding community and has developed a loyal customer base. Its usual sales of more than \$1 million are up 8 percent this year in spite of a tight economy.
  - Mountain Song, also in Nevada City, is popular with local residents and tourists alike, offering elegant women's fashions, unique gifts, toys, books, cards, and jewelry. It's a store that "feels" different. Employees are helpful, friendly, and trusting. The merchandise is unique and carefully chosen.
  - East-West Books, which they acquired in 1980, has the second largest sales of any metaphysical bookstore on the West Coast. It is located in Menlo Park, California, with a branch in Seattle.
  - The Expanding Light is a guest facility that was developed at the community's Ananda Village in 1970. It provides retreat facilities for individuals and groups and offers classes.
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A community-owned medical facility serves members as well as residents of the surrounding rural area. The staff includes a physician, an osteopath, two chiropractors, and three nurse practitioners. A community health plan is available to all residents.

The organization of this community represents the best example of participative management I have ever seen. Decisions are made at the "lowest" possible level—people are trusted to make a decision without "checking it out" with some authority figure. A general manager takes care of the day-to-day operations under the direction of the Village Council, which is elected for one-year terms by the membership. In addition, most businesses have their own boards of directors to oversee individual operations.

"Leadership means vision first, above everything else," says Walters. "I serve the community best in my role as spiritual director. If you get too close to problems, the problems become central." It is refreshing to see how his teachings in *The Art of Supportive Leadership* are carried out in practice in his own life.

The leader who fears strength in his subordinates is concerned merely with protecting his own position. Any work that he and they may be engaged in is certain to produce only negligible results. Indeed, it is likely that such a leader will find himself eventually alone, in full and unchallenged command of a sinking ship.

For leadership means strengthening the work of which one is the head, not weakening it. And this can only mean encouraging strength, not weakness, in one's subordinates. The wise leader knows that on the strength of his supporters depends the full effectiveness of almost everything he can hope to accomplish as a leader.

Walters had no financial backers when he bought the 900 acres of land in the Sierra foothills and raised much of the founding capital by lecturing around the world. Born in Rumania of American parents, he received his education there and in Switzerland, England, and the United States. He speaks nine languages and has lectured in five of them. He is an accomplished musician, composer, and playwright.

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The community's philosophy of organization is unique to Ananda businesses. Community members fill the roles for which they are best suited. Pay is commensurate with need, not with position (Walters himself, as CEO, makes less than many others). For example, a single person who is the manager of a store may earn less than one of the clerks who has two children to support. Each business, even though part of the community, stands on its own—meets payroll, pays expenses, and funds expansion. Financial support for the community is given as a "tithe" from the business' net profits, the amount decided on by those in the business—there is no set expected amount. As in the Mondragon style of business, hierarchy is for efficiency and not for power. Learning this explained the feeling that I got as a customer in several of the community's stores that no one is in charge because everyone is in charge. All employees are equally helpful, supportive of each other, and in their interactions with each other and customers—even an occasional difficult one.

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The philosophy carries over to the private businesses owned by members of the community. Ananda Builders Guild (a privately owned firm) recently finished construction of a school in Nevada City and is currently building a church in Portland and a health club in Woodside, California. It has constructed several of the residences in the community, perfecting the ancient art of rammed-earth construction as a lumber- and power-saving innovation. Ananda Power Technologies (a privately owned firm) manufactures state-of-the-art solar energy systems for clients around the United States and abroad. These and other private businesses subscribe to the same kinds of pay scale as those owned by the community. They also contribute a percentage of net profits to the community.

The contributions from businesses and individuals go into a fund to support community needs: construction and maintenance of roads and community buildings; support for the fully accredited school (currently with sixty-six students in grades K–8); community outreach; and whatever other projects are approved by the community—one person, one vote.

The effectiveness of this approach is evident. I am reminded of something I once heard Ram Dass say: "Just tell me what the need is, and let my heart tell me what to do about it." That's what happens in this community. It works because people "of heart" are drawn to become part of it and its spiritual director lives what he teaches.

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The final chapter of *The Art of Supportive Leadership* is called "What Is True Success?"

A true leader is neither attached to success nor afraid of failure. He knows that success is not so much the completion of a specific project as the energy that goes into completing it. Projects can be destroyed, but never energy itself....

The definitions of success are legion, as are also the techniques for reaching it. The most important thing this book can add to those multifarious definitions and techniques is this simple rule: *The outcome of any project always reveals, however subtly, the kind of energy that went into its development.*

A work of art reveals not only the skill, but also the consciousness, the basic attitudes, the philosophy of life, of the artist.

A place of business reveals the general attitudes of its workers: their happiness or unhappiness, their confidence or frustration.

A leader who leads truly, and never drives others, will create in his subordinates the most constructive possible attitudes, and will ensure the best possible long-range results for his and their labors.

The true success of an undertaking depends more than anything else on the spirit of the people involved in it. And the spirit of those people is a reflection, always, of the spirit of its leader.

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*The Art of Supportive Leadership* can be ordered from the publisher, Crystal Clarity, by calling 1-800-424-1055.

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