

## The Company We Keep

In 1987, John Abrams converted South Mountain Company, the small Martha's Vineyard construction company he co-founded in 1975, to a worker-owner cooperative corporation. He and two trusted company foreman became the original three owners, with eight employees in line for ownership; today, more than half of the company's 30 employees are owners.

Abrams' story, which he chronicles in the book *The Company We Keep* (Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2005), is not only about a new way of organizing and managing a design/build company, it is about commitment to a vision of honest work, social responsibility, and shared wealth, and to the notion of "the company as community." The story meanders through a wonderful variety of memoirs, anecdotes, parables, and philosophical musings; and operational particulars are detailed in three appendices.

But the heart of the story centers on eight core ideas or "cornerstones" which, Abrams says, he stumbled upon just as a stonemason picking through a pile to find just the right stones "discovers the wall as he builds it."

**Cultivating workplace democracy.** At South Mountain, employee-owners have a voice and a stake in the decisions that affect their lives. Ownership is a privilege extended to those who intend to work at the company for the foreseeable future; who demonstrate ability to work "effectively and cooperatively"; and who are committed to the company's core values of quality work, ethical business conduct, environmental responsibility, and concern for others. Owners set policy



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and make all decisions by consensus. (The backup voting system has been used just three times in 18 years.)

**Challenging the gospel of growth.** Questioning the notion of growth for growth's sake, South Mountain is not concerned with "more," but with "enough." As Abrams puts it, "The wish to make the best of a product and the wish to make all of a product may each preclude the possibility of the other."

**Balancing multiple bottom lines.** For Abrams, "profit is simply the engine that drives a bottom line composed of many parts." South Mountain also accounts for an environmental and social "bottom line" through its efforts not only to serve business needs but to recognize and accommodate the needs of individual employees and the larger community.

**Committing to the business of place.** South Mountain pursues policies that both preserve the unique history and character of Martha's Vineyard while mitigating growing problems brought on by

scarcity of land and the ever-increasing cost of living. This includes investing time and capital in such things as low-income housing and open-land preservation, and in conducting its business in a way that supports the local community.

**Celebrating the spirit of craft.** The company's commitment to design/build is a return to the "master builder approach," which combines all aspects of planning, design, construction, furnishing, and maintenance in a single entity.

**Advancing "people conservation."** The company extends "flexibility and patience" to support employees who choose to build their own homes, but has also provided outright housing subsidies to employees and clients, and is involved in co-housing projects on the island.

**Practicing community "entrepreneurism."** South Mountain actively supports rental conversions, historic preservation, and other projects that improve the local business climate while safeguarding aesthetics and promoting conservation.

**Thinking like cathedral builders.** Long-term planning at South Mountain treats the future as a "design issue" that is the "result of intent rather than circumstance."

If this thoughtful and thought-provoking book isn't already on your reading list, it should be.

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