

The Next Conversation

Episode 1 — Aligning Business With Community

Guest: Laury Hammel

Host: Ben Wolfe
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Ben Wolfe: Good morning and welcome. Welcome to this brave experiment, this first in a series of conversations that is sponsored by Axiom News with support from The Resonance Center for Social Evolution.

This is, in a sense, a dress rehearsal, a tech rehearsal — and a full-fledged conversation in what could become a podcast over time. And we are a small-but-mighty group. We have at least three continents on this call. We have North America. We have Benjamin Smith, in Berlin. We have Rituu Nanda in India. And we are very lucky to have with us, as our guest today, Laury Hammel, who is in Boston.

Laury is a true pioneer of the new economy movement — present at every stage and active in almost every part of the arc of that movement over the last 30 or more years. And we're going to have a conversation that will start with a lead-in between Laury and me, exploring some of his role in that movement and what's going on right now — including a pretty exciting conference coming up in under a week in Boston.

And then — because we believe that no one in this room, even our guest, has all the answers to everything — we'll move into dialogue. This is a participatory process where every voice matters. In the second half of the call, we'll move into triads for some conversation between and among all of us.

The call driver today is Yvonne Hollandy at Axiom News world headquarters here in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.

So, my name is Ben Wolfe and I am a community-builder and communicator, based here in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada. And I have collaborated closely with Axiom News over the last two and a half years on quite a number of projects, from generative journalism to creating local and trans-local organizations such as the Peterborough Dialogues, a pioneering initiative in community-building, learning, media-making and change. And, that's my role. I am the container holder for this space. I get to have generative conversations that I hope will provoke your questions and your discussion to follow.

Let's jump right in.

Laury, our time is not long, and I could spend easily half an hour asking you just about the earliest stages of your work in the New Economy movement. Obviously, we can't do that, but I need to give a little bit of background. So — you have been an activist in the 60s in the civil rights, peace and environmental movements, and moved into business. Through your Longfellow Health Clubs and other businesses, you've worked right from the very beginning on business for different principles than most — business that is not satisfied merely with the product and the profit but has a wider view.

And, if people have been following this movement over the last 30 years, they would be fairly stunned at all of the things that you've been involved in starting: from Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) in the early 90s; you're in the Social Venture Capital network hall of fame; and — an organization just the name of which speaks deeply to a lot of people — the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), from which the name of this conversation series comes. You were a founder and the first chair of that for several years.

I'm really interested in also mentioning that you were the chair of BALLE's national conference in Boston in 2008. And so there's a sort of cycle of return here, in it coming back to you and to Boston in 2017.

How do we even get into all of that...? The question I've decided to ask you is: you just came out of a two-and-a-half day intensive retreat for your own business — a business that embodies a lot of the values of this movement.

What's going on in your own business, that matters to you most, that's different from the usual world of business — that expresses the arc of this over the last 30-some years?

Laury Hammel: Well, Ben, thanks so much for inviting me to join this conversation. And not being really a high-tech person, being able to talk to somebody from Germany and Canada and wherever else people are, India, is pretty wild for me. It's a new experience and I'm really enjoying it, so thanks for inviting me to do this. And also thanks for your kind words. I appreciate the fact that you actually care about those things.

So my business is — there's two sides to it that I want to talk about regarding the retreat, that retreat we just came back from.

One is that when I was starting my business, it was actually started as a tennis business: tennis instruction and tennis club business, in 1972. And I never really planned on being a business person because I'm definitely a child of the 60s and the 50s — the 1950s, and 60s, that is. Some people think it was back to the Civil War, but not quite that far at this point. It's really just the 1950s and 1960s.

And the idea that businesses could play a positive role in the evolution of our world, our culture and of humanity and life, was a pretty radical thought at the time. And in fact, when we started the first trade association that we know of in America and North America, and probably the world, that was based on a mission of changing the world, when we told people we were talking about socially responsible businesses, people thought that was an oxymoron.

So we came out of the 60s and we were really trying to do good. And I happened to be working for a business, and I was happy doing my work, which was to teach people tennis and

show people how to fun and develop community.

But then it turned out that the people I was working for didn't have much respect for what I was doing. They didn't share the same values.

And so in 1980, a group of the tennis professionals there decided it was time to start a new business. And we started the new business, our own business in 1980. We started it with a purpose which was different: we wanted to make sure that our business was going to be a vehicle for social change, not simply a business to make money. Our mission from the very beginning was to create a world where people's basic needs are met and everyone experiences love, happiness and satisfaction. That was our global vision.

And then we wanted to create a model organization that enabled us to try to achieve that vision and help other people take from what we've learned and add that to their organization, so that we could actually use businesses and organizations as a way of changing the world. That was the mission.

So in 1984, we actually became a health club and a family outdoor club. And that really even transformed our business more, because we went from a club of teaching tennis, which had a lot of nice qualities but wasn't necessarily what you would call transformative — or while what we did looked at lot of people who were from under-served communities and who had a lot of... children learned a lot from our programs from all different economic backgrounds —

But it wasn't specifically an initiative to change the world. And my health clubs now are dedicated to bringing health and vitality to our community and helping our community and individuals thrive and create what some people have called "blue zones." Blue zones have been identified as the seven areas in the world that are the healthiest communities around.

And so we've made one of our missions to do what we can to create our club and our community to be a blue zone — where in a blue zone it's easy to make the right decision, the right choice because that's what everybody is doing.

And we're all about creating community in our club and in our towns and cities that surround us, so that it becomes easy to make decisions and choices that not only help you to be more healthy, but they help your family and your community be more healthy and more alive and to thrive.

So we spent a lot of time over our retreat talking about: what are the various behaviors we would like people to adopt to become more healthy. So that was one thing we talked about, and that was sort of the mission and the vision. And then the other part of the conversation was how do we actually run a business so that we can do that? And how do we collaborate

with the staff so that the staff feels empowered, they feel engaged and they feel unified around a particular new mission, not new mission, but new project we're taking on?

So we were dealing with two things. One was how do we stay in our mission and share that with the world, in our particular local world? And then how do we make that happen the most effectively by organizing a business so everybody feels fully engaged and alive and active by the process?

So they're sort of two components to it. And we spent a lot of time over the last two and a half days dealing with that.

Ben: What's an example of an idea that came out of this retreat that's got you really excited?

Laury: Well, this idea didn't really come out of the retreat, but it was a focus of the retreat. We've put together a mandala, which is a circular, visual representation of ideas that we're trying to share with all of our community.

Each of those ideas represents a practice and those practices all have verbs. And so one practice is, "Get moving," another practice is "Be present," another practice is "Think positive." And we've got eight of these practices. We're putting them in the form of an artistic mandala so it can serve as a touchstone and a talisman for our members and community to say, "Oh, this is some of the things I want to do to help bring me more joy and lifelong health and happiness."

So that concept, it was a major topic of our conversation and very exciting as we had people who were been working on how that mandala might change their lives, how in fact it did.

Ben: Great. Okay. And I'm in a community where, I'm looking at where you were 30 years ago and thinking that looks pretty good, where you've moved from having an individual business that has these values, to creating a local network that has these values.

Because this all started in your home community and then it kind of grew, from business to local, to regional, to national, to international.

And I'm guessing there are a lot of people out there who would like to connect with a network that has these values. Can you say a little bit about how BALLE came about — about BALLE, the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies — and about what's, since we don't have that much time, what crossroads is this movement at as it comes into this conference in Boston in 2017?

Laury: Those are some big questions, Ben. I'm up for it — up to it and up for it.

So, when I founded the business in 1980 with my partners, my business partners, one of whom is still a partner of mine after 37 years, when we started it, we developed in the very beginning, a mission statement that was global in nature and was values-driven.

And as soon as I did that — and this predated Ben and Jerry's, it predated Stonyfield Farm Yogurt, it predated Seventh Generation, which are local companies that grew in New England.

And so I spent, from 1980 to 1988 looking for people who owned businesses, and entrepreneurs, who would share my values, and I could work with to try to figure out how to make this happen because it was a concept that was pretty rare. Just to be clear, in 1980, most businesses didn't have mission statements, let alone mission statements that had something bigger than 'serve the customer and sell products.'

So I start looking for people who shared my values. In 1988 I ran into Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield from Ben and Jerry's, Gary Hirshberg from Stonyfield Farm Yogurt and Tom Chappell from Tom's of Maine, and a number of other entrepreneurs in New England. And we formed what's now called the Sustainable Business Network of Massachusetts. And we also founded a number of other networks throughout the six states in the New England region.

So in 1991, I went to the Social Venture Network conference which was held in Santa Cruz, California to meet with other leaders around values-based businesses — to meet with them to see if we could found a national organization of businesses. And we did, and on Valentine's Day, 1991, I was the founder, along with other people. But I was the head of the program and led it for four years.

We founded that organization and it was pretty exciting. And we worked on that for, I think, three or four years and then we were having trouble raising money, so we found somebody who was very tied in with Levi's, the company Levi's, he was very connected with that company and other companies. He said: we've got to be focusing on the big corporations because they have money and they can help fund us.

So, at the time I mainly put business in one big category of business.

And I learned the hard way that there's a big difference between a small local independent business and a huge corporation. So what ended up happening was that, as soon as you brought in that person who was connected with these big corporations, they spent more and more of their time supporting big corporations and connecting with people like Wal-Mart and Coca-Cola and a lot of other companies, and less and less time with small, local independent businesses, which is what I was and still am.

And so in 1999, which was eight years after myself led the founding of that organization, they

came to us and said, “We’re no longer joining with local businesses or independent businesses, only big, public corporations because they’re the ones who are changing the world and they’re the ones that have the money.” They said, “Nice talking to you, see you later.” I still sort of stuck around in the Massachusetts chapter of that organization for a little while longer.

And then I realized that I’m going to take another six months and we needed to form an organization of local and independent businesses. And that happened with the help of people like Michael Schuman, David Korten, and Julie Wicks. And in 2001, on October 13th, in, interestingly enough, San Jose, California, we founded the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, which was meant to be networks of locally-owned independent businesses that were small.

Small of course, in these days means under a billion dollars, because of many definitions for small and mid-sized companies. But we did that, and we founded with about three or four local networks. We had one in Philadelphia, one in Boston and one in Minnesota. And then over time, we grew and grew and grew till it finally got to the point where BALLE had 200 or 300 local business networks and thousands of local businesses.

So that’s how that happened. Simultaneous to that, Jeff Milchen and Jennifer Rockne had founded a group called the American Independent Business Alliance (AMIBA). And they were doing similar work but their focus was more on independent businesses and the whole multiplier effect and how the local climate was handled; and our focus tended to be more on many different activities such as environmental issues, justice issues and fairness issues.

So our movement that we’re working with right now, which we’re at this point calling the Local Sustainable Economies Movement — for the first time we’re having in a conference, it’s going to be in Boston (June 7-9, 2017), that brings together the groups that are affiliated with the American Independent Business Alliance and the groups that are affiliated with BALLE. We’re bringing them all together under one roof to find ways to share best practices.

This is really a generative opportunity because we haven’t met for a couple of years and people are feeling a little disconnected, so we’re trying to bring people together to reconnect and find out what the next step is for our movement. And one of the phrases that we’re using for this conference is the phrase that “We’re working to align business with community.” That if you really are aligning your business with the needs and the things that are important to your community, you’re going to be greener, you’re going to be more connected, you’re gonna be able to make a difference in the world.

We’re talking a lot about aligning our businesses with our communities and trying to do that with communities all across North America. And in fact, we have six people coming from France who are doing this, who got started with their mission by coming to the BALLE

conference in Berkeley, California about 2005. So it's going to be a reunion for a lot of people, and we're going to be getting together and seeing what the next steps are.

Ben: That's fantastic. That was a beautiful map the arc of all of this. And this conference in Boston, I mean, I love the language that is out there inviting people to this conference. It says,

"Now, more than ever, our work and our world need the vision and impact that are created when business aligns with community. These times call out for a powerful, new narrative enacted by courageous pioneers who are equipped with practical tools and methods."

That's quite the invitation.

Laury: Yeah, correct. If you're not a courageous pioneer, you're not welcome. That's the deal. Just kidding.

Ben: So — what happens when an individual person who's been feeling lonely with these values connects with this wider movement?

Laury: Great question, Ben. You know, we started our first conference, I think it was 2003. Yeah, our first conference was 2003 and it was in Portland, Oregon. I was, of course, pushing for it big time, and less ... you might say more conservative or some people might say, less impulsive people, were just saying, "Let's wait a while before we run a conference." And I said no, we can't wait. People need to get together. We need to connect. We need to be with each other. We need to find out who our soul mates are, soul brothers/soul sisters. We need to be able to find out who our tribe is.

And I said, "I am totally convinced we're going to get 100 people at that conference." And I said, "If don't get 100 people in that conference, I'll be dipped in shellac." That was the threat I put over my head.

And about one week before, we had 100 people signed up and so the pressure was off. My skin was safe.

Interestingly enough, I made the same statement this time around and I said, "If we won't have 200 people signed up, I'll be dipped in shellac." So yesterday, he called me after the retreat, the managing director of SBN Massachusetts, and said, "Laury, I've got some bad news," and I said, "What's that?" "Well, we got 225 participants, and you're not gonna be dipped in shellac and we were looking forward to that." I said, "Well, we lost that opportunity."

In any case, the reason I say that is that every conference we've held, that BALLE held and almost every one that AMIBA held, and now this is a new one, a sort of a hybrid of those two,

more people have been in their first conference than their second conference, partly because it kept growing and growing. Our last conference at BALLE had probably 500 people there.

So, most of the people were first-time people. And it was so much fun to introduce these new people to their future friends, you know, because they shared so many values and shared so many emotions and shared so many things they wanted to do to be in a space that was filled with leaders who were all trying to do the same thing they're trying to do.

And the business world was and continues to be very inspiring. I was just talking to my friend Chris Fowler from Syracuse, New York, and he's trying to get his friends from upstate New York to come. And he says, "The thing that is so frustrating is that I know that if I get them to come they'll be so forever grateful, but I just can't get them to cross that bridge, to get them to take the three days or the two days or the one day off and travel five hours to get to Boston to be a part of something that will definitely be magical."

So it's almost across the board, a unified experience that when you walk into this space, there's so many people who share so much love and so much care and so much commitment, to try to change the world, that it definitely feels like you've found your tribe. So for people who are brand new, we can't even wait to meet them, because we think they're all future friends.

Ben: That's great.

You know, like this call there's a structure to your conference that I just find really refreshing and fascinating. You've got stages of storytelling — it's presented as storytelling, and there's a recognition in the whole design of the event. It feels in looking at the agenda, that everyone has a story to tell.

And there are dialogic conversations between and among all of the participants, given quite a bit time after each round of the storytelling — which is quite nice.

And we're going to do the same thing here. I hope you have been sufficiently provoked by that history and those stories from Laury to have some things that you're interested in talking to each other about. So what we're going to do now is move in to breakout rooms. In most cases, they will be rooms of three.

What about what you heard from Laury — about his own arc and the arc of the movement, energized you the most? And what possibilities does it bring to mind for you in your home community?

The call went into breakout sessions in groups of three for participatory dialogue.

Ben: Welcome back. So, that was great in our little group. I'm hoping you had a good experience.

What memorable or surprising thing did you just hear in the conversation you were in? Surprising or delightful... Cheryl?

Cheryl: That an enormous corporation that makes big, heavy metal equipment to push the earth around in ways that it doesn't like, can become a circular economy, or can be part of one.

Ben: Yeah, that was Caterpillar. I was in that group too...

Philip, you go ahead.

Philip: Thank you, Ben. To me it is amazing how quickly we recognize the values, the words, the concepts — of silos and systemic thinking, complexity, acting based on the systems of nature where everything is connected is what I heard in my group.

And this is what I've been saying for the last 10 or 15 years, in all the organizations public or private, federal level or little community levels. [...]

Ben: Great. If you didn't know, Philip is in Montreal but from Geneva and has quite the interesting history, and is working on spreading the UN Sustainable Development Goals at the moment.

Phillip: Thank you, Ben.

Ben: Laury, I was really struck by the sense of how my own hopes, for my own community, are so much more possible because you are out there, having done all that you've done over the last 30 years — such that when a local network forms here, it's got you to find, and so many other people who are steps ahead. So, that's exciting.

Laury: Thank you. [...] I'd like to say, Ralph and I had a great conversation because Ralph in the process of starting a worker co-op that is a bakery that is focused on employing and engaging with ex-offenders in the criminal system. And I had three good examples I could give him. He already had a couple of others he's working with closely, businesses that I've known and worked with over the years that are doing, not exactly the same, but similar things. [...]

So we had a very good experience, because he was telling me about the things he was doing and I gave him some good feedback of where to go. And he told me about some businesses that I wasn't aware of that was doing really profound things — so, lining up speakers for the next conference!

Ben: That's great. Dhoog?

Dhoog: The piece that came up between Ben Smith and I was, if we focus so strongly on this longing for community and a sense of belonging to something value-packed, you know, will we get almost mesmerized into the sense of that feeling that it will actually end up in less action taking place.

I think that's something that I recognize in my own pursuit of community on many levels. And I'm curious, I guess, because I'm not in the business world, and perhaps people like Laury could speak to it. [...]

Laury: Well, that's a great question and a question that I've never heard before, so thank you for bringing that question up.

In the 60s there were a number of people who decided, "Screw this, I'm gonna start my own commune out in the mountains." And there were literally, thousands and thousands of people who wanted to develop community and separate themselves from all the craziness. And, you know, they had a 0.1% success rate, partly because community is really challenging. A healthy, happy community is really challenging to develop anyway and it does require some intentionality, but when you start adding intentionality, it brings a whole another round of challenges.

So the nice thing about the business world is that we're developing, we have, a really strong community. I have 33 managers and their average time with me is 18 years. And we work very hard to keep people, good people, with us whenever possible, and that process has taken a lot of work and a lot of knowledge, a lot of understanding and it's been very profound. But in no cases has that ever detracted from doing the work of our business or the work that goes beyond our business.

I mean, I spend more than half my time doing pro bono work. And I do that because if you're mission driven, it's, you know, for me it's really hard since I do read the newspaper, and I do watch TV news, and I do listen to radio and I do go online, that I'm so connected to the pain of people who I don't know personally, that I feel that for me it's a life mission to try to reach out in every way I can, locally and globally.

There is a very famous quote which I'm gonna butcher, by Eugene Debs. He says, "If there is a criminal class, I am in it. If there's a working class, I'm off it." I'm butchering this but, "And as long as there's one person in prison, I am not free." And, you know, please Eugene Debs, I apologize for butchering that quote but I've thought about it for a long time. [...]

So that's sort of my life mission. That's where I'm coming from. And [...] we do it as concentric

circles. [...] [Y]ou've got family and then you've got neighbourhood and you've got these concentric circles that go all the way out and they're all connected and intertwined. And so for me, you know, it's really a very, very fluid set of relationships, even though I'm trying to focus on my own particular place to make sure that's where we start. Is that at all helpful?

Dhoog: Thanks. I'm enjoying some of those images, for sure. And I think some of the piece of that inquiry that Ben and I were having, you know, we haven't finished so it was... the piece I'm looking at is we're talking about being satisfied, we're talking about the pitfalls that might happen for some, where they get so juiced by the sense of finding their tribes that they'll revel in it and forget the mission or the other parts of them that was spurring them on.

Laury: I can't wait for that problem to happen. I am so excited for that problem to happen. [...]

Ben: So — I've got my eye on the clock and I believe we need to close this conversation. I want to thank you, first of all, for being part of this brave experiment, this tech and dress rehearsal for a possible podcast series with prophets, pioneers and social evolution change-makers.

Laury, you've been a wonderfully good sport, in all senses of the word, to be part of this first call. [...]

[I]f you are not already registered, we get to have another conversation tomorrow morning, 9:30 to 10:30 Eastern Time with the other co-chair of that conference, Michelle Holliday. [...] She brings a whole other thread into this. She's the author of a book called "The Age of Thrivability." And her core inquiry is about the relationship between living systems and change processes in organizations, and how those can be at the core of business.