

# Honoring People

An Interview with Douglas R. Conant, Founder & CEO, ConantLeadership

**EDITORS' NOTE** Douglas R. Conant is an internationally-renowned business leader, New York Times best-selling author, keynote speaker, and social media influencer with over 40 years of leadership experience at world-class global companies. For the past 20 years of his leadership journey, he has honed his leadership craft at the most senior levels – first as President of the Nabisco Foods Company, then as CEO of Campbell Soup Company, and finally as Chairman of Avon Products. In 2011, he founded ConantLeadership ([conantleadership.com](http://conantleadership.com)), a mission-driven community of leaders and learners who are championing leadership that works in the 21st century.



Douglas R. Conant

**The world is facing an unprecedented crisis that is impacting all countries and their citizens. The pandemic is being fought on the front lines by healthcare workers, first responders, those providing supplies and meals, transportation workers, and all other essential workers. What do you say to these true leaders and heroes that are risking their lives to protect others?**

These first responders have been serving others for years – many for their entire lives. But we often don't think to honor them until we are personally exposed to their contributions to us and to society. I think back to my near-fatal car accident in 2009. Doctors literally stitched me back together again and nurses gave me the support and care to get me through a very difficult recovery process. They were leaders in every sense of the word, guiding me through my path back to wellness.

I had almost taken it for granted prior to my accident but became profoundly grateful for hospital workers' and first responders' skills and dedication when my eyes were opened by my firsthand experience. We're collectively having that firsthand experience now. This pandemic is highlighting the powerful work that healthcare workers do and I hope our appreciation extends beyond this moment. It is a shame it took a global crisis for us to more fully celebrate them but let's not forget them when we get through this. Let our appreciation be deep and abiding.

**ConantLeadership is a mission-driven community of leaders who are championing leadership that works in the 21st century. What do you see as the role that ConantLeadership can play during this unprecedented time?**

Our mission is anchored in being a catalyst to help leaders rise to the challenges of the day. The time is now. Demanding times demand better leaders. This applies to every area that touches society. For example, it means advancing better leaders who

can serve public health and the workforce in the midst of a pandemic that is causing uncertainty, job loss, and monumental changes to the way work is being done. And it means challenging leaders to speak up – and take action – to address the most pressing crises of the day like vocally addressing systemic racism in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the many similar horrific events that preceded it in Kentucky, Georgia, and throughout the country.

As a community of leaders, we are called to create better leadership within ourselves and within our peers. I've been working in this territory for 45 years. I have a point of view on it that's tested and true and can help leaders continuously improve. The key is an incremental process for leadership development. With small steps, leaders can become more impactful on Monday morning if they dig into the ConantLeadership approach.

In our new book, *The Blueprint: 6 Practical Steps to Lift Your Leadership to New Heights*, we ask leaders to look inward, to investigate their life experiences and to bring those experiences to the forefront in the way they show up and lift their leadership to new heights. We don't ask them to lead like somebody else; we equip them with the tools to lead like only they can.

**ConantLeadership was built with an entrepreneurial spirit and an ability to be nimble and adapt. How are you addressing the business during this time in order to succeed in this difficult environment?**

Like most businesses, we're pivoting to a more virtual model of fulfilling our mission. This is very exciting to me and the team because we've found we can actually reach more aspiring leaders than ever before. I believe in making leadership personal and we're finding that

personal doesn't have to mean "in person." We've started doing free virtual town halls so we can connect with leaders at every stage of their journey, in the real world.

Before, we were reaching hundreds of thousands of people on our social media channels and through our suite of resources on our blog at [conantleadership.com](http://conantleadership.com). But now we're in deeper conversations with hundreds of people on our town halls. The conversations there are more substantive and richer than the kinds you might have on twitter and it's very energizing. We feel great about the reach.

We're launching a limited-run virtual summer coaching series as an accompaniment to *The Blueprint* book and I am looking forward to personally guiding people through the development of their own leadership foundation comprised of their leadership purpose, leadership beliefs, leadership model, leadership practice treasury and leadership improvement plan. Our book launch was largely cancelled as our publication date rubbed right up against the spread of COVID-19 globally. We had to conceive of a different way to help leaders maximize their impact using the Blueprint process. We've also transformed our most elite tier of leadership training, our Blueprint Boot Camp, into a virtual offering for the Fall. We're excited about it.

The overarching thought here is that organizations always underestimate their agility. But I've found that people, leaders, and organizations can rise to the challenge and get things done. Quickly, we're finding our footing and reimagining how we go to market in real time.

**There is a great deal of discussion about businesses reopening in a "new normal." What is your outlook for what this new normal may look like and how is ConantLeadership preparing for the next stage in this crisis?**

I have a clear-eyed but optimistic view about the world of work post-COVID. There are very real challenges that I will not minimize. We have a tough road ahead. But the upside is I believe we are going to evolve to a world that celebrates what I call "virtuality." The power of virtuality has been revealed like never before.

The changes that have been swiftly implemented in response to the pandemic are going to ultimately enable workers to live more well-rounded lives. I don't think we will ever return to a paradigm where everyone shows up at the

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office five days a week, eight to ten hours per day. And that is a positive transformation.

What we have discovered and what we will continue to see is that people can be just as productive – if not more productive – with more flexibility. This is an exciting opportunity to reimagine what the workweek can and should look like to best meet the needs of the people we are leading. And it will be different depending on the organization – why shouldn't it be? A “one size fits all” approach doesn't make much sense under the scrutiny this pandemic has inadvertently provided. Some people may come into the office one to three times a week and others rarely or not at all. We have the technology to support these new modes of collaborating. The new normal will almost certainly be a hybrid of the way we were operating before married with the new technology that unlocks the full potential of “virtuality.”

**You are a business leader who has always focused on your people and believed that talent makes great companies. What do you say to your team about their perseverance and resilience?**

I believe that perseverance and resilience are a byproduct of leading a life that honors people, inspires trust, and has a higher sense of purpose. You have to be anchored in your own leadership foundation to be able to weather

the storms of change. For example, I know my response to any crisis or situation must be centered in “honoring people” because it's at the heart of my personal leadership model, as part of my leadership foundation. This allows me to move more quickly because I have already done the work to figure out what matters most to me as a leader: people. This facilitates the way I engage with the world.

This connects to the central metaphor in our six-step blueprint process. Any structural engineer will tell you that the trick to building a soaring skyscraper is laying a deep foundation. Without a sturdy foundation, buildings are susceptible to calamities; they can topple under their own weight and may not be able to withstand natural disasters or high winds. The same thing is true in leadership.

Leaders who succeed have a sturdy leadership foundation that tethers them to their purpose, core beliefs, and personal leadership model born out of their unique personality, characteristics, temperament, and life experiences. Leaders operating from this deeper understanding of who they are and what they believe are able to stand firm and tall as they adapt in the face of adversity, recover from setbacks, and persevere through crises. That's the message I share with my team and with all leaders. “The only way out is in,” is one of our

mottos, meaning that to make impact externally, you have to do the work internally to strengthen your leadership understanding and approach.

**Leading companies in all industries have changed the way they operate and have been engaged in providing talent, resources and supplies to those on the front lines of this crisis. This has provided an example of the role that business plays as a force for good in society. Will you discuss your views on the responsibility that leading companies have to address societal need?**

I believe the world is already heading in the direction of a more explicit expectation that business become a force for societal good and social change – and the pandemic coupled with the movement to combat systemic racism have become accelerants. There is a very real sense that if you're not part of the solution, you are part of the problem. This is a good thing.

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The companies of the 21st century must be much more vigilant in paying attention to all their stakeholders, not just their shareholders. This means awakening to the fact that employees are essential partners in business. Their agenda has to be honored if we ever hope for them to fully honor the agenda of the shareowners and the leadership.

We have an opportunity now to move even more quickly in this direction with the added momentum of the pandemic and the social justice movements that are sweeping across the globe. This means, among many other things, honoring employees need for flexible work, listening to their concerns about balancing the demands of parenting with the demands of work (even after the pandemic is over), and shifting focus to initiatives that support public health (a good example is the chairman & CEO of J&J, Alex Gorsky, leading the development of a vaccine for COVID-19). It also means standing up and vocally being counted on issues that affect society and that personally impact your employees, the most obvious one currently being racism against Black Americans and people of color both in the workplace and systemically in the world at large. If you do not resolve to be listening, to be working towards

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a “leadership that works” for the many, not just the few, and putting your money and behaviors where your mouth is, your colleagues, employees, customers, and friends who are personally harmed by racial inequity might correctly and understandably interpret your silence and inaction as “speaking volumes.”

We have to rise to the challenge. Business has been moving towards being a force for good in society prior to this moment but now the call is even more urgent and we can't rest on our laurels. We have to leverage the momentum to propel us in the right direction so we're in a stronger and more enlightened position to lead people through the inevitable future crises that lie ahead.

**You serve as chairman of Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (CECP) which is committed to creating a better world through business. What do you see as the role that CECP can play as business begins to transition into the next stage of this crisis?**

CECP was founded 20 years ago by Paul Newman, and a number of business luminaries, with the express purpose of encouraging companies to better serve society and be a force for good. We've been championing that notion faithfully and have watched it blossom to the point where we now have over 200 Fortune 500 CEOs who are personal members of our organization and who are leading the charge in their companies.

We see the power of it now as CECP is helping these companies reimagine better business practices post-COVID and as our CEO, Daryl Brewster, is explicitly supporting and encouraging companies to speak out about advancing anti-racist operating practices, more effectively furthering Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and putting money towards organizations that are on the frontlines of advancing social justice. There is a lot of room for improvement on all these fronts and we're proud to be partnering with companies to honor the societal agenda and engage in the hard work of doing better. CECP exists to be that partner with organizations to help them meet the needs of all their stakeholders during crises and afterwards.

And now we're moving beyond the corporate world. We are partnering with leading academic institutions and other thought leadership organizations who believe that leadership can and should be a force for good. This will add even more momentum to this movement as we evolve through this crisis and endeavor to show up even more responsibly for the next one.

**You are known to be an optimistic person. During this difficult and uncertain time, what are you telling your people and what would you say to young people across the country who are deeply concerned and scared about the future?**

We have to simultaneously be both idealistic and realistic. Optimism is important for leaders because people don't follow staunch pessimists. There is no inspiring vision for the future that is brought to the fore with pure pessimism. People need to believe in a way forward. That said, these battles we face will not be won with optimism alone; it's insufficient.

What is needed is “realistic optimism.” You have to acknowledge the gravity of the moment and respect the real dangers that are causing tangible harm, but also know and believe – and rally people around – the idea that we can and will get through it. As a country and as a global community, we have weathered many storms before. There is still a lot of work to do but we have consistently come out stronger and made steady incremental progress throughout history. We have to believe in progress and paint a picture of a brighter future that people can put their arms around and believe in. As a leader, show the way, do the work, say what's right, then DO what's right. That's how we model the behavior for the next generation of leaders.

The best place to start is by bringing a “How Can I Help?” attitude to any issue of import. At a time where help is badly needed, roll up your sleeves and simply begin helping.

How to start? Consider your “circle of concern,” your “circle of influence,” and your “circle of control.”

Our “circle of concern” has exploded. It can seem overwhelming. How to pierce through it, how to make an impact? The best way is to examine your “circle of influence” and see what action you can take within that circle of influence to make a change. Who can you help or influence – with your time, skills, money, expertise, or organizational resources – to take actions that move things forward? The choices we make and the actions we take are the things that lie within our “circle of control.” Use the things in your “circle of control” to make an impact in your “circle of influence” to see change reflected in your “circle of concern.”

The simple version is: Show up and help in a way that is possible for you. In the words of Arthur Ashe, “Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.” That's what will set the table for us to transition through this period and that's what leaders do. Leadership is the art and science of influencing others in a specific direction. Bringing a “helper's” mentality is a powerful tool of influence. ●

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