



A Port in the Storm

As a leader, you must be the port in the storm, particularly in times of crisis. Let me elaborate.

People crave resolution. We watch and read stories seeking a concrete close to events – an ending – something to mark that one season has concluded and a new one has begun. We organize our lives around these periods of renewal, closure, and transformation – quarterly reports, three-year plans, summer, winter, spring, fall. Goals and increments. Milestones. But as a year of complexity and turbulence draws to a close without much in the way of resolution, we are called to sit with the continued discomfort of a profoundly changing world.

COVID-19 has ravaged our ideas of certainty and revolutionized the world of work. The virus has spread chaos without any concern for the co-converging storms of social justice movements, political rancor, and a volatile economy, all of which exacerbated its impact on our lives in 2020. Now, it continues to disregard our very human desire for resolution – especially in this end-of-year period when we typically reflect on the 12 months behind us and draw conclusions that will buoy us for the 12 months ahead. This pandemic has challenged us to look forward and celebrate our humanity in the absence of the most human thing we crave: closure.

I choose to embrace this challenge because it underscores the truth of the matter – that this idea of a crisp and neat conclusion is a human fabrication altogether. We seek closure so badly because the reality is that it often eludes us in real life, pandemic or not. To lead people in this environment demands that we accept uncertainty as the constant, and that most of the time *we* are the variable. Leading people is all about showing up in the midst of uncertainty – again and again – showing up reliably in an unreliable world.

While part of accepting a world in flux means adapting to change with agility, pivoting and course correcting along the way, an equally important part of being an effective leader in times of crisis is learning how to be a force in opposition to uncertainty, something sturdy and solid; it means understanding that we must find virtues we can embody with steadiness, behaviors that do *not* change (no matter what swirls around us). If we can't give people closure, to lead effectively, we must give them consistency.

How > What

To be a stabilizing force in the new year of this extended crisis, I strongly encourage leaders to focus on managing the “how” more than the “what.” Mostly, we can't control the “what” – what happens around us and in the world. But we can control the “how” – how we respond, how we treat people, how we navigate the good times and the bad.

The best way to manage the “how” boils down to putting people first, repeatedly, no matter the crisis or climate. Create a reservoir of goodwill. Anchor all leadership behaviors in honoring others, treating them with civility, and respecting them as human beings. They should know what you expect of them, and what they can expect from you; they should be able to trust you; they should feel secure that you will treat them with dignity even as the storm clouds gather.

Here are seven simple tenets in service to a commitment to honoring people. Internalize them and act on them regularly, dependably, and people will learn to trust that you are managing the “how” to the very best of your ability.

1. As a leader, you must be simultaneously tough-minded on standards of performance *and* tender-hearted with people.
2. It is unrealistic for you to expect extraordinary effort and performance in an enduring way without creating an environment in which people feel extraordinarily valued.
3. “Thank you” does not go without saying. Express your thanks for contributions of significance earnestly and often.

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4. In leadership, particularly in a crisis, the “soft” stuff is the “hard” stuff. Often, EQ trumps IQ.
 5. Clarity is next to godliness. The more unclear the circumstances, the clearer your communication must be.
 6. Borrowing one from Stephen Covey, you should: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”
 7. Borrowing another one, from Conan O’Brien: “Work hard, be kind, and amazing things will happen.”

Observing these tenets is a way of showing thanks to the people with whom we live and work. It reminds us that the virtue we so often celebrate at the end of the year – gratitude – is active, not passive; more than a feeling, gratitude requires behaviors and action. It doesn’t happen by accident. It requires intention and discipline. The more we anchor our actions in honoring people, the more we prove our credibility amidst catastrophe, our reliability amidst volatility.

When people can’t count on closure (and they can’t), let them count on you. If you are intentional with your leadership, leveraging timeless leadership practices and forming habits around honoring people, you can become that beacon of solidarity and certainty people are seeking – the constant among the ceaseless variables – the port in the storm.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Douglas R. Conant". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Douglas R. Conant
Founder & Chief Executive Officer
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