

# Developing Leaders

An Interview with Douglas R. Conant, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, ConantLeadership

**EDITORS' NOTE** Doug Conant is the only former Fortune 500 CEO who is a New York Times and Wall Street Journal Best Selling Author, has been a Top 50 Leadership Innovator, a Top 15 Leadership Guru, a Top 100 Leadership Speaker, and twice named a Top 100 Most Influential Author in the World. He is the Founder of ConantLeadership ([conantleadership.com](http://conantleadership.com)), former President of the Nabisco Foods Company, former President and CEO of Campbell Soup Company, former Chairman of Avon Products, and has served on over 20 for-profit and not-for-profit boards. Conant is uniquely suited to reach leaders at every level, having himself experienced every rung of the corporate ladder: He began at the very bottom of the hierarchy, as an entry-level marketer, and over the course of his career, worked his way to the very top.



Douglas R. Conant

**You have been a business leader and have studied leadership for over four decades. What do you feel are the key issues leaders are facing today, and are these issues different from the past?**

I officially became a leader when I had my first person working for me directly in 1979, so I have been doing this for a while. One of my mentors, Warren Bennis, coined a term in 1987 to capture the state of the world, which he called a VUCA world – volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous. And that was before the internet. More recently, in 2018, Jamais Cascio, who is a cultural anthropologist, coined the term BANI to describe the current state of the world – brittle, anxious, nonlinear, incomprehensible. Basically, now it is a VUCA world on steroids.

The challenges today are different in that information is moving faster, new technology is transforming the world rapidly, and there is more diversity in the workforce. In my career, I had 56 bosses – 28 direct bosses and those 28 had another 28 direct bosses – and 55 of them were men. When I started my career, there were two kinds of leaders, broadly speaking – old white men and older white men – and there was a narrow way to operate in that environment. Today, diversity abounds across every demographic from age to race to gender, and it is a beautiful thing – ConantLeadership is

a women-majority workforce, but it contributes to the complexity.

I talk to people every day who feel as if a tsunami is washing over them: They're being asked to react to more and more, both professionally and personally, and it is overwhelming. I think the way to handle this is the same as when I first started my career, which is to be incredibly well anchored in what matters most to you. The conditions may change, but the principles are enduring. You need to develop your own personal identity as a leader, and you need to be true to that at all times. My work today is all about helping leaders find their bearings in an ever-increasingly complex world.

I also think it's important to remember, especially as AI becomes more ubiquitous, that leadership is all about the people. Data and information are the domain of machines. Relationships are the domain of humanity, and of leaders. And that is sacred. As the world changes, we need to double down on human-centric principles that work in the real world even as we adopt and incorporate new technologies.

**Is it possible to learn these traits and skills, or are they something a person is born with?**

The answer is somewhere in between. Of the thousands of leaders I have talked to over the years, it is interesting that they are all different. While they may share some common characteristics, they each have a unique story. In the bestselling book I wrote with Amy Federman, *The Blueprint*, we landed on the anchoring idea that your life story is your leadership story. When you peel everything away, leaders are heavily influenced by the life story they experienced before they became a leader.

My family founded Salem, Massachusetts. Jack Welch grew up in Salem, and we became friends. Later in life, as I got to know Jack, he was the same guy who grew up with a father who was a railroad conductor and lived in the blue-collar world of Salem which was a rough and tumble environment. Much of Jack's actions and behavior can be traced back to his upbringing.

This is something I see with all of the leaders I talk to – they may have some natural gifts that predispose them to the craft of leadership,

but like any craft, the real skill is developed through life experience and hard work. The way to become really good at something is to study and work hard at it. Being a great leader is about envisioning your path, getting anchored in your unique story and beliefs, leveraging your capabilities, studying and practicing, and then committing to continuous improvement.

**What was your vision for creating ConantLeadership and how do you define its mission?**

I retired from my CEO job in 2011, and promptly started ConantLeadership. Our mission is championing “leadership that works” in the 21st century and beyond. It is focused on helping leaders meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

When I was at Campbell Soup Company, I started the CEO Leadership Institute for high potential leaders, and it was obvious to me that what was missing was their own identity. They didn't know who they really wanted to be as a leader and were taking their cues from the boss. I didn't see any training and development work that adequately addressed this, and that is why I started ConantLeadership.

We work with all levels, from administrative assistants to the C-suite, since everyone needs to get well anchored in order to show up authentically. Anyone who has an appetite for learning and growing can find something enriching in our core offerings of Writing, Speaking, Teaching, and Serving. We offer a suite of resources, webinars, assessments, and leadership development programs that serve leaders across price points and experience levels. Most of our leadership content is free and accessible to all. It's important to me to be able to serve everyone; our mission is altruistic. I don't take a salary and if we have any money leftover after we've covered our overhead costs, we give it away to nonprofit organizations who are moving the world forward.

**How critical is authenticity when it comes to effective leadership?**

I have yet to see someone who has succeeded that was not highly authentic. It is not just about being authentic; the three things you need are high character, high competence, and then you have to work well with other people. Competence, Character, and Chemistry is the magic recipe. If you can do those three things within the context of your own authenticity, in my opinion you win.

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**How valuable is it to have mentors on one’s leadership journey?**

There is an impression that leading is a lonely job, but that is not true. In my career, I had plenty of mentors as well as peers to learn from. In *The Blueprint*, one of the most popular things we talk about is building your Entourage of Excellence. These are the people who have had a profound effect on you – it could be a parent, a teacher, a coach. When I think about the network I built early on in my career, some of these people are still in my network today. We still talk, and we help each other, which makes for a much richer life and doesn’t cost a penny. It is important to find mentors and to invest the time to build your Entourage of Excellence – and also to pay it forward by sharing your time, energy, and expertise with people who need it.

**What do you tell people about the need to build trust as a leader?**

It is mission critical. The best subtitle of any business book is from Stephen M. R. Covey’s book, *The Speed of Trust*. The subtitle is *The One Thing That Changes Everything*. You build trust with your team and anything is possible. When I started at Campbell Soup Company, it was a very low-trust environment. We were headquartered in one of the poorest and most dangerous cities in the United States, which was Camden, New Jersey; we were selling the same products we had been selling for over one hundred years, canned soup; and we had laid off an enormous amount of people. There was almost no trust. So when I showed up, the focus needed to be on building trust. People can tell if you are genuine and sincere, or if you are not. In my experience, building trust is the only way to create an enduring enterprise and lasting value.

A good place to start is by getting just one step closer to people than you have in the past. Be present with others and listen. Try to do just a little bit better tomorrow than you did today. The more you show up for the people you lead, the more they will show up for you.

**You mentioned *The Blueprint*. Will you elaborate on the key aspects it entails?**

*The Blueprint* is a roadmap for individuals to develop deeper self-knowledge

and learn to lead like only they can – because we believe your life story is your leadership story. Every leader is different and you don’t have to learn to lead like somebody else – although at times that can be instructive.

*The Blueprint* is designed to be both idealistic and realistic. It’s practical in that it is grounded in a small-steps, incremental approach to making big change. The motto is “forget perfection.” And it’s also aspirational in that it empowers leaders to make huge strides in a way that nests into their busy, chaotic lives.

The central metaphor comes from architecture: The taller the building an architect wants to construct, the deeper the foundation they must dig to support it. The same is true

in leadership: The higher your aspirations, the deeper you need to be anchored in your unique leadership foundation, which consists of your purpose, your beliefs, and your values. Through a series of carefully designed steps and prompts for reflection, *The Blueprint* helps leaders get grounded in who they are and how they want to show up. The process is designed to help people decide how they want to walk in the world – as individuals, and as leaders. It is about empowering the individual to have the courage of their convictions, be resilient, and lead people in a way that invites everybody along.

**What do you see as the success model for leaders?**

My own model for enduring success is that you need to win in the workplace first, which enables you to win in the marketplace, which allows you to win with the communities you are serving. This is a flywheel effect, and it is interesting that the more you help the community, the more your employees become engaged, and the more you win in the workplace. It is a beautiful thing to experience.

This is the model we created at Campbell Soup Company – we called it The Campbell Success Model. It was about winning with our people, winning in the marketplace, and winning in the community. Success is the trifecta.

At ConantLeadership, we’ve adapted and expanded this model into The ConantLeadership Flywheel which has the core tenets of “Honor People,” “Inspire Trust,” and “Clarify Higher Purpose” at the center. With these three components guiding our approach, we have behavioral north stars to measure our efforts against. And, because we champion a continuous improvement approach to leadership, the model may soon evolve to include an additional core tenet that explicitly honors the virtue of a “growth mindset.”

Overall, our model is a reminder of our values: We hold that leadership is about doing the right things, for the right reasons, with the right people, and then you get the right results. And no matter what, self-belief is mandatory. Regardless of your specific model for success, you have to truly believe that you can make a difference, and you will. ●

