



Douglas R. Conant

EDITORS' NOTE Douglas R. Conant is an internationally-renowned business leader, New York Times bestselling 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), a mission-driven community of leaders and learners who are championing leadership that works in the 21st century.

What was your vision for creating ConantLeadership?

Nobody's ever actually asked me that question. Although ConantLeadership wasn't founded until 2011, I've been doing the work that sits at the heart of ConantLeadership for almost 35 years, because it was 35 years ago that I had the traumatic experience of being unexpectedly fired. I went into the office one day and my job had been eliminated. We had just had our second son, I had a big mortgage, and I didn't know what I was going to do. I was devastated. They sent me to an outplacement counselor and when I called, he answered, "Hello, this is Neil MacKenna. How can I help?" Every time Neil answered the phone, he would answer the same way. This was before caller ID and cellphones. It could have been the plumber calling and he would have said, "Hello, this is Neil MacKenna, how can I help?" He was a gifted outplacement counselor and at that time in my life, I needed someone to mentor me through this transition.

Neil's helping orientation inspired me to lead with that same spirit of "How can I help?" From that point on, my leadership journey became all about trying to help people and organizations prosper.

When I retired from Campbell Soup, I started ConantLeadership with that same desire to help people grow and prosper in the modern age. This grew into our current day mission, which is to champion leadership that works in the 21st century.

A Fulfilling Journey

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

We designed it to be an altruistic mission where I don't get paid any salary. We charge for certain things to cover the cost of operations, but any money we make is donated to organizations that are championing the kind of enlightened leadership that can move the world forward.

How do you define the target market for ConantLeadership?

Our resources and leadership development programming are for all leaders who aspire to improve, to get unstuck, and to maximize their impact. The notion here is that all leaders can do better, but they need to find a way to do it that sits in the middle of their busy lives. Most people want to shoot the lights out but can barely find the time to turn the lights on. Leaders want to do better but they're overwhelmed.

I have many thoughtful friends who speak on this subject, but most are academics or thought leaders rather than seasoned leadership practitioners. They haven't walked a mile in your shoes. I've walked a thousand miles in the shoes of the leaders that I talk to and that gives me unique understanding and knowledge of their situation, which a lot of people who are writing about leadership just don't have. They have great ideas, but they haven't actually been down the road.

Is leadership something that can be taught or are you born with the skills to be a leader?

I don't buy this notion that leaders aren't made, they're born. I believe it's the opposite.

I believe you can have talent that you're born with, but then it's about what you do with that talent that defines your legacy. Those with large amounts of talent – innate or developed – must commit to a continuous improvement approach in order to keep their skills relevant and remain effective.

What interested you in writing your new book, *The Blueprint*, and what is the message of the book?

The book is designed for all leaders who want to do better but are beset by a deluge of competing priorities and pressures. It is particularly helpful to aspiring leaders who don't have the financial or time resources to do it on their own and need help. The book highlights 6 practical steps to lift your leadership to new heights, steps I codified from my decades of experience at every rung on the ladder, from entry level to the Fortune 500 C-Suite, CEO, and chairman ranks.

We have created small bite-size programs that you can iterate through very quickly and in a few weeks you can start changing. We have made it approachable through the eyes of somebody who's spent 40 years in meetings and answering phone calls with demands on their time from every quarter of the world, from family, friends, and work.

What interested me in writing *The Blueprint* is the powerful idea that your life story is your leadership story. To lead most effectively, you can't lead like somebody else; you have to learn to lead like only you can. To that end, I offer practical exercises and prompts for reflection to help readers unlock their unique leadership voice.

When you look at your career, were you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate the wins?

It's something I'm constantly working on. I love what I do. I believe that leading organizations is all about the people and helping people thrive in chaos is what I try to do. I am here to help and I can't think of a more fulfilling journey.

When I was a CEO people would say, "Look at all this money you're making" and would focus on the pomp, not the substance. Well, I'm still devoted to leadership now and I'm not doing it for the money. I am incredibly committed to this journey.

Ten years ago, I was involved in a near fatal car accident and it was a difficult, dark time. At that point I'd been a CEO for about eight years at Campbell Soup, and I remained CEO for another two years where I played through my injuries. After I started to recover from the accident, I went through a process of self-examination and realized how deeply I care about people. I decided that if I was ever able to get out of my bed and start functioning again, I was going to rededicate myself to following in Neil MacKenna's footsteps and saying, "How can I help?" I resolved to do it in a real-world way that helps people succeed in the here-and-now.

The silver lining out of that cloud was this ability to recommit myself emotionally to helping. Every day I'm hearing from somebody who I helped – some of them are executive assistants, some of them are friends, many of them are former students or colleagues of mine. I derive a lot of joy from that.

I can't think of a better way to pay forward all of my good fortune. ●

