

Leadership That Works

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

EDITORS' NOTE Douglas 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), 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.



Douglas R. Conant

When did your interest and passion for the study of leadership develop?

I have always been fascinated by people who excelled in their chosen fields. As a child, my focus was largely on sports figures and individuals who served our country. As I grew older, my portfolio of interests expanded to include world leaders and people who championed social advocacy. After I received my MBA from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in the mid-1970s, my interest in studying business leaders of all kinds exploded. It was then that I began to look beyond the “who” to develop perspective on the “why” and the “how.” This is where my study of leadership began to seriously take root, 50 years ago.

Finally, in the early 1980s, I lost my job and was out of work for a year. That specific crucible moment catapulted my interest in lifting my own leadership contribution profile. I wanted to understand what effective leadership looked like – and I’ve remained faithfully devoted to enhancing that understanding ever since. I believe that life is enriched by a “continuous improvement” mindset; I love learning about effective leadership and applying that learning to my own leadership journey in perpetuity.

How do you describe ConantLeadership’s mission and purpose?

Our mission at ConantLeadership is championing “leadership that works” in the 21st century, based on my 50 years of study and practice in the business community. Our mission is about making meaning – not money – and all of our profits after covering our operating costs are donated to enlightened organizations who are moving the world forward.

We believe “leadership that works” is more essential today than ever. People are overwhelmed and they need good stewards to get them through. So we provide a suite of resources and training designed to help busy leaders lift their game in a way that works for them.

My personal leadership purpose is designed to advance the ConantLeadership mission and is captured in the following statement: “I intend to help leaders find the joy, fulfillment, and impact of building high-

trust, high-performance teams that honor people, employ a growth mindset, defy the critics, and thrive in the face of adversity.” I endeavor to live this purpose every day, and I feel strongly that each leader must connect to their own leadership purpose in order to live a fulfilling life. To this end, we’ve developed a process for discovering and articulating your personal leadership purpose that I teach in my book, co-authored with Amy Federman, *The Blueprint: 6 Practical Steps to Lift Your Leadership to New Heights*, and as part of my signature leadership development program, The Blueprint Boot Camp by ConantLeadership, and in a new LinkedIn Learning course called “Finding Your Leadership Purpose with Doug Conant.” There’s a bit more to it, but a preview is that you only have to answer three essential questions to get started on the path to finding your purpose: 1. Why Do I Choose Leadership? 2. What Is My Promise? 3. What Are My Values?

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership?

There is an umbrella idea here which is: Leadership is all about the people. One of my signature pieces of leadership advice is – to win in the marketplace, you must first win in the workplace. Honor people and they will honor you and your agenda.

Then, under that umbrella, there are ten foundational tenets of “leadership that works” that we advance at ConantLeadership and in our book, *The Blueprint*. It’s not an exhaustive list, but it does capture the essentials. The 10 tenets are:

1. High Performance – Leaders must perform. There are three Cs of high performing teams: Competence, Character, and Chemistry. And then there are 3Qs of leadership intelligence which are IQ (Intellectual Intelligence), EQ (Emotional Intelligence), and FQ (Functional Intelligence).

2. Abundance – Leaders must advance an abundance mindset that rejects what Jim Collins calls “the tyranny of the ‘or,’” and embrace the “genius of the ‘and.’” You must be both tough-minded on standards and tender-hearted with people.

3. Inspire Trust – Stephen M.R. Covey says, “trust is the one thing that changes everything,” and it’s true. To inspire trust, leaders must honor all stakeholders, do what they say they are going to do, uphold high ethical standards, and model the behavior they expect from others.

4. Purpose – To succeed in our times, leaders must craft an aspirational “calling” that resonates with stakeholders and delivers economic and social value. A higher purpose guides your work and provides a reservoir of vitality that invigorates the effort. We offer many resources for articulating your purpose in our suite of resources and training.

5. Courage – Maya Angelou said, “Without courage we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can’t be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest.” Leaders must have the fortitude to display the courage of their convictions.

6. Integrity – Leaders must “Declare Themselves” so that constituents understand their beliefs and intentions. Then, leaders must match their behavior to their declarations. When you make mistakes, you should take responsibility swiftly, own the problem and the solution, and move forward.

7. “Grow or Die” Mindset – To succeed in an ever-changing world, leaders must be willing to champion a learning culture, to push for continuous improvement, to invest in growth, and to hire people who will challenge the current paradigm.

8. Humility – The best leaders are expert connectors and listeners. Humility is the virtue that binds these two competencies. It’s also essential to understand that you’re not always the smartest person in the room and to remain alert to the attitudes and insights of your associates.

9. How Can I Help? – When you learn to offer proactive support, rather than operating in a purely reactive mode, you can transform your organization. It’s amazing how something as small as the four little words, “How Can I Help?” can change the entire energy of your workplace.

10. Have Fun – If work and leadership are purely serious all the time, it will be a slog – for you and your employees. Learn to bring a love

and a vigor to the work, take care of yourself first – because you can't pour from an empty cup – and stay connected to your purpose.

Was the concept of philanthropy instilled in you early in life and how has your commitment to philanthropic work evolved?

In my youth, the concept of serving others was instilled at a high level. However, the more focused practice of philanthropy was not part of my upbringing. It grew on me over time. It started with my experience with the United Way and Junior Achievement in my first job at General Mills and grew from there. In the beginning, I was devoting my time and energy to those organizations. I had virtually no disposable income.

Today, both personally and professionally, I pay forward my good fortune by devoting my “time, talents, and treasure” to helping others. In that spirit, I attempt to live into the Arthur Ashe quote of “starting where I am, using what I have, and doing what I can.” A philanthropic spirit is central to my work; helping people is why I do what I do.

What do you feel are the keys to making an impact and achieving results in philanthropy?

For me, the challenge is to find a way to maximize my contribution profile in a way that optimizes the performance of the organization that I am supporting. Some organizations need my financial support more than my business and leadership experience or my sweat equity. Often, my business and leadership experience is helpful. On more than one occasion, I have had to “roll up my sleeves” and simply help get the work done. With every engagement, I am always looking to find the right formula for the effort. No two engagements are the same.

How do you decide where to focus your philanthropic efforts?

Through ConantLeadership, we focus on developing high-functioning, enlightened leaders who can impact others in a scalable way. Since 2011, we have had the opportunity to help develop hundreds of leaders in the for-profit, not-for-profit, and public service sectors. In turn, they are impacting hundreds of thousands of people throughout their value creation networks every day. The impact is exponential. Also, in service to our mission, I do not take a salary at ConantLeadership and whatever money we do make is donated to organizations selected by our team.

On a personal basis, our family foundation supports areas of personal interest to us in the arts, academics, and social services with a heavy focus on serving our local communities.

You serve as the chair of Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (CECP). What attracted you to CECP and how do you define its mission?

Our mission at CECP is “to create a better world through business.” In 1999, our nonprofit was founded by the actor and philanthropist, Paul Newman, along with several New York City business luminaries including, but not limited to, David Rockefeller, Peter Malkin, John Whitehead, Paul Volcker, and Michael Roth. In Paul's words,

the founding belief was that the corporate world can and must be a “Force for Good” in society – in a way that transcends having a singular focus on shareholder value. At CECP, we work with affiliate companies to help them create greater value for all stakeholders, including shareholders, communities, and society at large.

Over the past 25 years, we have grown into a movement of more than 200 of the world's largest companies that represent \$7.7 trillion in revenues, \$37.4 billion in total community investment, 14 million employees, 22.5 million hours of employee engagement, and \$21 trillion in assets under management. CECP helps companies transform their strategy by providing research, benchmarking, strategy, communications, and convening in the areas of societal and community investment, employee engagement, environmental and social governance, sustainable business, DEI, and telling the story.

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Prior to encountering CECP, I was searching for a community of CEOs who were championing a value creation formula that fully acknowledged the role of business in helping to build a better world. Then, as CEO of Campbell Soup Company, I discovered CECP, and it was like coming home. Collectively the members of CECP are learning from each other every day about how to make a net positive contribution to their people, the audiences they serve, the global economy, and our planet. And I believe their contributions will expand exponentially over time.

While much of philanthropy is focused on writing checks, you give your time, energy, and ideas to the causes you support. How important is it for your philanthropic activities to be more than just about donating money?

To be clear, “writing checks” matters enormously. However, I personally derive the most joy from devoting my time, energy, and talents to organizations that are making a material difference in the lives of the people they serve. At this stage in my life, I have a reservoir of

organizational leadership experience that, in many ways, is second to none. I enjoy volunteering my experience to organizations where I can add meaningful value.

Do the same qualities and traits that made you successful in business translate to being effective in philanthropy?

Largely, yes. The ten tenets of “leadership that works” apply in both business and philanthropy.

The challenge for me is to live the tenet of “abundance” – to find the right balance between being tough-minded on standards of performance and being tender-hearted with people. In philanthropy, it is easy to be seduced by the emotion of the cause at the expense of being sufficiently tough-minded on the standards of performance. In the long run, the performance standards must be met for the enterprise to endure, and the emotion of the moment must be put, at least momentarily, in the parking lot.

What does success mean to you?

I need to look myself in the mirror every day and be able to say that I am living my purpose with students, mentees, and colleagues. Again, my purpose is: “To help leaders find the joy, fulfillment, and impact of building high-trust, high-performance teams that honor people, employ a growth mindset, defy the critics, and thrive in the face of adversity.” Success is being able to live and lead in alignment with my purpose every day.

When you think of legacy, is the impact that you have made in countless lives through your philanthropic work what means the most to you?

My legacy is closely tied to the lives of the people with whom I work. I try to enrich each of their lives in some small way. Years ago, when I lost my job with General Mills, my outplacement counselor, Neil McKenna, had a profound influence on me. Every time he answered the phone, he would say, “Hello, this is Neil McKenna, how can I help?” Neil endeavored to be helpful every moment of every day with everyone. I hope my legacy of contribution can begin to approach that standard. And I capture the importance of Neil's “How Can I Help?” message in my ten tenets of effective leadership.

You are known to always be looking at what is next and to focus on the future. Are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to reflect on your accomplishments?

I do tend to live in the future, always thinking about what's next, and it can get in the way of my ability to fully enjoy the present. However, I have a mental tool that helps me become what I call a “leadership time traveler,” because it transports me across three key “time zones”: the Past, the Present, and the Future. It's a checklist of short questions I ask myself when wrestling with a course of action:

- Am I learning from and honoring the past?
- Am I meeting the expectations of the present in a quality way?
- Am I creating a clear and tangible path for a more prosperous future?

Try it – you might find “leadership time travel” suits you too. ●