



"An essential book on leadership." —**DANIEL PINK**

**GET UNSTUCK**

# THE **BLUEPRINT**

6 Practical Steps to Lift  
Your Leadership to New Heights

**DOUGLAS CONANT** with **AMY FEDERMAN**  
*New York Times* Bestselling Author

Foreword by **STEPHEN M.R. COVEY**

**WILEY**



*“Doug Conant has long been one of America’s most effective and enlightened leaders. And now he has written an essential book on leadership. Unlike many books in this genre, his is not a collection of wispy platitudes – but an eminently smart and practical guide for building a foundation for your entire professional life. If you’re hungering to become a better leader, The Blueprint belongs on your shelf and by your side.”*

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*“Doug Conant is a special breed: a hard-edged corporate CEO with an introspective nature who attributes his success to reflection, study, and thoughtful inner work rather than birthright or bombast. In The Blueprint he offers a powerful – and approachable – process for more fully connecting with the unique gifts that will allow your special leadership voice to come alive and impact the world.”*

—Susan Cain, bestselling author of *Quiet*

*“Doug Conant hasn't just been a highly successful leader – he's an unusually thoughtful one. In this hands-on book, he shares a model that you can apply right away to elevate your impact.”*

—Adam Grant, *New York Times* bestselling author  
of *Originals* and *Give and Take*, and host of the TED  
podcast *WorkLife*

*“Today's busy leaders often question how they can lift their leadership profile while staying true to themselves. Read The Blueprint for answers.”*

—Indra Nooyi, former chairman  
and CEO, PepsiCo

# THE **BLUEPRINT**

6 Practical Steps to Lift  
Your Leadership to New Heights

**DOUGLAS R. CONANT**

with AMY FEDERMAN

WILEY

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*We dedicate this book to the leaders of yesterday who have inspired us and to the leaders of tomorrow in hopes that they will honorably lift the craft of leadership to new heights of service, performance, and contribution.*





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# Foreword

It's a privilege to introduce you to this book, and, of equal importance, to Doug Conant. He's remarkable – and so is this work. Let me tell you about both.

## The Man

When I was in school, my father, Dr. Stephen R. Covey, often said to me, “You don't take classes, you take teachers.” That insight has proven helpful to me in both my education and my career. The reality is that those of us who work in organizations don't report to the organization; we report to a person. Thus, our pairing with a leader or mentor, like a teacher, can be transformative.

In *The Blueprint*, you will find a transformative opportunity with Doug Conant. As you study and apply the principles he teaches, you will come to feel that he not only knows and understands the practical leadership process he's guiding you through, but that he also knows and understands *you*. He's lived this process himself. He's paid the price to earn the profound insights he shares. And he knows firsthand how to guide people in their own personal discovery and creative process.

In an intense, chaotic world, Doug has pondered deeply, reflecting on his past experiences, choices, and perspectives – on his life story, which has become his leadership story. Plumbing his own personality, character, passions, and skills to identify and improve his own *personal* leadership has enabled him to offer superb *people* leadership. And, most importantly, he’s developed an actionable process to help each of us do the same.

Consistent with Doug’s belief that leadership is personal, he is remarkably personal in this book. His courageous sharing of being fired ten years into his corporate career and his subsequent renaissance is truly inspiring. What he learned from his near-fatal automobile accident will likely cause you to reflect on why he was spared – and on what work, what contribution, may yet lie ahead for you.

You’ll read how, as president of Nabisco Foods and CEO of Campbell Soup Company, Doug demonstrated his leadership acumen by achieving exceptional business results while simultaneously building high-trust teams. Yet what distinguishes him most as a trusted voice on leadership is not just his ability to lead people and deliver performance – it’s how he balances action with *reflection*.

## The Book

There is a story about the famous Italian artist Michelangelo that illustrates why I love *The Blueprint*. According to the story, Michelangelo was asked how he crafted his masterpiece statue *David*, an artwork celebrated as a virtuoso representation of the human body. He replied, “Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.” At the

core, Michelangelo “discovered” the statue of David by simply removing everything that wasn’t David.

If you follow the practical process for reflection outlined in *The Blueprint*, you’ll do the same thing. You’ll take your own leadership journey to *reflect*, to discover what’s at your core, revealing a virtuoso representation of *your* leadership. Just as Doug commenced a journey of discovery after getting fired, giving up beliefs and behaviors that weren’t part of him to become the person that was “within the stone,” so too will you follow the same path.

In a real sense, leadership is the highest of all the arts because it enables every other art. You may not have the talent to craft a visual masterpiece like Michelangelo did, but you do have the ability to strengthen your competence and character to create your own masterpiece in your organization, your community, your family, or the world. Ultimately, this inside-out approach will show you, as Doug writes in this book, that “the only way out is in.”

That’s why Doug is a natural guide for this journey: because he knows that leadership is more than a title or position; it is a *craft* to be mastered – a craft of beauty, design, and adherence to enduring principles.

## The Work

The work of personal leadership – of excavating the inner person from the stone of learned responses and others’ expectations – is work indeed. Inner work. And it isn’t just for those who want to lead people and teams; it’s for all who want to lead a life of meaning, purpose, and contribution and merit the trust of others. This is work that only you can do. As Doug puts it, “There’s only one you.”

By diligently following Doug's process, you can craft *your* unique leadership foundation, developing an approach that will guide you far more effectively than one you might learn about in a book or a workshop.

Doug is the right teacher for this work because he makes it clear that while you'll be following his map, this is *your* journey, *your* masterpiece. Only you can bring it to life.

## A Parting Thought about "Blueprints"

As the oldest son of my parents, I feel a keen sense of responsibility to continue the work my parents and ancestors performed in "gathering" a large and diverse posterity. My parents' nine married children have over 50 children among them, and the next generation continues to grow.

Seven years ago today, my father passed away, and as my parents' home has already been pledged to charity when my mother no longer lives there, my wife, Jeri, and I started discussing where the large Covey family could gather in the future.

In the end, we felt moved to remodel our own home, not just to have a bigger house, but to provide a gathering place. We did the inner work to identify *why* we wanted a larger home and all of its attendant responsibilities. We had blueprints created by an architect, hired a builder, and lived through all of the inconvenience and hard work of a remodel expansion. The blueprint for the remodeling wasn't just about where to build walls and add windows; it began in the work we did as a family to identify *why* we wanted the space and what we would do with it.

We're very grateful for the outcome. We now call our home "Oahu," which is Hawaiian for "the gathering place." It

serves as a convergence point – not only for our extended family, but also for our children’s sports teams, community events, musical soirees, and other neighborhood and church activities. It brings to life our dreams as a family because the *purpose* work preceded the *physical* work. This is the same kind of leadership work you will be invited to do as you move through this book to bring to life your dreams as a leader.

Today, we live in a world that is overmanaged and underled. Our society *needs* you to lead. The tough problems we face can best – perhaps only – be solved by wise, principled leaders built on solid foundations.

Are you ready to begin? Doug, anchored by the spirit of “How can I help?” is ready to teach you. I can give no higher recommendation than to say that you can trust Doug as an expert guide to help you create your own distinctive leadership approach. I trust him. In fact, when I was asked in a recent media interview to name the best leader I know, I unhesitatingly replied, “Doug Conant.” There is no other leader who has more effectively balanced enduring organizational performance with a passionate caring for people.

So, following the advice of my father, take Doug as your teacher now. Absorb and implement the process in this book. I’m confident you will be grateful for the time you invest as you discover, create, and refine your own unique leadership voice – and for the legacy that will follow.

Stephen M. R. Covey  
Bestselling author of *The Speed of Trust*  
July 16, 2019





## Authors' Note

We have written this book with the intention of helping leaders from every generation discover their true, unique leadership voice and to help them bring that voice to life in the workplace with ever-increasing clarity, authenticity, and effectiveness.

We are clear-eyed about the reality of the day. We know that today's leaders have varying styles and temperaments. However, we believe that the spirit of *The Blueprint* represents the best path forward for leaders who aspire to have a fulfilling and enduring impact on their leadership journey.

To that end, we have formed a unique partnership. The content of this partnership is built around Doug's 45 years of leadership experience and study. It is then codified and written with the insightful help of Amy, a "30-something" writer and Director of Content at ConantLeadership, who has endeavored to make the topic fresh and approachable to next-generation leaders.

We think this approach works. We bet you will too.



# Introduction

## *The Raw Materials of Change Are Already within You*

*“Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.”*

—**Arthur Ashe**, American tennis player

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**“Your job has been eliminated. Clear out your desk by noon.”**

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Those were the words that changed my life. In the spring of 1984, when I was 32 years old, I drove to my job as the director of marketing for the Parker Brothers Toy & Game Company in Beverly, Massachusetts. I can remember the commute vividly. The salty sea air wafting off Boston’s North Shore filled my senses. A snap of wintry briskness lingered in the air but there was a whisper of warmer weather to come. It was a beautiful day, serene and promising. I felt good. Sure, our company had recently changed ownership, and things had been chaotic, but I was still confident in my ability to contribute. I walked into my job that day energized, expecting to put in another honest day’s work moving things forward for the organization.

When I arrived, I was asked to report directly to the office of the VP of marketing, who was fidgeting nervously and waiting for me outside his door. Gravely, he asked me to step into his office. He was having trouble looking at me, his eyes darting around at everything else in the room – landing on inanimate objects like his stapler, the doorknob, his chair – anything but me. Despite his strange temperament, I had no idea what was coming. Once we were both settled in his office, he fired me immediately, and with barely an explanation.

I couldn't understand it; there had been no warning whatsoever. All he could muster as a reason for letting me go was that my job had been "eliminated" and I was too blindsided to choke out any follow-up questions. Gesturing toward the door, he asked me to clear out my desk and go, ushering me out of his office as quickly as possible.

Although it would have monumental impact on my life for years thereafter, the whole miserable conversation came and went in manner of minutes. It was crushing. In a daze, as I made my way toward my desk, a storm of feelings converged inside me: I was stunned, hurt, indignant, angry, and most of all, humiliated. How could this be happening to me? And, worse, how did I not see it coming?

As I gathered my things and left the building, my feelings gave way to an even heavier sensation of dread as I realized I would have to deliver this disastrous news to my wife. How I would break it to her? We had young children and a hefty mortgage; everyone was relying on me. What was I going to do?

As I drove home, my self-esteem was in freefall. The drive that had felt so full of promise hours earlier now had the feel of a funeral procession. The refreshing spring sea air that had

wafted through my window before now felt thick and stagnant. Without a doubt, it was the most awful day in my entire career. And in the wake of it, I felt hopeless and stuck. This wasn't how I envisioned my journey; as a dedicated and committed professional, I had always hoped for more. Now, all I felt was uncertainty.

But as you'll learn, this defeating experience turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me; it was the *beginning* of my leadership story, not the end. It was in this crucible moment, after this abrupt and devastating firing, that I first began to consider what might be holding me back from realizing my potential, fulfilling my dreams, and making a bigger impact on the world around me. It was the first step toward total reinvention.

## Ups and Downs

People are often surprised when I tell them this story. Since that harrowing time when I was fired, I've been blessed with much success on my leadership journey. I'm fortunate to have become well-known (at least in the business world) as a president, Fortune 300 CEO, and chairman. I've served as president of Nabisco Foods, president and CEO of Campbell Soup Company, and chairman of Avon Products. I've had the joy of starting my own company and the privilege of serving as a board member for many others, in the public, the nonprofit, and the academic sectors. It's been an honor. When I tell people that I once got fired and struggled to find my footing, they often admit they had assumed that my success story was smooth and seamless. But of course it wasn't. As is so often the case, my journey could have easily turned out very differently.

My career got off to a floundering start. I began at the very bottom of the ladder as an entry-level marketing assistant at General Mills. It was my first experience working in a corporate office environment and I was out of my depth. I certainly didn't look the part: On my first day, I walked into the corporate offices in a tacky khaki suit and long, wild, curly hair. Everyone else was clean-cut. I didn't act the part quite right either; I was shy and hesitant, not comfortable in my own skin. Struggling to find my footing, I worked hard but delivered lackluster results at first. Early in that role, in my first performance review, my most senior manager only wrote six words: "You should look for another job." It was tough feedback to receive so early in my career and I was discouraged.

But I persevered. With encouragement and support from my direct manager, eventually I was promoted, and I made a predictable ascent to better jobs with more responsibilities. Although I wasn't very flashy, outgoing, or even remarkable, I was always committed to working hard, putting my best foot forward, and helping those around me, so I managed to make some progress.

## Back to Square One

Then I faced the *big* setback, the crippling one: I got fired.

When I got home on that fateful day, I felt bitter and hopeless. I'll never forget walking through my front door to face my family, feeling defeated. Usually an agreeable guy, I felt an uncharacteristic anger rising inside me. My calm demeanor was riled so much that when the HR manager called me later that day to follow up on my exit package and transition details, I cursed and hung up on him mid-sentence, slamming the phone down in frustration.

The worst part was that I felt like a victim. I didn't have a sense of agency or control over my life. And I went down a dangerous road of self-pity. It seemed like my entire career had been flushed down the toilet. All my hard work, all that striving, all my quiet adherence to rules and expectations, behaving how I thought I was supposed to – what had it amounted to? I didn't know how to deal with the large mortgage payments looming, or how to overcome the shy temperament that had kept me removed from the world around me. I was stuck.

## The Question

The more I thought about it, the less I understood it. Why weren't my efforts yielding the career I envisioned? Why was I experiencing these setbacks? Even though I'd had modest success in my career, something was always holding me back from achieving a breakthrough, from being the leader I believed I could be. *But what?*

It wasn't that I lacked ambition or work ethic; I had always kept my head down, worked hard, and done exactly what I thought I was supposed to do. It wasn't that I lacked a competitive drive; the grit that had carried me to success as a Division 1 collegiate tennis player still burned within me. It wasn't that I wasn't competent; I'd always shown a proficiency for the work I was given. And it certainly wasn't that I didn't have strong values. Family, faith, and a commitment to community and public service were deeply ingrained in my personhood, instilled in me since childhood.

I had a lot going for me. But there was a glaring problem: I hadn't figured out how to translate all of these characteristics into a winning formula for success. I hadn't yet learned how

to leverage the parts of my personality, motivations, temperament, and beliefs that were uniquely *mine* and transform them into a foundation for limitless possibility and greater impact. What's more, nobody at the time would have ever known any of these defining things about me; always playing it safe, I mostly kept to myself. I had no approach for reflecting on my inner self or communicating to others what mattered to me. But all of that, luckily, was about to change.

## A Game-Changing Lesson

At this rock-bottom point in my life, I knew I wanted to stop merely going along to get along. I wanted more. I yearned to love my work, to be really good at it, and to feel fulfilled by the difference I was making in the world. But, like so many of the leaders I speak to every day, I didn't know how to do it. Amid the competing pressures of my life and job search, I had no idea where to look, or how to start. I felt like my life was happening to me, not like I had influence over it; I wanted to be the driver of my circumstances, not a mere passenger along for the ride.

What I know now that I didn't know then is you can start where you are, with what you have within you. And you can start small. **You already have the raw materials to change your leadership life.**

But I didn't learn that lesson on my own. I had help. My best clue as to how to elevate my leadership came from a straight-shooting outplacement counselor named Neil Mackenna, who was hired to support me after I got fired.

Fortunately, I had swallowed my pride and called the HR manager back (yes, the same person I had cursed at and hung up on). Thank goodness I made that call because the HR manager connected me with Neil, and meeting Neil changed my life.



Neil was a gruff straight-shooter with a hearty New England temperament. He didn't suffer whining, BS, or a victim-y "poor me" attitude. Not for a second. I could tell he cared about me and genuinely wanted to help, but he was a tough guy. Which is why I was surprised when, in our second meeting, Neil asked me to handwrite my life story and share it with him. That seemed like a strangely intimate request from such a gristly man. But he insisted. He didn't care how long it took; he wanted every detail I could remember. I was dubious – but I was desperate to find a job, and he said this could help, so I got cracking on the task of cobbling together my autobiography.

Before this assignment from Neil, I had never taken the time to think that carefully about my life experiences. Most people haven't. It felt uncomfortable but I took it seriously. I wrote about growing up in the suburbs of Chicago with my three younger brothers, my unrelenting competitive drive as a tennis player, the values of service, grit, and industriousness my family had instilled in me, the forthright nature I admired in my mother, the unconditional love and support of my wife and children, the inspiring role models we had in both of our families, my admiration for Teddy Roosevelt, my love of Louis L'Amour Western stories, my passion for learning about exceptional people in sports and public life, and on and on. Everything and anything I could think of, I included. Then I handed it off to Neil, confused that anybody would even be interested in reading such an account.

## **Straight Talk**

Two weeks later, Neil had read the entire document cover to cover. And he had drawn some harsh conclusions. Bluntly, he told me that one of the main reasons I wasn't living up to my

potential was that I was *lying* to people; I wasn't telling them who I really was. "I looked at what you wrote down. And it just doesn't match up," he said in his typically brusque manner. I bristled at the accusation at first. "I'm no liar," I said.

Gesturing at the pages I'd written, he explained, "The person who wrote *this* life story is a fierce do-or-die competitor. It's the opposite of the face you're presenting to your colleagues. What you're showing to the world is a modest guy who goes with the flow. But the Doug who wrote *this* story is a leader and a fighter." Incredulous, he said, "The person who wrote this life story, and the person you're showing to the world – these are two completely different people!"

Everything started to click. I wasn't forging connections with people because they were never really meeting the real me. I had been hiding without even realizing it. Why? **Because I had no foundation in my true self.** I'd never done the self-exploration necessary to connect with what makes me, me. And, like so many leaders today, I had never been exposed to a usable process for getting to the bottom of it.

With a challenging job hunt ahead of me, Neil warned, "You're going to interview terribly because you're not honest with people about who you really are. They're not ever meeting the *real* you." It was hard to hear but I realized he was right. I wasn't showing up in an authentic way, not in *any* of my pursuits. How would anybody know about my fierce resolve, my tenacious spirit, my desire to contribute? I didn't tell them. And I didn't show them. I kept a low profile, staying mostly sequestered in my office where I did my work. I made halfhearted plans to try to find a way to do things differently. But, inevitably, because I did not know where to begin and felt swamped with my work, those plans had always remained unrealized.

All this time, I had been looking outward for answers, blaming my setbacks on a complex world, on uncharitable bosses, on external factors altogether. But this dose of eye-opening tough talk changed me. I began to understand that to make a change, I couldn't just try harder, I had to try *differently*, to *do* something different. Maybe the secret to raising my impact wasn't somewhere *out there*. Maybe it had been within me the whole time. And it was up to me to transform it into a platform for reaching my goals and connecting more fully with the people with whom I lived and worked.

I couldn't just sit back anymore and wait for things to change. If I wanted to realize my full potential, it was going to require some work.

Determined, and true to my roots as a competitive athlete, I devoted myself to learning everything I could about leadership. I became obsessed. I read every book I could find. I practiced endlessly. I committed myself to the pursuit of leadership excellence, consulting mentors, friends, and experts. And eventually, over a 45-year career that would carry me to unforeseen adventures, setbacks, and triumphs I never imagined, I developed and honed the life-changing six steps, now simply called *The Blueprint*, that would change the entire arc of my career and lift my leadership to new heights.

## Paying It forward

My path to leadership success was bumpy, slow at the start, and riddled with setbacks. It took me a long time to figure out a practical approach to reaching my potential. I don't want you to have to go through the same thing.

Today's leaders don't have the time to figure it out on their own. The pace of life has accelerated rapidly; technology has ushered in a tacit expectation that we be "on" and reachable 100% of the time. The number of texts and emails we receive has tripled in recent years. Expectations are higher. Companies want more, better, faster. That's why it's now my mission to share *The Blueprint* with you, so you don't have to go through what I went through to figure out how to lift your leadership to new heights.

The leaders I talk to, coach, train, and mentor every day – they need help! They want to do more, to dream bigger, to become the leaders they know they can be. But they're busy and stressed and they don't know where to look for a road-tested way to do better. I've done the hardest part so leaders – both seasoned and aspiring – don't have to muddle through figuring it out on their own anymore.

While this book is years in the making, you can start putting it to work for you *today*. Following the same exact six steps I took to change my leadership life, you too can fulfill your potential and deliver ever-improving results in a demanding, confusing, and time-starved world – and actually enjoy yourself along the way.

## **Built Especially for YOU**

The most important thing about *The Blueprint* is that it is all about you. You shouldn't have to learn to lead like somebody else. These steps teach you about yourself, and help you build a customized framework for reaching your goals, in a way that works uniquely for you, with your own leadership voice and style. All you have to do is follow the practical steps in earnest. Each step is small and manageable; nothing in *The Blueprint* ever has to be "perfect" or "complete." Because that's not the way life works.

## The Catch

There is one small catch: you must enter into this journey understanding that it is ongoing. While you'll be making measurable progress right out of the gate, noticing changes, and achieving goals, you won't ever truly be "finished." Once you embark on this journey, it never ends.

Although the steps are numbered, the Blueprint is not linear. Its power is derived from the fact that it is cyclical by design. It's iterative, designed to fit into the cadence and pace of your life. Because the tempo of modern life has accelerated, this change process nests harmoniously within the complex structure of the life you are leading today. It's comprised of small steps that you can start, revisit, and revise whenever it suits you. You can begin exactly where you are with exactly what you have right now and you'll keep improving it whenever you want, at your own speed. The process is ongoing. You begin where you end. And you end where you begin, getting better each and every time.

After you've worked through the six steps once, you'll be ready to work through them again and again throughout your lifetime, continuously honing, improving, and reaching higher. You'll find it will become second nature to progress through the steps, and it will go more quickly each time around. It's simple – but not easy. Hard work – but well worth it. Aspirational – but also approachable. Let's go!

## About This Book

There are two primary parts to this book that will help you design, and build, your own customized path to fulfilling your infinite potential. With this book as your guide, you can get

short-term results by applying the practical advice herein on Monday morning *and* use the six-step Blueprint to develop a strategy for reaching your most ambitious, shoot-for-the-stars goals in the long-term.

You'll also learn how to marry your own insights and expectations about your personal leadership with the expectations of your organization. Becoming a better leader won't be particularly helpful if you can't apply your improved approach in the real world so, while the steps are designed to empower your personal leadership journey, they are also created with a view toward helping you integrate your learning in the workplace to deliver more powerful results for your organization. Taken as a whole, this book can help you to get unstuck, maximize your impact, and yes, even change your leadership life.

## Part I: Blueprint

In **Part I: Blueprint**, I'll guide you through the practical six-step process of self-reflection and study that I used to build the **Foundation** for my own leadership success. It's not an academic or scientific process; it's based on my lived and learned experiences. Unlike many professors, gurus, or thought leaders in the leadership space, I offer a change process based on real experience climbing the corporate ladder – starting at the very bottom and ending at the very top. It is further strengthened by my lifetime of study and years of teaching leadership to hundreds of managers and executives.

In Part I, you'll learn how to use small steps to meet big goals. You'll learn why you must dig deep to reach high and why building a solid Foundation is the most powerful thing you can do to achieve leadership success. In each of the six steps, there are exercises and prompts for reflection. I'll guide you through the