Leading Through Tough Times

LED BY:

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Leaders must recognise the accelerating pace of change and the increasing complexity of today's environment. The VUCA world of the 1980s has evolved into what we now call BANI: brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible. In this context, building and sustaining differentiated strategies rooted in your core capabilities is more critical than ever.

Leaders in a new position have 3 years to get traction:

- **Year 1**: You inherit your predecessor's work and do the best you can with what you have.
- **Year 2**: You start to gain traction and see the green shoots of opportunity.
- **Year 3**: You own it. You're accountable, and people expect results.

These stages are as relevant today as they were 50 years ago, though the challenges are greater in a BANI world. To help you reach peak performance within three years, frame your goals around the Tuckman Model of team development:

1. **Forming:** Build your teams
2. **Storming:** Work through issues
3. **Norming:** Establish behavioural norms
4. **Performing:** Deliver results

"Companies are remarkably resilient, and they figure it out."
- Doug Conant

CASE STUDY

Be the talent leader

During his time at Nabisco, Doug recognized that one of the reasons the turnaround took longer than expected was that the company heavily relied on search firms to find top talent. He felt he needed to get more deeply engaged in the search process. He started a practice of meeting two people a month from any field related to consumer products.

He had a search person on retainer who identified high-performing individuals around the world. Doug met them for a meal or drink when he was traveling, even if no role were available. He wanted to understand if they would be suitable for his teams should an opportunity arise.

He met roughly 25 people over 20 years, and attributes his success as CEO of Campbell largely to his deep knowledge of the talent base available in the industry.

01 FORMING: Build teams that thrive

You cannot solve today's challenges alone. Your success depends on the three to five people working closely with you. The role of leadership is to empower, support, and grow them.

“I always found that if I had a very capable team, my job was a lot easier.”

- Doug Conant

Identify talent early

If you want strong performance within three years, form your team fast. They need time to get their hands dirty and figure out how to work together.

“Recruit talent before you need it.”

- Doug Conant

Know what good talent looks like in advance. Don't wait until you're under pressure to fill a critical role. If you rely on recruitment firms only when it's urgent, you're already behind.

Evaluate for character, competence, and chemistry

Ensure that you have competence, character, and chemistry among your top leaders.

- **Character:** They must do what they say they are going to do.
- **Competence:** They must know what they are doing.
- **Chemistry:** They must play well together.

CASE STUDY

Leverage internal experts

To find the balance between inside-out and outside-in thinking, the CEO of Kraft Foods set up STAR projects.

He gave divisions the chance to call upon the best and brightest people within the company, wherever they were in the world, to form a STAR group and create a plan for the division.

It sparked fresh thinking and dialogue among people already intimately familiar with the company, and then handed over to the division team to take ownership of the plan.

“Create the right team with the right character, competence and chemistry and your job will be doable. If you don't, it's at risk.”

- Doug Conant

Trust is the currency of progress, and trust comes from both competence and character. It's not enough to be a good person, you also have to know what you're doing and show confidence in facing challenges. People must believe you have the skill and the integrity to lead them well.

Align new thinking to established values

Outside thinking is vital, especially when old paradigms start to dominate. But new talent must connect naturally with the values of your organization. That means you need clarity on what those values are before bringing in new leaders.

“Can we get people who are competent in their fields of endeavor but have shared values that fit within our organization?”

- Doug Conant

Change is easier to manage when new voices bring expertise and fresh ideas, but already align with what matters most to your company. Some CEOs attempt to redefine values entirely when they assume a new role, but this approach rarely succeeds. Values have history and meaning. You can evolve them, but you have to honour what came before.

CASE STUDY

Look after people

Doug was responsible for moving two operating units from North Carolina to New Jersey, a highly unpopular change within the North Carolina operation. Everyone in the company was watching the leadership to know how much they truly cared about the workforce.

Anxiety was at an all-time high, and Doug knew that they had to strengthen the value proposition if they hoped to have an effective transition.

The company established an outplacement center and committed to keeping it open until everyone had secured a new job or successfully relocated to New Jersey.

Counter anxiety with value

Anxiety in the workplace is higher than ever, whether due to AI, restructuring, or constant change. In this climate, your employee value proposition must rise to meet it.

People are sustained by earnings but driven by legacy. At heart, they want to transform themselves, their company, their customers, or their surroundings. Allow them to transform while delivering on the company's performance. Give people the sense of doing something extraordinary.

"Your people need to feel more valued today because they're more anxious than ever before, but they also have to feel challenged."

\- Doug Conant

Yes, the business has to deliver results. But people also want their work to be meaningful. Even if someone's future lies beyond your company, ask how you're helping them get there.

The employee value proposition begins with the CEO's level of maturity. Set high standards, but lead with empathy. If people don't believe you care about them, they won't care about your goals.

02 STORMING: Balance long-term vision with short-term permission

Friction is expected and necessary. It marks the moment when difficult conversations must happen to turn intent into action. It's when teams debate, clarify, and align on how the work will get done. Without storming through these issues, your strategy will remain stuck on paper.

Don't rush the 3-year process

The path to sustainable performance doesn't speed up just because the world is moving faster. Three years is still the right time frame to embed change. It's what lets you transform culture, drive performance, and lead well beyond a single business cycle.

"We all run large, complex organizations. Nobody's going to do it overnight. And if they do, it's a high-risk proposition and probably not sustainable."

- Doug Conant

That doesn't mean you wait to start. You must hit the ground running in year one, show visible progress by year two, and take full ownership by year three.

Every organization behaves its way into its current state. But as Stephen Covey said, "You can't talk your way out of something you behaved your way into." Behavior shifts take time

"Take care of the task at hand in a way that you can look at the workforce you're building and say, 'I can sustain this next year.' Because if you don't, there won't be a next year."

- Doug Conant

03 NORMING: Turn short-term wins into long-term brilliance

Define the norms that guide how strategy gets executed. As new habits take root, trust grows, and accountability becomes shared. Your role is to reinforce what works and help the team translate early wins into a consistent model for success.

Build momentum with quarterly wins

Break your three-year plan into 12 quarters. Each one is a stepping stone toward long-term success. Delivering in the short term earns the right to keep going. Small wins add up to strategic transformation.

Build a culture that values both discipline and adaptability. Stay focused on the long term while being responsive to change. What matters is delivering quarter by quarter without losing sight of your broader vision.

Let teams own the strategy

People support what they help create. A strategy that is handed down from the top rarely gets owned at the front line. Let teams challenge, refine, and shape the plan with you.

"Data and information are the domain of AI. Leadership is the domain of people."

- Doug Conant

Create clarity around strategic priorities, then give people the freedom to figure out how to deliver. It's their plan now. Your role is to ensure it aligns with the company's direction and is executed with consistency.

"If my team couldn't own the plan, then we had the wrong plan."

- Doug Conant

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