



MIXING WOMEN INTO THE SOUP

How Campbell's former CEO Doug Conant put female leadership on the front burner.

BY STACEY CLOSSER

It began with a simple phrase, “We can do better.”

When Doug Conant — Chairman, Avon Products; Founder, Conant Leadership; and Chairman of the Kellogg Executive Leadership Institute — became CEO of the Campbell Soup Company in January 2001, he was charged with reinvigorating

the culture of a 132-year-old company while steering the organization to solid financial footing, just one year after it lost half of its market value.

Conant's experience with Campbell's formed the business strategies he teaches and speaks about today — get the right people in the right leadership positions to create, execute, and evolve a winning strategy.

Research has established that the leaders you seek, and the basis of your competitive edge, are women. There are those that would argue that operational agility is the only real competitive advantage, but Conant has found that it's *people*, and more specifically, a diverse and inclusive group of people.

Conant knew this when he took the reins at Campbell's

— whose customer base was 80 percent women — that there existed a mandate to defy tradition and he actively established a business case for women, one that opened up a leadership pipeline that more profoundly reflected the company’s workforce and customer profile.

Campbell’s was forced to rethink its strategy for finding qualified applicants because the old way didn’t naturally identify diverse candidates. Other companies have discovered the same trend but instead write it off, saying there aren’t enough qualified female candidates. “When you reject that notion, as I did, the organization finds a way to address it,” says Conant.

Conant challenges those in leadership positions to think more broadly, build processes, and tie expectations to targets. “Leading from in front is fine, but you have to establish a process and accountability that cuts across the entire organization,” he says.

The results are rooted in Conant’s own leadership history. As he’s experienced, the more diverse leadership gets, the better a company does in the marketplace.

As employees feel valued and recognized, as they see themselves represented among the decision-makers, they become more engaged. “Corporate employees feel like they’re taking a sip of water from the fire hydrant of life. They’re just swamped,” he says. “If you’re not tuned into that, and where they feel the company has some empathy, it’s highly unlikely they’ll be engaged in a way to move the company forward.”

CHANGING THE PARADIGM

It takes effort to reject the paradigms of your generation, which is exactly what it requires to move beyond the status quo. As Conant recalls, it used to be men selling to men, dealing with men, to get business done. Today, there are five incredibly diverse generations in the workforce, and the old hierarchies are breaking down.

As Conant says, “People don’t usually derail because they didn’t get the return on investment right, [it’s because] they didn’t manage the room well; they didn’t communicate well. Those intricacies are more necessary with greater diversity, complexity, and the fast flow of information.”

Someone once asked him, “Doesn’t your daughter deserve the same opportunities that you did as a man?” The simple question sent Conant on a journey that he is still on today. “It got me thinking and made it personal,” he says. “It gave me a whole new level of energy for this. . . . I’m pleased [today] that I see a world where there are enormous opportunities for women.” However, Conant is quick to point out that businesses still have miles to go.

“There aren’t enough women in the C-suite, on boards, or in leadership roles in government,” he says. “We can do better.”



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— Doug Conant, Chairman, Avon Products, and Chairman of the Kellogg Executive Leadership Institute. For more information on Doug Conant, go to www.conantleadership.com.