One day, as they strolled through the tranquil setting of a Utah mountain retreat contemplating a return to the hurly burly of corporate life, Mette Norgaard asked Doug Conant: "Don’t you get tired of the ceaseless interruptions?" Weighing up the implications of an issue all managers and leaders encounter pretty much every day of their working lives, Conant replied: "To me they're not interruptions. They're opportunities to touch someone and improve the situation."

Thus was born the idea for this book and the concept of TouchPoints – the myriad of encounters and interactions that populate our days and which, the authors argue, we too easily dismiss as intrusions and irritations - when in reality, they are opportunities to help and to demonstrate our leadership.

It's a disarmingly simple idea: Instead of brushing aside these encounters, you exploit the chance to guide someone, thereby helping to improve their game while contributing to overall business performance. But it's actually a piece of revolutionary thinking that posits a whole new way of dealing with personal interactions.

Conant has had plenty of reasons to want to do that. Regarded by many as, in the words of book series editor Warren Bennis, a "leader of leaders," he was the troubleshooter brought in to rescue the ailing Campbell Food Company in 2001. It was a task he accomplished to universal acclaim, reversing its fortunes and notably enhancing both morale and employee engagement to world-class levels. As President and Chief Executive, he helped move the company into the top echelon of the global food industry and, among other achievements, picked up a number of employee-related accolades including the 2010 Catalyst Award for helping women advance their careers.

Norgaard is a strategic leadership expert, trainer and author, who works with blue chip clients like Microsoft and, of course, Campbell Soup Company. Her focus includes increasing employee engagement and self-development of individual leaders. She is, says Bennis, a "teacher of leaders."

The pair had previously collaborated both in books and leadership training, culminating in the "eureka" moment that spawned this book, described by business guru Stephen Covey as "a masterpiece on leadership."
Bennis, an outstanding business author in his own right, selected the book for his signature series of "exemplary contributions to management thought and practice." He captures the essence of TouchPoints: "A true leader moves things forward in a series of interactions that are made up of moments. There are spaces in between where something is and what something might become and these moments are ours to seize."

Inside a TouchPoint

A TouchPoint can be any kind of interaction, with one or several people, when you have the opportunity to influence the outcome of their activities. Bumping into somebody in the workplace, having them pop their head around your door, sending an email, and even, in some circumstances, making a decision that impacts on them – these are all the kinds of interactions the authors are talking about.

Now, think about how many of them happen to you during an average working day. Then consider how you handle them. Do you stop to think "this person needs my help?" If you're like most managers and leaders, probably not, at least most of the time. And even if you do help, can you be sure that you maximize the opportunity to guide the recipient in a memorable way? Or are you just trying to get past the issue so you can move on? In that case, to borrow a philosophical phrase, you are not fully present in the moment. You are not focused on the here and now. You are thinking about what has to be done next.

You miss out because, as the authors explain: "Every TouchPoint is spring-loaded with possibilities. Each one can build – or break – a relationship. Even a brief interaction can change the way people think about themselves, their leaders and their futures." Furthermore, the effect of a TouchPoint, whether you handle it properly or not, is exponential. That is, your response and the outcome rarely stay with just the recipient. For better or worse, word gets around; your comments and decisions influence not only subsequent actions but also perceptions of you as a leader.

Think of each TouchPoint as a synapse in your organization's central nervous system, suggest Conant and Norgaard, and you'll get the idea.

Here are a couple of TouchPoint examples from Conant's repertoire:

First, in his early days at Campbell, after listening intently to a colleague who complained about the unsightliness and negative messaging of barbed wire surrounding a factory, Conant had it removed and the external walls repainted. His actions got people thinking about other ways to improve the work environment.

Second, and from a different perspective, as the company faltered in its recovery momentum, he pulled his senior team together, told them what needed to be done and declared: "If you don’t want to sign up for that, you shouldn't be here." You may argue about whether that was a helpful TouchPoint or not – it certainly was for the company and provided clarity for the individuals – but, regardless, people still talk about it today.

The central message is that a TouchPoint is not a knee-jerk reaction but a considered response that ultimately aims to move things forward. It's actually a skill that has to be learned and practiced, honed and mastered. Responding to a TouchPoint may involve seizing the
moment when it crops up or it may be about creating those moments – like the Procter and Gamble executive who takes a daily walk through his plant, aiming to connect with 50 to 100 people in an hour. Most of these are just the briefest of encounters but he always carries a note with a dozen or so issues he wants to deal with – such as an update on a safety issue or telling people about an award the company has won.

In this and every other effective TouchPoint, there are three critical contributors to their successful handling – metaphorically speaking, using your head, your heart and your hands. Half of the book is devoted to these elements, so let's take a closer look at them.

**The Brainpower Behind TouchPoints**

Using your head to exploit a TouchPoint means behaving in a logical and consistent way, based on your own set of ideas about what works in business. In effect, we are talking about having a clearly defined business model for the way you operate.

Models, the authors note, guide our behavior and we use them all the time in everyday life. For example, if you want to go on a diet, knowing ultimately that all diets are based simply on taking in fewer calories than you burn, you still select a particular model – a type of diet – that you think will work for you.

In business, though, your model may be less overt simply because you haven't taken the time to think it through, codify and articulate it. This is how Conant created his model when he first started at Campbell. First, he considered his own beliefs and those from other management experts that resonated with him. Then he shared these with his senior team and they developed a clear and concise Campbell Leadership Model, a circular process based on the following sequence:

1. Inspire trust
2. Create direction
3. Drive organization alignment
4. Build organization vitality
5. Execute with excellence
6. Produce extraordinary result.

Then it's back to Number 1.

Since every individual and business is different, you can’t adopt someone else's model, though you can certainly borrow and reshape elements of it. Instead, you need to go through a three-step process to develop your own.

First, get to the bottom of your own assumptions about leadership. How do you view it – as a battle, a race, an adventure? Think about metaphors you use in your business language. For instance, do you talk about "rallying the troops" (a military metaphor), "coming from behind" (a sport metaphor), "milestones" (echoing journeys and adventure) or perhaps "adapt and survive" (are you a business evolutionist?). When you apply your approach based on these terms, do you
do so assertively, dictating how people should behave, or persuasively, encouraging their support? Neither is right, by the way; you should have an integrated approach that uses both elements.

Second, answer two vital questions: What do you believe makes people give of their best and what strengthens corporate performance in an ever-changing world? What has your experience and learnings taught you about these issues?

Finally, reflect on the outcome of these deliberations to develop a prototype of your leadership model. What do these answers tell you about your leadership philosophy and the way you want to drive the business forward? How can you combine being both assertive and persuasive? Try jotting down phrases that capture how you feel and want to behave, like "being truthful" or "helping others succeed." You'll discover that your ideas can be clustered into groups that become the basis of a model like Conant’s. To see more examples, visit www.conantleadership.com.

If the outcome is intended to be a corporate (rather than individual) leadership model, as Conant’s was, it should be developed and tested within your team, so that it can be applied consistently and communicated to everyone throughout the organization.

"Your model will make it easier for them to understand the way you think about leading people and change, and why you make the calls you make in the moment," the authors explain. You and your team are then mentally equipped to respond appropriately in a Touch Point.

Using Your Heart

Using your heart in a TouchPoint is about instinct and gut feelings – when you know what the right thing to do is – and about sensitivity to people’s feelings, especially when you have to make a tough decision. It’s also about being authentic, true to yourself and your ideals, even if that sometimes conflicts with what others want to do.

"We believe that when you use your heart, you will make better judgments concerning the issue," state the authors. "You will make stronger connections with other people; and you will develop your personal authority as a leader."

They cite the example of a case in which an employee died suddenly at work in unclear circumstances, though most likely as a result of a medical condition rather than a workplace accident. Although this would have given the company the opportunity to deny a compensation claim, the departmental VP knew the decision should be made on a matter of principle, a TouchPoint with the victim’s family and colleagues that would have exponential implications. The company agreed to pay the claim.

"To make genuine connections with other people," the authors continue, "you need to bring more than information and experience to the interaction – you need to bring yourself."

So, who is the real you? That’s what you need to know, if you are to handle TouchPoints in an authentic manner. Find out by answering three questions to yourself.
First, understand **why you choose to lead**. What's your dream? What gets you out of bed? What do you feel called to do? If you can't answer these in the context of your role as a leader, then maybe that's truly not what you want to do.

Second, **define your personal code**, the set of principles that guide the way you behave and what you believe in.

Third, think about how good (or not) you are at **walking the talk** – in this case the extent to which your actual behavior aligns with what you say you believe in. For instance, you may say you value straight talk but when you're in a TouchPoint, do you actually beat around the bush, withhold information or add a spin to the facts?

When you understand yourself and your principles and the extent to which you apply them authentically, you have the foundation on which to build a technique for using your heart as well as your head in dealing with a TouchPoint.

**Developing TouchPoint Skills**

Combining the use of your head and heart into an effective TouchPoint response is a skill that calls for commitment and practice. This is what the authors mean when they talking about using your hands. It's a metaphor for continuous improvement. Because, as you might expect, none of us gets it right every time. What we aim for is an improvement in the "that went well" to "I blew it" ratio. Effectiveness in TouchPoint responses calls for mastery of certain key skills. For instance:

- **Thinking before speaking.** Too often we criticize when it would be more effective to provide positive guidance or to offer help.
- **Getting to know people.** Taking the time to talk to people and know what makes them tick lays the foundation for understanding and building relationships.
- **Being upfront about our values.** Declare yourself, the authors say; tell them why you choose to lead and the code you choose to live by.

Above all, we must develop the skill of listening. No, really listening, being present in the moment. And that is a skill that doesn’t always come easily to leaders, whose inclination is to act fast, to make instant assumptions and quick diagnoses, followed by a mental leap to the next issue.

It takes real discipline to pause and **listen with your head** – that is, drawing in the data, the facts, figures, events and conversations that led to the TouchPoint – and **listen with your heart**, tuning in to how other people are feeling, paying attention not only to their words but also to their body language and tone of voice.

It's a useful practice to think of their behavior in terms of the colors of a traffic signal: red, when people seem angry, avoid eye contact and seem to shut down; yellow, when they signal hesitance and uncertainty, repeatedly questioning your ideas; and green, when they seem enthusiastic, confident and keen to move forward. Adjust your own behavior accordingly –
trying to understand what's going on when the energy is red, listening sensitively (with your heart) when it's yellow and helping to move forward when they are green.

When it's appropriate for you to speak, reply from both the head and heart. The head needs you to clarify points and confirm both your understanding of the issues and the other's understanding of your message and expectations. Speaking from the heart, you must share your beliefs, passion and even your vulnerabilities. You must be authentic and you must be convincing. This isn’t always easy to do, but here's a useful learning technique the authors pass on from executive coach Bob Gordon. He suggests you get a copy of the Gettysburg Address and read it to a colleague, asking them to move closer to or further away from you according to whether your words touch them or not. Practice until the person is standing right next to you.

One more thing about "speaking." Remember the exponential effect of a TouchPoint? One of Doug Conant's ways of achieving this is to write between 10 and 20 notes every day to thank individuals for their work or to compliment them on their promotion or other success. "These notes energize those who receive them and send positive impulses all over the world," he says.

The Master Touch

TouchPoints are all about helping others rather benefiting yourself. Leadership is not about you, the authors declare. It's about them. Asking yourself or, aloud, them, "How can I help?" are the four magic words that hold the key to mastery. Responding thoughtfully and sensitively represents the most effective follow-through.

For example, suppose you attended the first in a series of important presentations by a junior colleague. It goes all right but could have been a lot better. Success is critical, so the temptation might be to wade in quickly and explain where they went wrong. But a TouchPoint master might instead drop by the office of the presenter some time later and discuss the positive aspects of both the subject matter and the presentation, and then ask: "What do you think is the one thing you want to work on for your next presentation?" And then: "How can I help?"

As aids to mastery, the authors offer us two further insights:

The TouchPoint triad draws on the analogy of musical structure, the three-note chord in which each element is a crucial component. With TouchPoints, those three elements are listening intently so you can really understand what's happening and what is needed; framing the issue, which involves summarizing it and placing it in a context that everyone understands; and advancing the agenda, where you decide on next steps and who will take them. Well, actually, it turns out there's a fourth point – reviewing how the TouchPoint went once it’s been completed. But the key thing is to remember the "listen-frame-advance" sequence.

Second, as a memory aid, learn the 4 As of an effective TouchPoint against which you can assess your performance. The As are: Alertness – that is, being fully present so you can pick up the nuances and data, as well as identifying gaps; Abundance – an attitude that opens minds to different solutions and combines being tough on standards but enthusiastic on people; Authenticity – living and acting by what you believe so that you are consistent in every TouchPoint; and Adaptability – drawing from an array of skills and expertise to provide the
most appropriate solution, for example deciding whether to show strength or vulnerability, to be directing or consultative, to push or to show patience.

And yet, and yet… you will still mess up because, as the authors tell us, mastery is not a destination; it's a quest. So you must keep your TouchPoint performance under continuous review, asking yourself: "How can I do better tomorrow?" Do your own "post-game analysis," perhaps even keeping a journal, to identify where you went wrong and what you should do not only to be better next time but also to put right the mistakes you have made. This might even include an acknowledgment to others that you handled the situation incorrectly. There's nothing wrong with apologizing!

**Conclusion**

Doug Conant's leadership of the Campbell Soup Company is living proof of the authors' contention that every interaction with individuals and groups is an opportunity to help them and improve performance. We need to dismiss the idea that encounters are nuisances and intrusions that inhibit our own progress. Granted, they concede that we should cordon off particular times of the day when we should let it be known that we do not want to be disturbed. However, at all other times we can stand ready to turn TouchPoints to the advantage of others and the well being of our businesses.

To achieve this effectively, we need to combine our brain power and emotional sensitivity – to work with both our heads and our hearts. We need to learn the skills of listening intently and thinking carefully before we frame our responses and instigate follow-through: listen-frame-advance. Above all, we need to review, refine and practice our TouchPoint performance understanding that we'll get some of them wrong.

"The leadership literature talks a great deal about the crucial moments that mold your character," the authors reflect. "Yet it is the millions of ordinary everyday moments that ultimately shape your reputation. Mastering those begins with one simple question: 'How can I help you?""