Hugh Grant – Monsanto’s CEO Sustainability Pioneer

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**Abstract**

This research was conducted to better understand how Hugh Grant, a Scottish-born molecular biologist turned businessman, transformed one of the most controversial companies while becoming one of business’s most admired chief operating officers (CEOs) of this decade. Over the last three decades, the Monsanto Company has utilized the talents of Grant, who began at the company as a product development representative for the company’s agricultural business in 1981 at the Scotland location of Monsanto. Recognizing the inspirational leadership ability of Grant, the company quickly moved him up the ranks from director of the agriculture division to his current positions as Monsanto’s CEO and Chairman of the Board (BoardEx, 2014). The company was faltering after the mutual resignation of the company’s former CEO and was in a weakened state (Westervelt, 2003). With a competency level that stems from a combination of compassion for the industry and people; experience with genetically engineered seeds and traits; and an advanced education in both business and agriculture, Grant provided Monsanto much needed change and clarity within the company’s direction and inspired a friendly, energetic environment for transformation (Seewald, 2003). This paper provides a detailed argument that within an ambiguous and uncertain industry, a leader should inspire a shared vision while using critical thinking skills on the level of executive intelligence; possess a high level of emotional intelligence plus personal and relational power to deal with various publics; and present a genuine presence of credibility that portrays authentic integrity, all of which lead to successful transformational change.

**Introduction**

The biotechnical agriculture business is a business that touches everyone globally, and Hugh Grant, as Monsanto’s CEO, takes sustainability seriously, while gently raising the corporate backbone when necessary (Ryssdal, 2008; Machan, 2013). A business day at Monsanto begins with the life of the food producers, farmers, and growers. Monsanto’s beliefs are passionately shared by Grant and spurred from the fact that the earth’s population is exceedingly outgrowing the food production by 55 percent, and currently less than two percent of the population is still farming (Grant, 2008; “Monsanto Company at Sanford,” 2013). Grant’s passion lies within these efforts that are done in a sustainable manner to help empower farmers globally by providing the best performing seeds, farming information, and data so farmers can grow proprietary in-the-seed technological traits that have protective properties to further support efficiencies, including reduction in farming costs through licensing other companies worldwide (“Monsanto Company,” 2013; Bill, 2014). Simply said by Grant, “… optimizing yield and driving financial performance one acre at a time (“Monsanto at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). While Monsanto is known for its herbicide called Roundup, Grant brought national attention to the company by redirecting the focus when he assumed the process of accelerating the cost of reduction of operating expenses for Roundup, because once the patent licenses expired for Roundup, a plethora of lower-priced generic forms of glyphosate took the market pricing to an all-time low (“Leadership,” 2008; Melcer, 2003; Seewald, 2003; Westervelt, 2003; Spencer and Fisher, 1997).

Grant was able to integrate this change within the new vision for Monsanto, exemplifying an extreme level of executive intelligence, personal and positional power, and emotional intelligence while focusing on the marriage of responsibility and financial discipline (Westervelt, 2003; Bill, 2007; Grant, 2008). By using inspirational, motivation, and empathy, Grant deemed the company’s state of affairs a profit shift and a major milestone in Monsanto’s new directional flow that used its seeds and traits business as its driver to bring up market share by 23 percent during his first year in office (Westervelt. 2003; Seewald, 2003). Using a comparison to the golden years of the 1950s when the population was 2.5 billion and 20 percent more of the land was farmed, Grant pointed out that the population has doubled while the agricultural activities have decreased (Grant, 2008). Grant is a forward thinker who uses key operational drivers of the business to continually innovate and create new platforms. His decisions allowed the company to acquire other companies, such as The Climate Corp., that helped, as Grant put it, bring together genetic agronomy data and weather data – things that make the company’s core customer, the growers, successful by being a turnkey resource provider for farmers (Brown, 2013; Machan, 2013). This has helped increase the world’s food sustainability and growth-rate times (Brown, 2013).

Grant’s intentions and solutions for market growth far surpass the production of seeds extending to the needs of the farmers and end-product customers, who have concerns about genetically modified foods and their safety (Caplan, 2013). The company has consistently increased earnings under Grant’s leadership with earnings up to $373 million first quarter 2014 compared to $349 million a year ago (Gillam, 2014). Grant continues his mission to accelerate development time to increase yields to .5 billion new bushels within the next 10 years by supporting a strong and collaborative research and development (R&D) effort, crossing R&D markets within germplasm, and resetting pricing on Roundup solutions (“Event brief,” 2010; Brown, 2013; “Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). The numbers which support this vision are compelling, and help further support the intellectual property developments of one billion dollars in Monsanto’s R&D because Grant feels that products that provide consistently on farms will provide the competitive edge (Carter and Woods, 2012; “Event brief,” 2010; Donlon, 2010; Tomich, 2010). It is vital for Monsanto, per Grant, to expand globally to expand acreage in a saturated and competitive market in order to increase yields (“Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013; Brown, 2013; “Monsanto Company annual,” 2014). This expansion requires internal and external change. For this reason, Grant focuses on the personal and relational power of his relationships to build credibility and further understanding (“Monsanto Company at Sanford, 2013; Gustin, 2012; Jacobsson, 2012; Coons, 2009; “The value,” 2008; Bill, 2007). He is inspired and passionate within his mission because of the uncertainties that spread among those customers and activists who do not relate to the science, but Grant feels simplicity through communication leads the way to educating the public (Bill, 2007; Caplan, 2013; “Events brief,” 2010; Grant; 2000; Jacobsson, 2012).

Hugh Grant demonstrates his competencies and abilities to inspire and motivate, while gaining credibility as he steers a company that suffers from severe public scrutiny, constraints of nature, and a saturated and competitive market (Caplan, 2013; Grant, 2000; Ryssdal, 2008). He is contagiously enduring and his personal power resides in his unique understanding of how to grow people and seeds – that being evident in the peer and colleague nominated win of the 2010 CEO of the year award (Donlon, 2010; Henman, 2011). Grant hopes to turn scares into hope for solutions to those who are embraced in skepticism of the technological advances in genetically modified crops that could help prevent diseases rather than cause them (Caplan, 2013; Grant, 2000; Machan, 2013). This discussion is continued with some specific examples as they relate directly to setting direction and inspiring vision; core values and credibility; executive intelligence with critical thinking skills; along with emotional intelligence that set the pace for transformational change.

**Discussion**

**Core Value and Credibility**

Hugh Grant is a well-educated man from Scotland, who holds advanced scientific, technical, and business degrees, but his education began with his relationship with poor and unhappy farmers in Scotland (BoardEx, 2014; Grant, 2005). As he began his career with Monsanto, his concerns lie with a typical farmer being able to feed only 25 people, and today a farmer feeds about 130 people (Donlon, 2010). Grant has his roots in agricultural zoology and molecular biology, so science is very important to him (BoardEx, 2014). He understands the criteria for safety in foods that are derivatives from Monsanto’s seeds (Grant, 2000). Grant is proud of his work in the most humble way, and it stands to reason that he takes regulatory issues very seriously (Grant, 2000). He noted that there is a distinctive difference between the United States and Europe in which consumer confidence in regulatory affairs remains high for the U.S., whereas the consumer confidence in Europe’s regulatory system is very low (Grant, 2000). His work with Monsanto takes on a personal level daily, because he is an advocate for Monsanto’s beliefs and feels their technologies can change the way that small farmers farm (Grant, 2000). He sees the reality that 24,000 people perish daily from hunger with the majority of those being children (Grant, 2005). This is one of the reasons that Grant helped create Monsanto’s “golden rice” as a gift to utilize the company’s genome, along with further studies for improvement, plus the rice is vitamin-enriched to help prevent night blindness (Grant, 2000).

As discussed with the introduction, Grant has concerns about our natural resources and this has been his essential motivator against skeptical protestors who do not understand the science behind genetically modified seeds and crops (Conard, 2014). One protestor arrested in 2014 was even a shareholder in the company (Caplan, 2013; Conard, 2014). Which leads to a problem that is intolerable to Grant, on behalf of his work at Monsanto and a personal mission, it is a term he describes as “reverse elitism” that warrants a message eluding to the fact that if genetically-engineered crops exist, then everything else should not exist (“Monsanto CEO,” 2013). He feels there is a place on the consumer shelf for organic and pesticide-resistant crops, and Grant worries that these protestors are being fueled by elitism (“Monsanto CEO,” 2013). Representatives of these activist groups are allowed to attend Monsanto’s business meetings to cover their concerns and Grant answers their questions respectfully, and, as mentioned in the introduction, he uses a gentle backbone to stand up for the company’s purpose all the way to the specifics of labeling (“Event briefs,” 2010; Grant, 2008; “Monsanto annual.” 2014).

His candor is refreshing nurturing even to adversaries because he listens attentively and values their opinion (“Monsanto annual,” 2010). When asked about his views on the constant challenge with biotechnical adversaries, he has a healthy, but straightforward point of view. He feels that agriculture is caught up in the midst of global policy issues which pertain to food, global warming and water, among several other issues (Donlon, 2010). Further, he feels that since Monsanto is within the middle as a key source to suppliers and makers of foods, it receives the strongest of visceral reactions, but if it were not Monsanto, it would be another company (Donlon, 2010). Grant provides explanation with great emotional intelligence that is always empathetic. He cannot see the world staying the way it currently is and remaining sustainable – within the current children’s lifetime, there will be another three billion people (Monsanto Company at Sanford,” 2013). Grant seems to take personal responsibility when speaking to critics (Caplan, 2013). His thoughts are always customer-centric, environment and natural resources-centric, and he is committed to sustainable growth as it is seen in the vision and direction he has set for the company and the common good of farmers, suppliers, and consumers (“Monsanto Company annual,” 2014; Kouzes and Posner, 2007).

People trust Hugh Grant because of his tenure, but also because he is transparent and genuine as is testament in interviews with Grant (Ryssdal, 2008; Bill, 2007; Grant, 2000; Machan, 2013). When asked about altruism, Grant responds with assurance that if a business does well and also does good for others, “…that is about as good as it gets” (Ryssdal, 2008). Another example is that he admits to sometimes being hesitant about the skittishness of people in other countries when it comes to biotechnically-engineered crops (Ryssdal, 2008). His admittance to being more comfortable and optimistic about the use of genetically modified seeds today verses 12 years ago, or a billion acres ago, is a sign of his authenticity (Ryssdal, 2008). Grant’s transparency stems into every conversation, whether at meetings or interviews. He is very straightforward in all of his dealings, and his references to his business travels reveal that he leads an integrated life that is transparent (Grant, 2008; “Monsanto Company at Sanford,” 2013). His openness to new ideas has actually turned adversaries into advocates. For example, at a board meeting, Grant accepts an offer from an advocate to be coached on better communicating their technologies to activists and multiple groups on the level of training his scientists as speakers; thus, setting an example for others to follow (“Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). Even when pressured for disclosures, Grant has revealed licensing, salary reporting, and the full gamut of business dealings is available for the public to view, and provide input (“Regulatory Affairs,” 2014; “Monsanto Company annual,” 2014).

Grant delights in fellowship and expands on the value of relationships (“The value,” 2008). A statement that NCR CEO William Nuti offered publishers in regards to Grant helps easily epitomize his leadership style, “Hugh Grant is admired by his peers for driving seamless change …. success that will outlive him and provide value to all stakeholders of Monsanto for years to come” (Donlon, 2010). This public statement shows that succession planning and keeping the results for the company optimized were taken to heart and is again, a reflection of Grant’s character and credibility (Collins, 2001; Valentine, 2012). His compassion for the growers and his employees radiates within his speeches and interviews as he addresses all audiences (Donlon, 2010; Grant, 2008; “Leadership,” 2008; “Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). Grant is multifaceted with an empathetic eye and heart for improving the systems within the environmental food chain, and he definitely displays a strategist’s action logic building trust among all stakeholders (Rooke and Torbert, 2005).

**Inspiring a Shared Vision and Setting Direction**

As an example to explain the state of today’s world, Grant used an apple cut into four pieces and removed three pieces and explained that those three pieces were three quarters of the world which represents the 75 percent of water for which the world is composed (Grant, 2005). Grant split the fourth into fours as well to account for deserts, swamps, mountains and polar ice caps, which left one eighth once he removed three of those portions, which was split again into 32-secondths to represent what is left of our world currently (Grant, 2005). Grant is a brilliant storyteller with a main purpose, his vision for Monsanto. To help better visualize the world’s condition, the topsoil is explained using the skin left on the apple portion of the 32-secondths split yet again, which is his vision of what is left for farming resources – taking 100 years to produce another layer of topsoil that can be lost in one bad weekend (Grant, 2005). This is the premise for the main vision that Grant shares with those who work for him and with him (“Monsanto Company annual,” 2014). He details that because of the state of the world, everyone must do more with less, and that just begins the tiered plan, which Grant is constantly sharing for further development of biotechnology that will improve sustainability and increase yields for Monsanto and their core customer, the farmer (“Monsanto Company annual,” 2014). Grant realized that chemicals were not the answer to sustained production and growth, but genetics, better biotechnical seed, and informational data that helps the farmer grow within limited environmental conditions with less pesticides was a better answer (Melcer, 2003; Seewald, 2003).

Setting direction by putting not only the reason why, but the customer as the who in his vision helped formed clarity for his employees (Sinek, 2009). With clear direction, he provided the new direction for the Roundup business and explained how it would be integrated with the overall vision for the company (Melcer, 2003; Seewald, 2003). Hugh Grant uses every drop of his Scottish blood to encapsulate the reasoning of necessary tasks and business shifts within the marketplace. This not only has an infectious appeal upon his teams, but also upon the company’s opponents – often turning them into advocates (Machan, 2013). Despite outside resistance, the company remains on track delivering above and beyond expectations year over year (Gillam, 2014; Machan, 2013). This does not go without directional guidance because Grant believes in functional teamwork and strong relationships (“Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). He says if a deadline is missed within their industry, it equates to an entire year being missed due to the nature of the planting season (“Monsanto Company annual,” 2014). Grant believes in teams of six – the rule of six, because he feels that half a dozen people need to help make approval decisions within their global company before selling – technology, regulatory, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the United States Department of Agriculture, plus others who normally include scientists (“Leadership,” 2008). Also due to the timing, an entire team is needed for winning executions (“Leadership,” 2008). Grant is a leader and a manager who sets up his followers to deal with the future (Kotter, 1990). He possesses the special skills to handle what is referred to as the analytical divide, but his definition takes on a dynamic meaning because of the adversely negative publicity from activists who fail to understand the nature of genetic science (Caplan, 2013; Machan, 2013; Bill, 2007). The ideological demands of Monsanto’s vision and the public’s view, which also can flow to the farmer, has a grave impact on Grant’s job to inspire and motivate his employees while maintaining trust against the negative publicity within the organization (Caplan, 2013; Kotter, 1990).

The vision and direction that Grant inspires with his employees comes from his personal power to connect efficiently to influence positive reactions and responses. He understands people, and has an overwhelming sense of emotional intelligence that helps stakeholders, including the activists, relate positively to the vision to help withstand those challenges and misunderstandings due to conflicting beliefs (Kouzes and Posner, 2007; Grant, 2000; Bill, 2007). One very important skill that Grant demonstrates, as noted previously under the core value sections of this paper, is his listening skills. He is an excellent listener and provides immediate thoughtful feedback that ensures his audience that he understands, and this builds trust that is required to inspire the shared vision and rally people around the vision of the company (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Grant understands that his vision cannot be kept to himself alone, and he admits that to his teams of six, his 20,000 plus employees, his 400 roundtable members, and adversaries who share the same planet to inspire an adaptive culture that is customer-centric (“Leadership,” 2008; Henman, 2011). While Grant has the advantage of being part of Monsanto’s culture for over three decades, he was also able to create a new culture and vision centric to Monsanto’s customer, the growers, by thinking strategically and globally (Donlan, 2010; Grant, 2008; Henman, 2011; “Leadership,” 2008; “Monsanto Company annual,” 2014).

Through astute business practices and with motivational inspiration, Grant’s teams of six have proven effective and efforts are rewarded based on leadership agility gauged through 360-feedback, employee promotions, and salary increases (Carter & Woods, 2012; Melcer, 2005). The relationships that Grant weaved throughout the fiber of the culture helped create a climate to embrace the future by learning from the past and looking forward to a world where there will be more technologies, wider choices, and seeds tailored specifically to the end-users needs (Grant, 2005). His strengths go beyond his personal power of influence and motivation to change, his perseverance sets an admirable role model; and even among the boldest controversial adversaries surrounding the business, Grant admitted that he could not imagine doing anything more meaningful than what he is doing (Machan, 2013).

**Executive Intelligence Leads to Transformation**

Nothing holds truer than the fear of change and fearing the unknown, than the uncertain industry of biotechnical agriculture (Grant, 2008; Henman, 2011). Grant has established both a conservative yet proactive culture that is both adaptive and centered around its customer (Henman, 2011). His processes for decision-making delve deeply into scientific data, seed testing, and ten years of product development; and this helps provide him with a keen sense of executive intelligence (“Event brief,” 2010; Henman, 2011). Similar to Winston Churchill’s quote that advises to let advance worrying translate into advanced planning, Grant advises his followers to not become discouraged with past failures, but learn from them and use them to gauge the future to make better choices (Seewald, 2004; Westervelt, 2003; Henman, 2011). Grant is a highly efficient executive who knew when to stop and redirect the Roundup business and devise the new outlook and pricing structure for the business (Seewald, 2003; Westervelt, 2003). As a leader, Grant allows the critical eye to be placed upon the company and himself against those of others; thus, exhibiting the cognitive skills which are core to executive intelligence (Caplan, 2013; Machan, 2013; Menkes, 2006; “Monsanto Company at Sanford,” 2013).

Grant has the personal and relational power, along with critical thinking coupled with his knowledge of the seed business that allows him the strong ability to make imperative decisions and effectively communicate and empower others for action (Jennings, 1966). The results-driven and forward-looking business intelligence of Grant also allows the company’s innovative platforms to become one reality after another (Bill, 2007; Donlon, 2010; Tomich, 2010; “Monsanto Company annual,” 2014). It is true that Grant understands that decisions are a process, and his strategic plans are very systematic surrounding the thinking that spawned from his own beliefs and the vision for the company. He is a visionary who can develop collaborative ideas with others, funnel the ideas through the company to his various teams of six, while engaging the partners and scientists who are currently collaborating with Germany’s BASF totaling over 3500 scientists (“Monsanto Company annual,” 2014; Grant, 2008). These scientists and teams are creating new technologies that are aligned with the vision, the business plan, and the R&D plans, which have increased budgets for future innovation of the expansive pipeline developed collaboratively by Grant (Brown, 2012). Grant watched shares shrink from $140 per share to $70 per share upon his appointment as CEO of Monsanto while still doubling profits for the company (“Monsanto Company at Sanford,” 2013; “Events brief,” 2010). Today, the view of shares are up to almost $80 per share and profits are still expected to double over the next decade, while earnings per have grown 20 percent year over year (Brown, 2012).

American farms are booming, which has helped grow business but Grant views the profits as a more sustainable growth in acres, or arable land and yield (Brown, 2012; Donlon, 2010). With the world’s population expected to reach 9.1 billion by 2050, Grant feels that agricultural production will need to increase by 70 percent to meet demands (Brown, 2012).

The relationships and diversification used by Grant in business helps retain and grow continued business globally, specifically in Brazil and Argentina, where Deutsche Bank analyst David Begleiter proclaimed Monsanto as a preference in retention of the global agricultural cycle (Brown 2012). Grant does not get so caught up in the vision of the company that he cannot see what needs to be done immediately and in the long-term future, because he has the ability to think clearly (Grant, 2008; Henman, 2011; Chartrand and Rose, 2008). Grant also exemplifies the full spectrum characteristics of a critical thinker, such as: strategic thinking, dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, and promoting innovation while maintaining an optimistically contagious leader’s disposition (Chartrand & Rose, 2008). An assertive style allows Grant to bridge criticism flawlessly with the understanding that adversity is undoubtedly a given for this industry.

**Leading Transformation and Change**

Grant sees the acquisition of The Climate Corp., a weather data company, as a bolster to help Monsanto with a new platform in switching to a more precise form of agriculture (“Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). He has focused on mending fences consistently within the pricing issues and pricing philosophies that have helped bridge the company’s transition from producer of pesticides to precision agriculture in which data meets biology (“Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). His credo has been to more effectively leverage the company’s leadership by integrating platforms for growth. His mentality is focused on the growth of the company and the farmer’s business; thus, together with Monsanto’s strengths in research and development, Grant maintains that the innovative pipeline is the heart of the business expected to grow at 30 percent NPV over the course of five years (“Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). He analogizes that the transition from pipelines to reality is the difference from a PowerPoint presentation to growing new bushels on the farm (“Monsanto Company at Sanford,” 2013). The grower buys performance and Grant sees performance as the basis for year-to-year decisions from the growers (Grant, 2008). Over the last decade, Grant has led the changes through an initial public offering (IPO) into record yields for germplasm because of the work placed in research studies and market seeding trials for new traits, new mixes, and the differentiation of his leadership; which he claims is within the conversion of incremental performance promotion and financial returns to shareholders (“Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). This delivers a clearer vision, which closely follows that of the transformation in platforms for Monsanto with Grant foreseeing growers making 40 decisions regarding their crops per year based on new data (“Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). He sees the transformation in every facet of the company to build these platforms to help the grower with these decisions and new product developments that will, in turn meet the growers’ needs (“Monsanto Company at Morgan Stanley,” 2013). This comes through the visualization that Grant exemplifies within the employees, shareholders,
and growers.

Grant has the ability to enlist and involve all stakeholders by making a commitment to the consumer as he has, because he feels the consumer is the key concern that needs to be addressed equating to the commitment the company will make to show this seriousness about product safety and quality and adding the benefits the consumer will appreciate (Grant, 2005). He views the transformation of the company as a shared responsibility that is built upon very strong relationships across many networks within the industry, which he feels is a noble profession (Grant, 2005).

**Conclusion**

It would be easy to refer to Hugh Grant as the natural born leader for Monsanto because of his years of expertise in the business, his competency; his ability to influence others in charismatic manner, his gracious personality and value for relationships; and his uniquely balanced blend of social, emotional, and executive intelligence that provided an overwhelming sense of responsibility to deliver (Kotter, 1990). There is no denying that Grant’s Scottish upbringing within rural farm areas and his early career aspirations to become an expert in seed farming, coupled with his own vision to improve hunger and ease the suffering of the sometimes unfortunate farm conditions, helped shape the type of leader he is today (Grant, 2008; Grant, 2005).

Grant has realized, through activists and advocates who protest Monsanto, that Monsanto is open to help educate against all levels of ambiguity. This will ensure that the message and understanding of what Monsanto is all about is part of the efforts to further educate the public on safety, the purpose, and the positive effects of genetically engineered seeds. Grant’s power, vision, and intentions are nobly humble – he is an empathetic leader full of passionate drive, yet not forceful, and the qualities of his leadership have transformed Monsanto consistently for successful, long-term change (Brown, 2012; Hansen, Ibarra, and Peyer, 2013; “Monsanto Company at Sanford,” 2013).

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