

Pivot Perfect

A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group

Stephan Born: The Art of Adaptation – Navigating Cultures, Markets, and Change

Stephan Born, CEO of Hugo Boss Americas, is a leader who thrives at the intersection of strategy, transformation, and brand evolution. With a global career spanning Europe, Asia Pacific, the Americas, and more, Stephan has successfully steered fashion and consumer brands through dynamic market shifts. His leadership career began in the beauty industry at Wella, where he navigated its acquisition by Procter & Gamble, learning the nuances of culture integration and business transformation. Stephan then transitioned into the fashion world, joining Hugo Boss in Spain before expanding his leadership to Northern Europe, the Middle East, and India from the UK. Now at the helm of Hugo Boss Americas, he has been instrumental in repositioning the brand from a traditionally formal-driven apparel company to a modern, culturally savvy powerhouse. A graduate of the University of Ottawa with an MBA in Business Strategy and Marketing, Stephan's ability to balance precision with agility has defined his leadership style, fostering growth, resilience, and cultural adaptability across diverse markets.



Under his leadership, Hugo Boss Americas has nearly doubled its business, reshaping consumer reach through bold digital strategies, innovative partnerships with the NBA and NFL, and a refined omnichannel approach. Stephan's leadership philosophy is rooted in authenticity, strategic vision, and an unwavering drive to "never waste a crisis". The Brownstone Group spoke with him to discuss his career journey, the art of leading through transformation, and the lessons he's learned in building high-performance teams across industries and cultures.

Timothy Boerkoel (TBB): You consistently present yourself with a "classic formality" even as the world shifts to a more casual approach. This strong self-awareness has been a part of you from a young age, shaped by travel and exposure to many languages. How does your personal awareness and image translate into your professional leadership style?

Stephan Born (SB): I would describe my style as "modern formality" since I work in fashion and

follow trends. There is a classic touch to how I present myself, and I try to achieve a level of elegance with my attention to detail. My personal style and leadership style have both evolved over time, as I look back, I stayed consistent with the trends, first more casual, then more formal, and now my style is versatile – a mix between classic and modern formality.

Reflecting on the question, personal image is important; it's about developing a style you are

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comfortable with – especially in fashion, it is about self-expression through a clear and consistent look. Confidence and comfort in your personal style is essential. For me, that translates as well to my leadership approach. As I've progressed in my career and built upon my experiences and challenges, my leadership methods have evolved as well, but the core values that define me as a leader or person are always constant. I'm known for being honest, transparent, direct, and straight forward, with a desire to win and do more. Actually, I expect the same from the people around me; and just as in my personal style, the details matter. I like to be involved in the specifics; not because I'm a control freak, but because I want to better understand the business in order to give informed opinions and make wise decisions.

However, leadership style also adapts to the environments you are in – different countries, cultures, and emergency situations may affect how you lead. I always want to be authentic, but situational awareness affects how to get things accomplished. In addition to urgency, different teams and markets play a role in how you lead. Deep down, it's my character traits that influence each leadership situation, that set me apart as a person, and I adapt as the situation dictates.

Over my career, I've worked in many different cultural environments, including Asia Pacific, Europe, the U.K., and the Americas. How I lead and adapt to change is very much shaped by both company and country culture. You must remain true to yourself because you cannot influence other people without authenticity. It's difficult, but the payoff comes in the long run as your team develops trust in you and feels empowered – which is how you achieve the strongest performance from a team. Self-awareness and being grounded in my classic values have been the key to my leadership success.

TBB: Procter & Gamble is renowned as a “machine” that has produced some of the world's most iconic consumer brands. It's also widely

recognized as an incubator for exceptional executive talent, developing and facilitating their growth through hands-on experience and responsibility. Share with us your path to P&G and how that pivot cultivated the business skills and character traits you hold today and any key mentors who inspired you?

SB: Before joining Procter & Gamble, I was with a global \$4 billion dollar haircare company, Wella (and I was based in Europe), prior to its acquisition by P&G in 2003. Wella was a main competitor to L'Oréal in the haircare category and had a business model and company culture completely opposite to P&G. At the time, Wella was very entrepreneurial in spirit, decentralized, and driven by local markets. On the other side of the spectrum was P&G, which had a system-driven culture, and made decisions by consensus. This meant that it took a longer time to execute plans; but once the system was in place, the results were powerful. The two organizations held opposite business models, mindsets, and talent skillsets; and P&G remains very centralized today in terms of decision-making and functionality.

It was interesting for me to be immersed in the acquisition process. P&G had acquired Wella for their technical know-how, especially in the growing market of hair color, in addition to some of their key retail brands. I experienced the integration from beginning to end, witnessing many products, divisions, and people not survive the process; but I chose to remain with P&G for six years. It provided a learning curriculum that made me a stronger manager and person. It was exciting to experience the powerful system and culture of the P&G “machine.”

Being a part of an acquisition allows you a lens into what goes *wrong*, as well; not everything was successful, and it was important to understand *why* things didn't work. Synergies did not always align with the business complexities, and it would occasionally become challenging to determine value creation for the customer. In the end, I gained

incredible knowledge from both P&G and Wella – a strong entrepreneurial spirit and energy and the benefits of empowerment and responsibility, all at a young age. At Wella, I was the youngest Managing Director of a small market (Portugal) at the age of 28, with full responsibility of bottom line and managing teams including the retail division, hairdressing division, and all the supporting functions. It was enriching to take on different regional positions within this integrated, brand-powered P&G world after experiencing the entrepreneurial environment of Wella. I walked away with a framework for strategy development and deployment and the skills to ensure strategies are operational and consistent. At P&G, I learned the power of brand strength – the ability to price in markets, impose certain conditions on trade and your partners, and understand that consumers value and pay for trust in the brand. I also learned the significance of alignment within large organizations, and the magnitude of powerful operations and systems. Although it may take more time for a team to come to an agreement, once a decision is made within a system as strong as P&G's, the implementation phase is simpler, more powerful, and more scalable.

Enduring the integration and harmonization of two very different companies, while keeping the overall business running smoothly at the same time, required agility, stamina, adaptability, and a desire to win. It wasn't for everyone, and many people chose to leave. It took years to develop harmony from a human resources and operational perspective. To maintain the business operations, lead teams in transition, and oversee change integration is a personal growth experience that shaped me and cemented a framework for success that I did not know would be needed later with Hugo Boss. I was able to apply all my knowledge from Wella and P&G to the Hugo Boss model, which lies somewhere in the middle of those two experiences.

I'm grateful for many who inspired me along the way during my Wella and P&G years. Robert Jongstra, now Chairman at Pieminister Ltd. and Kinetic Consulting Ltd., was one of my mentors, along with Carsten Fischer, who is now President of Beautyblender. They were two brilliant leaders, especially when it came to communication and process integration. Robert identified key people who would add value to the unified business, and Carsten was instrumental in creating a path for as many people as possible to shine and maximize their role. Both of these mentors successfully deployed strategies that were operationally consistent throughout all levels of the organization. It demonstrated the advantage of aligning systems and teams in order to make decisions and ensure our success in the long run. This is something similar, by the way, to what I'm experiencing today through the board and leadership team at Hugo Boss.

TBB: Throughout your career, you have navigated many diverse work environments – different countries and industries; wholesale and retail; and team-focused versus process-driven environments. How does the culture and climate of a company impact how you lead a team and direct change?

SB: It is critical to understand how culture impacts leadership. The culture – whether we are discussing the culture of a team, company, market, or country – is defined as a set of common beliefs and behaviors, and it impacts how things get done. Without an understanding of this, directing change will not end favorably. As a leader, you decide *what* is to be accomplished – creating the strategy. However, it is through the *how* that you influence culturally driven change and its acceptance. There are unique cultural environments and expectations from one company to the next; there are even different cultures internally, per brand, like our two brands: BOSS and HUGO.

Even if you share common beliefs and strategies, how you interact with the people is fundamental in

navigating change. People are the central component to successfully managing change in an organization; for them to follow your leadership, they must trust you. If you're simply focused on the *what*, and not the *how*, moving forward will be a challenge. As a leader, you need to identify the new culture, build upon it, and above all, develop trust.

To give you an example, with Hugo Boss, when I moved from the UK to the U.S. as a highly successful manager, I experienced a painful learning process. My approach was too direct for the U.S. culture, and I needed to "smooth the edges" of my style. I quickly learned that how I delivered certain messages in the U.S. – especially constructive criticism – mattered greatly. In the U.S., feedback needed to be less direct than in Europe; otherwise, people's emotions could be affected, and it might trigger a boomerang effect of demotivating rather than driving progress. Looking back, I would have done some things differently. Arriving in the States, I was too direct, too fast, and too honest in my feedback – and I've learned from that. With coaching and the support of my team, together we found a successful way to move things forward, continuing to create empathy while staying true to myself and my core values.

TBB: Your advice for young professionals (which should be a lesson for all of us) is to find JOY in the journey itself. Chasing your dreams can be a marathon and it's only fun if you like running. How do you maintain joy in everyday tasks, and what are some things you do to create balance in your life?

SB: Working in the fashion industry itself brings dynamic change and a lot of fun moments – and at Hugo Boss, we take it to another level. I enjoy my work here, and especially the creativity of dressing and innovating as a man, as menswear is where our core expertise lies. Maintaining joy and creating balance in life requires perspective to get through challenging years and situations. My personal perspective balances optimism with realism. I also

surround myself with true sparring partners who give honest opinions and guidance when things become difficult – they push me out of my comfort zone and enable me to grow. If you don't have those sparring partners and have built teams that just say "yes", it may be a tough road because real life doesn't always run smoothly.

As managers, we've all faced difficult times, and that is precisely when you need your thinking to be challenged by honest feedback and different points of view. Building trust with strong and diverse teams is key; they have your back when you need it, share solid advice, and help navigate in new directions. The saying "B players hire C players" and "A players hire A players" is so important. The first saying diminishes the talent pool and innovation, and organizational growth is at risk. When "A players hire A players," you lead your organization to long-term success.

From a mindset perspective, when seeking balance in life, it's important to accept that change is the only constant. And as we move further into the digital age with AI, change is coming at a faster pace. When change as a constant is accepted, the journey itself becomes the joy. It's not about getting from point A to point B; it's about *how* you get there and the evolution along the way. Your professional career becomes about enjoying the day-to-day, finding balance, and integrating that mindset professionally and personally. This also applies to your family, friendships, and social networks. When you surround yourself with people who are free to share honestly and openly, to spar with you, difficult times become easier to traverse.

Beyond work, I find peace and tranquility in my own personal passions. I've always loved sports like running, soccer, and tennis – activities where I can disconnect. Also, I enjoy traveling and continuing to learn and experience new things.

In hindsight, most of the decisions I've made, both professionally and personally, have played out well

and brought me happiness; that perspective also reinforces my sense of balance in life.

TBB: One of your notable quotes is: “Never waste a crisis.” What crisis have you encountered that reflects the wisdom behind this quote, whether personal or professional?

SB: Throughout my career I’ve certainly faced many different management challenges. One of them was taking over the Hugo Boss UK division, which was already performing well, and taking it from good to great. Another challenge was leading Hugo Boss in Spain through a turnaround situation. Both experiences offered different challenges but were rewarding. I learned the necessary components of crisis management: strategic vision, identifying the right people for the mission, and speed.

“Never waste a crisis” can apply to many different situations. As an example, the COVID pandemic forced Hugo Boss to accelerate our decision-making processes and implement initiatives quickly. It was the catalyst for change; serving like a trampoline, driving us to move faster than our competitors for maximum impact. That’s the wisdom behind “never waste a crisis.” For Hugo Boss, we very quickly realized that this tough situation could be transformed into an opportunity to expand.

Other companies may have been protecting themselves and downsizing their retail portfolio, but our team decided to open doors in select markets, because some landlords were openly embracing new concepts and short-term deals. Because of our limited distribution and formal-focused brand positioning, we pivoted much faster than we would have in a normal market environment. There was a willingness to expand: convincing management in Germany to move quickly, building new distribution points, designing a shop-fit concept in the Americas, testing new markets, and ultimately reshaping the perception of our brand through bold moves. In 2021, the Americas were the first market in the Hugo Boss universe to grow to pre-COVID levels.

By 2024, we then nearly doubled our turnover to pre-COVID levels – all during a major world crisis that had never been experienced before. We took some risks and implemented new initiatives, and they succeeded. Today, the brand in the Americas is twice the size, with a more diverse consumer base, and all without losing our existing customer. We are also celebrating 16 quarters of strong growth – all because we were able to “not waste a crisis.”

Also, the casualization of our brand happened simultaneously to COVID. We’ve known for a long time that we had to casualize our brand, especially here in the U.S. We had been formal-driven in the past, but a large percentage of our sales were for more casual items. The pandemic prompted a radical and bold transformation for Hugo Boss, and we engaged in incredible partnerships with organizations like the NBA and the NFL, becoming more diverse and younger in our communication approach. Today, our average customer is eight years younger, at a “sweet spot” between 30 and 40 years old, with tremendous purchasing power and a desire for fashion developments – all accomplished without the loss of our older consumers, ultimately lengthening our consumer life cycle.

On a personal level, I’ve grown stronger having learned from some mistakes. The pandemic once again provides a good example. At the time, I was working here in the U.S., and my wife and family were supposed to relocate from London, but the embassies had shut down so no one could travel. If I left the country, I could not have returned, and I needed to stay in the U.S. to continue restructuring the company and lead our implementation strategy. As a result, I didn’t see my wife for over six months, and my children for over ten months. It required some creative maneuvering through Mexico to London to make those visits finally happen. It was difficult for my family, but ultimately strengthened us, and I promised myself that we would never separate again, and we do not take our time together for granted. It reinforced an important

lesson: over-communicating with those you care about is key.

TBB: In an era where star-power sponsorships and influencers are vital to many companies' branding strategies, Hugo Boss has teamed with the sports and entertainment sectors to spark growth. Tell us about this strategy and how a large international company stays poised to pivot on a dime and remain adaptable in a rapidly evolving consumer landscape?

SB: Creating a strategic framework first is critical, and in our case, it was clear we needed to invest in brand heat to best leverage digital first. It helps to bundle resources – pairing global initiatives with local execution to cut through the clutter. If you have a strategy that focuses on making noise and garnering attention in the direction you want to go, your framework should ensure it all translates back to product focus. Creating buzz around your brand is not enough; you need to drive product conversion down the marketing funnel. Buying intention comes first, but without campaigns and product focus, you will not achieve conversion.

Companies like Hugo Boss that have an international cast must ensure there is a bridge to their hero products (a company's unique product that sets them apart), specific ones that are seen in the campaigns so you can convert to sale – that is key. And within the framework, ensure there is accessibility to those products with a balanced distribution that flows through all the channels you play in. You need to be where the consumer expects your brand to be – using an omnichannel approach is fundamental, with relevant offers for each channel to address different shopping intentions. A brand must have awareness of the playing field, the competition, and importantly, what the customers really desire. When you know all facets of your consumer, you can build a successful communication strategy.

At Hugo Boss, we are truly digital-first and aim to be a tech-driven, premium fashion platform. We link

the online world with the brick-and-mortar world, embracing new technologies and leveraging data in our decision-making process – key elements of our success formula. Our strategic framework is built on *brand heat*, *product focus*, an *omnichannel approach*, and a *digital-first strategy*. This allows us to build a strong brand through successful campaigns. BOSS represents craftsmanship, quality, and elegance with a modern touch – this is our heritage. We then refresh our brand with a cast that resonates globally.

Historically, some of our campaigns resonated mainly in Europe, but since 2021, we've ensured they connect with customers worldwide. Over the past three years, we've partnered with sports figures such as David Beckham, Matteo Berrettini, and Taylor Fritz, as well as musicians like Maluma. All of them align with our brand values and are globally recognized.

Our "*Be Your Own BOSS*" campaign featured a culturally diverse cast, including Burna Boy, Khaby Lame, Li Ming, Kendall Jenner, Hailey Bieber, Gigi Hadid, and Naomi Campbell – representing our global consumer base. Our team conducts extensive research to ensure our campaigns are both authentic and relevant. Then the images go viral, generating billions of social impressions.

The BOSS advertising journey has taken us from "*Like a BOSS*" in 2022 to "*Be Your Own BOSS*" in 2023, where our story-telling focused on conquering personal struggles. We followed with "*The Choice is Yours*" in 2024, emphasizing confidence and redefining what it means to be a true boss. As we're building brand heat, we are ensuring that we're following our strategic framework, ultimately driving conversion. Hugo Boss is constantly evolving, blending creative messaging with cultural relevance, and always focusing on what matters the most to our customers ... this is what creates sustainable success and drives us forward.

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About The Brownestone Group

The Brownestone Group was launched in 2015 with a mission to offer the most effective executive search, strategic consulting, and leadership advisory services. We introduce exceptional talent to brands and their leaders, transforming businesses and careers. Founder Tim Boerkoel possesses more than 30 years of retail, consumer, hospitality, and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for global corporations, private equity, and startups alike in their searches for CEOs, Presidents, Board Members, and C-Suite talent. Brownestone, along with its global network of affiliate partners, operates as a true partner to clients ensuring swift yet long-lasting results.

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