

# "In Periods Of Uncertainty, Failure Of Imagination and Belief Will Hold Us Back."

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***Anand Chandrasekher** has a rare depth and breadth of experience — he was a senior leader at Intel and Qualcomm, and is now CEO of Aira Technologies and a director and advisor to several companies. He shared memorable insights in this interview with me and my colleague **David Reimer**, the CEO of The ExCo Group.*

**Reimer: How has your experience with past crises informed the way you are advising leaders today?**

Chandrasekher: I had to take dramatic steps in the face of

uncertainty when the dot-com bubble burst in 2000, and then during the financial crisis of 2008-2009. My goal in those times was to keep everyone on my team focused on the things they could control.

There are things in periods of uncertainty that we can't control, and worrying about those things doesn't do anybody much good. In fact, they wind up becoming a significant detractor. But focusing everyone on making progress on those things that we can control gives all of us a feeling of completion or success.

The second lesson I learned from years at Intel. Gordon Moore [a co-founder] had said for decades that you should focus on the things that matter most in any crisis and keep investing in those so that you come out stronger than your competitors. In particular, after the dot-com bubble, the markets were falling fast, and slumping PC sales were sending an existential shock wave through the company.

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Craig Barrett was the CEO at the time, and he kept investing to build chip manufacturing capacity, even though investors were questioning the wisdom of that strategy. And it worked. Coming out of that recession, Intel had a winning lineup of products and more capacity

than its competitors. That lesson is relevant for today.

If we believe the future is bleak, we will make investments accordingly, and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The future is not bleak. It may take a little bit of a hardship from getting from Point A to Point B, but Point B is the post-recovery environment. Our job is to keep the investments going that will put us in a stronger position than before the crisis began.

**Reimer: You've had a remarkable range of experiences, working in big organizations, in start-ups and as a director. How has each of those roles helped informed the others?**

Chandrasekher: I've tended to pick experiences that would give me an opportunity to learn. I've moved into a new role every three to five years. Often I was responsible for starting something from scratch, and whenever it got to a point where it was stable, that's usually the time I would start looking for the next thing.

All those experiences have given me the ability to see around corners a bit, or at least ask questions that might be relevant for figuring out what could be around the corner. Knowing all the answers is not what matters. What's more important as a leader is knowing what question to ask.

**Bryant: What do you find is the biggest leadership challenge of this crisis?**

Chandrasekher: Not knowing how long this is going to last. The ranges of potential scenarios for recovery are still fairly broad. The uncertainty is very taxing, so the challenge is to reduce it as much as possible. Our job as managers and leaders is to instill the belief that whatever core mission you're pursuing is possible and valuable.

It can't be an unachievable belief; it's got to be rooted in reality. In the current environment, our job is to create that belief around what's possible, so everyone stays focused. That's what humanity is based on. We effectively live on hope.

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A useful analogy: Roger Bannister was the first person to break the four-minute mile. For 100 years, people believed that it was not possible to run fast enough to break a four-minute mile. Even medical journals argued that it was a physical impossibility because of the strain it would put on a runner's heart. Bannister took upon himself the challenge, as did an American named Wes Santee and an Australian named John Landy. Bannister finally broke it in 1954, and here's the punch line: Over the next year, eighteen people broke the four-minute mile.

So for 100 years, nobody broke the four-minute mile, and then once one person broke it, 18 others did it. For me, that is a fantastic example

of how belief, not ability, can hold people back. It wasn't that man couldn't run a four-minute mile; it was that we couldn't imagine ourselves doing it. In periods of uncertainty, failure of imagination and belief will hold us back.

**Bryant: Sometimes new directors who are former operators can face a learning curve in shifting from being part of a management team to an advisory role. What are your lessons there?**

Chandrasekher: If you've been an operator, it's hard to give up that role. In a startup environment, it may not be as hard because, to some degree, the reason you've been brought onto the board is to help in a more active way than in a large public corporation. However, there still is that line that shouldn't be crossed of doing the job of management; you're helping them get to the questions they need to ask so they can do the task.

As a director, I tell the CEOs I work with, "I'm your advisor. You need to be able to have a chat with me and be completely unencumbered in those conversations because I'm not your investor. I work for you." They may have brought me on, but still I'm working for the CEO. So I tell them to be blunt and candid, and I also tell them that we should part ways if they find no value in the advice I'm giving them.

**Reimer: What is your framework for building an effective culture?**

Chandrasekher: The toughest thing in any organization is getting people to absolutely speak the truth. It's a human tendency to want to

share only good news and to receive good news. With the teams I've managed, the No. 1 one thing I impress upon them is that facts matter. And the way I try to emphasize that is by telling them that if they have bad news, they should text me. If they have good news, I want to hear it, but it can wait until we see each other face-to-face.

If you can get a team and an organization not to be afraid of bad news, either receiving it or delivering it, then you can build an early warning system. If you get bad news early, you can react faster, and that reaction time is precious.

**Reimer: How do you interview job candidates to ensure they will contribute to that culture?**

Chandrasekher: I look for raw intellect, but I also look for certain experience sets in the people we hire. Have they tried things that caused them to fail, and did they learn from those experiences? When you do encounter failure, how do you deal with it? Part of that dynamic is being able to be truthful not only to yourself but to your peers and others around you. If you shied away from a failure, then you probably didn't learn much from it.

*"When you do encounter failure, how do you deal with it?"*

And if they went from one failure to another failure immediately, that

tells you that they were a risk-taker and that they weren't afraid of jumping from the frying pan into a fire. But it could also tell you something about their judgment. If they went from a potential failure to something that was safer and more secure, that tells you something different. It's not the easiest thing to probe for in interviews, but it tells you a lot about an individual.

**Bryant: Take us back to your early years. What were important influences that shaped who you are today?**

Chandrasekher: I came to this country as an immigrant. This was the first trip I'd ever taken out of India. And I didn't come here with my parents; I came here on my own to go to school. Everything was new to me, even little things. When people gave me their phone number, it would often include the area code in brackets, and so I would look for brackets on the phone — pretty silly.

So I've had my share of embarrassing moments. And when you have enough embarrassing moments like that, it toughens you up and allows you to be willing to make mistakes. My willingness to leave home and come here to study shows a propensity for risk, and that propensity for risk has defined my career. I've been willing to try new things, and the newer they were, the more exciting they've been.