



Andre Durand, CEO of Ping Identity

"When Times Are Tough, Leaders Get A Chance To Be Leaders"

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***Andre Durand**, CEO of Ping Identity, shared key leadership lessons in my latest "Art of Leading" interview. [Subscribe here](#) to get future installments.*

Q. You and I have had conversations before about the art of goal-setting for organizations. What is your latest thinking on that crucial aspect of leadership?

A. Managing expectations is important, in life as well as business, and it boils down to a simple formula of happiness equals reality minus expectations, whether they are your expectations or other people's expectations. It's such a simple formula, like $E=MC^2$, yet it's incredibly profound for managing your emotional state, and the emotional state of your leadership team, the company, and the investors.

Somewhere in that tension lies your big dreams, aspirations, and stretch goals. And what is the gap between reality and that goal or aspiration? And how do you motivate people to bridge that gap? If you set expectations too far ahead of reality, it could lead people to feel demoralized. And if you set expectations too low, maybe you don't reach your potential. So it's both the art and science of that simple equation.

I've come to realize that most people tend to work harder when they're winning, and winning is somewhat of an expectational state, in that it's somewhat arbitrary. If you set a goal and you exceed it, then you're winning. And if you set a goal and don't achieve it, then in theory you're losing. Which then raises questions about whether the initial expectations were set in a way to make people more or less motivated.

Q. And companies mainly set those expectations for themselves with the annual forecasting and budgeting exercise.

A. There is more than meets the eye to annual budgeting. You're trying to push yourself, but you're also trying to be accurate and manage expectations between the management team and the board and Wall Street. And then you get monthly and quarterly reminders of how well you're doing against those expectations.

You hold the strings to the emotional wellbeing of the company.

I've seen how the motivational energy of the organization changes when it felt like we were winning and when it felt like we weren't. And the truth is, there are times when it's easier to do that than others. But I've really come to appreciate that, as a leader, you have to recognize that you hold the strings to the emotional wellbeing of the company in this budget-setting process. When you see it that way, it takes on a whole different dimension.

Q. I'm sure you do a ton of work mentoring young entrepreneurs. Do you see any patterns of whether they are too ambitious or too timid with their goals?

A. Both. I find that many people set eminently achievable goals that just don't matter. There's nothing game-changing about them. And they do achieve them, but the results just don't have any impact. They keep setting the bar lower and lower until they think they can cross it, and they've lost the wonder of swinging big and going big.

True 10x thinkers are pretty rare. But I do find a few 10x thinkers who haven't connected their aspirations with either their skills or the skills of their team, so there's a gap between their dream and their ability to execute.

Q. What were the key leadership lessons that emerged from this pandemic for you personally?

A. I'm fortunate in that my natural tendency, when things become unhinged and uncertain and frenetic around me, is that I get more calm, more centered, more focused. As a leader in uncertain times, that's a good trait, because people are looking at their leaders, and their antennae are really sensitive. They're sensitive to everything vibrating around them, and if they get a lot of vibration from leadership, it could send them in lots of different directions.

When times are tough, leaders get a chance to be leaders. When we entered the pandemic and things were completely uncertain, you couldn't make promises that you couldn't keep, so you're really sensitive about that. I wanted people to know that my job was to look out for them, and I was going to create as much stability as I could, despite whatever was coming our way.

Q. How did you develop that skill to be calm amid a crisis?

A. When you've survived a lot of crises — small ones at first and bigger ones later — and you get to the other side, you build perspective and understanding that every crisis ends. So you don't get caught up in the crisis. You know that it will end, and that builds a certain calmness.

In a sense, you build confidence that may be unfounded.

The other thing is that it requires a lot of creativity. The duck might be still above water, but the legs are moving. It takes a lot of skill, creativity and hard work to navigate these things. And when you've successfully navigated many crises, and it always turns out well, you do build a certain confidence that not only will you get through the crisis but that you will be better for it.

In a sense, you build confidence that may be unfounded. But you need that to be an entrepreneur. In a sense, we jump first and figure out how we're going to land second. That's the very nature of entrepreneurialism — we're not averse to risk.

Q. What are the X factors that you look for when you're hiring?

A. Our acronym for the raw attributes we're looking for is CATCH. It stands for cognitive ability; alignment to mission, vision, and values of the organization; team-oriented; coachable; and hungry. With those attributes, there's nothing stopping you, so we try to filter for that.

Q. How does the interview go to get at those qualities?

A. You listen to how they talk. Do they use "I" more than "we?" Many people who are growth oriented will tell you that they are always striving to learn the next thing. You'll hear whether they seem coachable. And whether they are hungry comes out in everything they talk about.

Do they have the fire, or are they just looking to get a job? There's a big difference between a person who wants to join a great company and somebody who wants to make a great company. Here's the way it shows up. If I ask why they want to join Ping, someone might

talk about how we're a top-rated Denver employer, that we have a great culture, or other things. But we're not interested in that person because what they just told me is that they're a joiner, not a maker.

The visual here is that one person wants to come sit in the wagon and have you pull them, and the other wants to grab the handle and start pulling. So you really look for the people who think of the company as a blank canvas for them to achieve their aspirations and to change the world. It's a very different language that shows up between builders and joiners.

Q. What's it like to work for you? What should somebody know that is non-negotiable for you?

A. It comes down to trust. And if you look at the essence of trust, it's a one-to-one ratio between say and do. If over some period of time I observe a good ratio of someone doing what they say they will do, they will earn my trust. And if they're off on either side of the say-do ratio, then they are sub-optimally performing.

What do I mean by that? We've all experienced people who say more than they do. We look at them and we say, boy, John makes some big statements. We'll see how it turns out, and then there are a lot of misses.

If you look at the essence of trust, it's a one-to-one ratio between say and do.

The converse is people who think they're somehow building up credits by saying less than they do, so they under-promise and then they always try to over-deliver. What I tell those people is that you're not helping yourself as much as you think. You think you're creating a dynamic where you're going to exceed my expectations, but all you've really done is not given full credit to yourself for what you clearly are willing and able to achieve.

Over the course of a year, when you can watch the emotional reaction of people to adversity, there are some people who are so reliable that I could set my clock by what they say. And then magic happens, because I will give them full autonomy — I trust you, make the decision, and go.

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