

Innovation Begins with Mindset: Leading with Curiosity

A Conversation with George Estrada, Executive Strategist, AWS

FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Heather McKissick

Hi, I'm Heather McKissick. I'm CEO of CUES, and I'm so excited to be here today with my friend and good business partner, George Estrada, Executive Strategist for Amazon Web Services. Thank you for sitting down and being here with me today.

Heather

We are having such a great time at CUES talking to leaders—seasoned leaders, experienced leaders, novice leaders—about what it is that they do to put their leadership into action, on behalf of their missions, on behalf of their organizations. And I think that you just have such an interesting story to tell about how you've done that throughout your whole career. So, I know that you've done so much more than just working with credit unions for Amazon Web Services, but you've been working with credit unions for about four years now. Tell me more about the credit union line of business within AWS.

George Estrada

Thank you for this opportunity. It's always great to get together with such incredible leadership in the credit union space. You know, about four years ago, we have a credit union team that falls under the nonprofit organization, which then falls under the Public Sector group at AWS. And about four years ago, leadership realized that to better serve credit unions, we needed dedicated resources. So, they dedicated about nine account managers, about four solutions architects, and then they tasked me to be the strategist for the group and go out and help not only the group build and earn trust within the community, but also be a sounding board for a lot of executives.

George

My background is I was a former CIO and CTO both in the nonprofit sector and the commercial side, respectively. So, I brought a good balance of that, been doing technology now for about 25 years. And so, you know, the first thing I needed to do is, once I came, we got into the this area, and we started learning about the credit union space—really digging in, digging in on the values, what drives the credit union industry, and taking it back to the team and saying, okay, here, here's some of the priorities that we need to work on. You know, you mentioned leadership, and I think it's one of the tools that we use...leadership is very hard to scale, right? A lot of times, folks get caught up and you have a really good leader, you're wondering, well, how do I replicate this? And Amazon has been known for its leadership principles. And we have a series of leadership principles. The first one is customer obsession. And so that's something that really, we use those leadership principles as a guide to those and aligns perfectly with that, obsession with members. We have customer obsession. You have an obsession with your members, and part of that means

finding what the right solutions are, the right outcomes and services are for them, not what's for me, but in service to the member or the customer.

Heather

That was right around the time that we met, and I remember being so grateful and impressed that you as a leader, and I'm certain it's true for other members on your team, but that you as a leader, had gotten so deep into what makes credit unions tick, so early into that whole process. You were reading books, you were reading articles, you were making brands, you were asking for resources, like you came to quickly understand some of the unique needs that credit unions have and how AWS could help to support that, but again, on their terms, not necessarily on yours.

George

So, it was interesting, right? Because, I mean, I go to some of these conferences, and it was very lonely at first, you know, no one really knew me, but I remember that yeah, the best thing that works is complete honesty, right? It's okay to be vulnerable. And I remember a couple CEOs tell me, what can you do for me? Like, how are you gonna help me? I tell them I don't know. I need to learn more about the industry, if you're willing to help me. And it was funny how that would always click. And they were like, okay, well, what do you want to learn? And they would just start talking, you know, learning about core systems, learning about what the core system means to each organization and where they are in their level of, you know, growth and independence or reliance on some of these systems. And it's interesting, because the one thing that a lot of folks would say—a lot of the feedback that I would get—people are like, Oh, we're too slow. We're moving too slow as an industry. But there's some kind of poetry to that, right? There's this whole, this is an Italian saying called "Festina lente," which means very slowly, right? And I always love it. And I always felt that the credit union industry is very much like that. They want to modernize. There's a desire there, but there's always that consideration of like, okay, but are we, in the process, going to leave our members behind? It's balancing that. And you know, what we're finding is that there's a lot of opportunities to leapfrog some of those delays. There's a lot of opportunities there, as far as meeting not only your members where they are, but also leading the challenge of finding the right partners, like AWS and others to help you get to a level of modernization that you can start competing with the rest of the financial services industry.

Heather

So, I mean, you're talking about so much. You have been a CIO. You are a leadership strategist. You're an executive strategist. You know everything there is to know about data strategy. You've been around for a good long time, right? And you've seen a lot of ups and downs across your industries. But even in the past four years, there's been a lot of change for credit unions as well. So, what are you seeing right now as some of the key challenges for us as we continue to work together.

George

So, I think one of the key challenges, look, let's talk. You know, generative AI is among us,

right? And everyone's been scrambling one way or the other, like, how do you deal with such a foundation-setting technology. And, you know, our CEO, Andy Jassy, had a great line that I just love using. And he's like, you know, everybody right now—I'm paraphrasing—everybody's focused on the hype cycle and always focused on the substance. And that's a really important distinction, right? Because a lot of people are making it up as they go along, but we're very confident that the foundation that we're laying is very important—securities, making sure that costs are acceptable based on the kind of business that you're doing. So, that prudence that credit unions already have built in serves as well. I think the challenge right now is really, how do you capture the value of some of these technologies? Because what's happening is, not only are these new technologies brand new and game changing, but they're also going to require creative thinking on how to figure out where the deal or ROI is. I'll give you an example. Is the value that I cut my call center calls from seven minutes to three minutes? Or is the value that I cut the call from seven minutes to three minutes, but now I use those four minutes to really learn more about my customers or my members? That's the Delta, right? So, is it cutting down to seven minutes or using the seven minutes in optimizing.

Heather

So, it's not just about the leveraging the technology, it's about leveraging that technology in the right way, and having the sort of leadership skill and vision to understand what the opportunities are for the business that may or may not be directly related to the technology.

George

Exactly, yeah. I'll give you one example. One advice that I give executives is, don't look at these new technologies as just efficiency and optimization. Look at it as amplification. If I have five-star employees that are giving me 100%, I could use this technology to amplify them, right? So instead of reaching 100 people, they can reach 300 people. Now you can say, oh, it's more efficient. Okay, maybe. But the mindset is very different. You know, if I—and I've done this in a couple of conferences—I'll be talking, and I pull my mic away, and then everybody at the back starts screaming, I can't hear you. Then I bring up the mic, and I said, this is what amplification does, right? It's incredible when you change the mindset, and I think that's one of the ways to really start thinking and managing through these changes. Is, how do we amplify our values? How do we amplify our skills? How do we amplify you know, our proposition to our members.

Heather

You're talking about a lot of leadership right now. You've used the word mindset a couple of times, and I'm all curious, from your perspective as a leader, how do you lead people to change their mindset, especially in such a rapidly evolving space like you are in. I heard you say, go slow, to go fast. I understand that sometimes that makes it easier to shift mindset as you go. If people aren't feeling like it's a race, but you're talking about a lot of concurrent change in a pretty complex environment. What do you do to help shepherd people's mindset along?

George

I think that I break leadership into two categories. Leaders manage up and lead time, okay? What

I mean by that is, you know, I have stakeholders—whether you're CEO, you have a board, right? You're managing the board. You're managing their expectations, you're managing your message, what they are driving to, you're managing that. You're not really leading them. You're managing them. But the folks that are downstream, those are the ones that you're leading, and you have to provide a vision, some guidance. And so, a lot of what I do when I'm, you know, working with some of the most amazing people, by the way, they're incredibly talented. Part of it is creating that vision. So, let's look at credit union space. I remember when I started, everybody was like, well, who are you? Why? How do I? How can you help me? I'm working with these credit unions. I have to present a vision to them, right? And I said, I want us to be a trusted advisor to the credit union space, but we're not going to do it by just going up to them and telling them what to do. We're going to do good by understanding and earning their trust. And you know, that's how you and I met, right? I was like, there was no real reason for me to be involved with the World Council of Credit Unions, right? Because I was actually, you know, on a different scale, a different level of where my mandate was. What I realized was that that was very important to leadership and credit unions, so I wanted to be there. And so, you know, making myself accessible, right? That's how you and I met, through serendipity. But we met, and then, you know, that is, I think, the biggest challenge that leaders have today, right, that we tend to conflate management with leadership. And a big part of leadership is creating that vision, holding everyone to that vision, everybody else will perform, and bringing us along, you know, as you go.

Heather

Because, just to use it as an example, I trusted you because you were leading with my best interests, not yours, right? But you were also curious. Hey, teach me something. Help me understand what this whole credit union thing is all about. And I think that was part of the generative fun you know, us getting to know each other, and what's turned out to be a great partnership. So, what kind of advice do you have for leaders in the credit union space or beyond about how to navigate the kind of complexity that we're talking about right now?

George

First off, be very curious, and don't shy away. Ask every question that you can, because you need to figure out which are the right questions. If you narrow the kind of questions and get through timid you can fall into the trap of asking the wrong questions, which means you will never get to the right answer, right? So, ask a lot of questions, be very curious, leverage an organization in a team like the AWS team, right? I mean, at AWS we have resources like myself that have had experience former CXOs, right? But, you know, I could get in contact with folks on the team that were CFOs. I can get in contact with people that on the team that were Chief Compliance Officers, right? So, my advice is, leverage these resources. A lot of executives, and a lot of the time I spent with executives is making them aware of the resources we have. You know, we have programs like data-driven organization, right? We've done several of those workshops with executive teams where we come in and we meet with them for a day or two and help them develop a data strategy, right? We have data assessments that we have leaders put together to understand well, what's the condition and state of my current data organization? Where's my data residing? What are the things that we need to do? We have one day sessions again, these are all with executives and their teams to help them understand, what are the outcomes you're

driving for? We work backwards on everything. So, we start off with the outcome. Eventually, once we figure it all out, then we worry about the technology. So, my advice is, ask questions, leverage the resources that are around you. And, by the way, congratulations on the Imagine grant. That is a perfect example of leveraging what's around.

Heather

We are so excited and grateful to have received that grant from AWS.

George

The Imagine grant, correct? And you know, briefly, it's a grant that our team offers every year, and you know, a lot of folks don't use it, don't leverage it. We want to encourage nonprofit organizations to think big. And sometimes, you know, you can think big, you know where you want to go, but you might not have the right resources. And this grant gives you the opportunity to, not only some kind of resources around cash and credits, but also leveraging resources for me, who helps you attain those particular outcomes. So, you know, my goal for this year now that CUES won this for our last matching grant, is to have at least five credit unions apply. Okay, everybody—I think that is a goal. Think big. I'm more than happy to meet with anyone that wants me to help them and guide them in that direction. But I do think that this is how we help drive impact in our communities, right? This is how we help drive impact into the industry. Because nobody's going to know how to solve some of these problems better than the credit union, right? And so, we're here to help. We're here to provide some guidance, whether it's on the senior leadership level, speaking with boards, or all the way down to junior staff and finding out from them, you know, where does the workflow break down, and what do you think would be helpful there?

Heather

I mean, amazing, amazing resources, amazing generosity of spirit, George, you know, thank you so much for helping CUES and for helping credit unions.

George

Thank you for the opportunity to continue to help and be a part of this community.