

Andrew Cherng and Scholarship Recipients

Complete Question-and-Answer Record

A. Opening Lightning Round

1. Orange chicken or Beijing beef?

Answer

I would not choose only one. Orange chicken and Beijing beef can be enjoyed together, although Panda is especially well known for orange chicken. Not every choice has to be either-or; sometimes both options can coexist.

2. Prius or Porsche - and why?

Answer

I choose the Prius. I still drive one because it is practical and energy efficient. Panda managers and supervisors travel throughout the country, and the company uses many energy-efficient vehicles. Even when resources are available, I value usefulness and efficiency more than status.

3. Suit and tie or activewear?

Answer

I choose activewear because it is more comfortable and creates less pressure. I prefer an informal, direct environment where people can focus on the conversation rather than appearances.

4. What was your first job?

Answer

My first job was in New York City. I worked as a busboy and learned how to become a waiter. The work was difficult, but it was excellent training. Restaurant work taught me service, discipline, speed, communication, and how to perform under pressure.

5. Complete the sentence: "Success is..."

Answer

Success is doing the right things right.

To me, success requires both good judgment and proper execution: choosing the right goal, then carrying it out carefully, consistently, and ethically.

6. What quote or principle do you live by?

Answer

No best, only better.

Nothing is completely perfect. Even successful people and organizations should keep examining what already works and asking how it can become even better.

7. What did you lack growing up that you appreciate most now?

Answer

My first answer is: everything. One of my strongest childhood memories is receiving a bicycle from a cousin who was moving from Taipei to Japan and could not take it with him. I rode it for hours and returned home exhausted but extremely happy.

That bicycle represented:

- Independence
- Mobility
- Ownership
- Freedom
- The experience of finally having something I deeply wanted

That experience stayed with me. When I want something, I plan for it, think about it, and work toward it. Occasionally something arrives as a gift, but most of the time, you have to go and get it.

8. What do you enjoy doing with your grandchildren, and do they receive bicycles too?

Answer

I do not believe in spoiling children who already have material resources. Children from successful families inherit greater responsibility, not merely greater privilege.

What I enjoy most is simply spending time with my grandchildren. I also enjoy traveling, visiting Panda stores, and meeting associates. When family members join me, they see me as a real person and understand the people and work behind the organization.

9. Who believed in you before you believed in yourself?

Answer

I do not naturally frame my life in those terms. I have generally been comfortable taking charge, speaking my mind, working with people, and accepting responsibility.

Over more than five decades in business, however, I learned that growth requires accomplishing things through other people. The challenge is not simply telling people what to do; it is creating circumstances in which they willingly cooperate because success is also in their interest.

I see Panda as an organization of problem-solvers:

- Solve your own problem.
- Help others solve their problems.
- Think long term.
- Ask what could be improved.
- Help employees recognize possibilities they may not yet see in themselves.

Many young Panda associates begin because they simply need a job. Through experience, some learn management, planning, communication, accountability, hiring, discipline, and business operations from beginning to end. Their income, housing, family circumstances, and confidence can change as a result.

At the time of the conversation, I described Panda as having approximately 2,600 restaurants and 60,000 associates, with most restaurants directly operated by the company.

B. Roots, Family, Courage, and Resilience

10. What lesson from your parents still guides you?

Answer

My father was my greatest influence as a human being. He had limited formal education, but he was a calm and respected leader. Restaurant kitchens can become stressful, especially when mistakes occur. His response was often simple:

Let's do it again.

Instead of increasing the tension, he helped people regain control. He was warm, helpful, respected by friends, and careful about how he spoke to others.

My mother had an extraordinarily generous heart. As our family business grew, she helped facilitate the immigration of hundreds of families to the United States so they could pursue better lives. People came to her for help bringing relatives or friends to America, and she directed us to help make it happen.

From my parents, I inherited:

- Calm leadership
- Kindness
- Helpfulness
- Respect for people
- Responsibility toward others
- The desire to improve people's lives

Panda's growth also taught me how unexpected life can be. We faced many ups and downs, and plans did not always work. The important ability was to recognize problems, change quickly, and keep experimenting. I feel deeply blessed. If I had not come to California, or had not unexpectedly entered quick-service restaurants, my life could have been entirely different.

11. How did your life journey teach you courage and resilience?

Answer

I think about this through the concept of workability - whether something truly works. We should not wait until something breaks before making a change. Even when circumstances are good, I ask:

- What is imperfect?
- What could work better?
- How can we improve it before a crisis occurs?

To me, resilience is not simply surviving a disaster. It is developing a habit of examining, adjusting, and improving.

I connect this idea to Panda's employment model. We look at whether managers are doing well financially and try to create win-win relationships in which employees benefit when the business performs well. When interests are aligned, leaders do not need to force people to perform. Employees can see why the goal benefits them, their families, and the organization.

12. How did your early experiences shape your ambitions?

Answer

From my childhood perspective, remaining poor was not acceptable. My father was a chef, and our family moved to Yokohama because he obtained a better-paying job. I attended high school in Yokohama's Chinatown and noticed that many classmates came from families that already owned restaurants. We did not own one, and I remember thinking how wonderful it would be to have a restaurant of our own.

Those experiences helped develop:

- A desire to do more
- A willingness to take risks
- Optimism
- An interest in business
- Comfort with making decisions
- Determination to improve my circumstances

Some of my investments and experiments failed, but I did not treat smaller failures as reasons to stop. I treated them as learning experiences while keeping Panda as the core business.

My lesson about details

I believe people should do little things exceptionally well. Cleanliness is one example. I wanted our stores and bathrooms to be consistently clean, and I joked that if I found chewing gum near a store, the manager would owe me \$100. The point was not the money. Managers should notice details before a customer or senior leader notices them.

The \$600,000 painting example

I once reviewed an apartment-building painting contract initially estimated at approximately \$600,000. Rather than assuming that three bids automatically guaranteed a fair deal, I pushed the team to understand the work itself:

- How many square feet required painting?

- How many gallons of paint were needed?
- Why did one contractor estimate 3,000 gallons while another estimated 2,000?
- Was scaffolding necessary?
- Could mechanical lifts be used?
- Would the paint be brushed or sprayed?
- Was one coat sufficient, or were two required?
- What repairs were included?

Once the team understood the details, I believed the project could be completed for approximately half the original amount. Kitty Lo reinforced for me the importance of careful negotiation, understanding value, and knowing exactly what one is purchasing.

13. How do you handle the guilt of succeeding when others continue to struggle?

Answer

I do not feel guilty about 'making it.' I see success as the accumulation of many small successes, struggles, adjustments, and lessons rather than one lucky event.

I remember an early restaurant construction project taking six months when it should have taken only a few weeks because the contractor had another full-time job and could work only on weekends. My focus was not guilt; it was workability:

- How can we reach the goal?
- How can we do it faster?
- How can we do it less expensively?
- How can we do it better?
- What can everyone learn from the process?

Panda Cares donation interlude

During the discussion, Panda Cares leader Tina explained that Panda was an early adopter of requesting small in-store donations. She said the program began around \$1 million, grew to approximately \$3 million, then \$7 million, and eventually reached roughly \$50 million before the pandemic. Panda Restaurant Group covers the foundation's operating expenses so customer donations can return to community causes.

I have seen that customers can be extremely generous when they clearly understand where their money is going. Some people contribute more than the price of their meal because they trust that the funds will support local organizations. When a purpose is clear, people are much more willing to participate. Small donations can become a major collective resource when millions of people contribute.

14. How can students from struggling backgrounds prevent financial anxiety from limiting their ambitions?

Answer

Young people should recognize that employment and opportunity are available and then take practical action. I have seen young Panda managers become major earners or breadwinners in their families.

Students can be creative about combining work and education rather than assuming they must choose only one.

Scholarships are valuable, but students can also do a great deal for themselves. My advice is:

- Get a part-time job.
- Learn the value of money.
- Become organized.
- Help at home.
- Accept more responsibility.
- Stop waiting for someone else to solve everything.
- Treat work as personal-development training.

I sometimes imagine parents asking Panda, 'What did you do to my child?' The ideal result is that the young employee becomes more responsible - organizing the room, helping with dishes, mowing the lawn, managing time, and contributing more to the household.

I also cited an hourly wage figure during the live discussion to show that part-time work can produce meaningful income. That figure was an example from the conversation, not a universal wage for every location or job.

15. Did you ever doubt your abilities, and when did you know your dedication was worthwhile?

Answer

I sometimes questioned particular decisions, but I did not fundamentally doubt myself. My attention was usually on the destination:

- Where am I going?
- What result am I trying to produce?
- What must I do to reach it?

There are often several possible paths. Failing to enter one school, secure one job, or accomplish one objective does not eliminate every opportunity.

I also did not spend much time identifying my 'greatest failure.' I was occupied with daily operations, solving problems, and moving the company forward. I often use the phrase 'begin with the end in mind.'

My approach is:

- 1.** Identify the intended result.
- 2.** Watch for danger early.
- 3.** Plan.
- 4.** Act.
- 5.** If the intended result is no longer good, change direction.
- 6.** Continue searching for a better method.

Communication is essential. A company performs better when people understand where they are going and how they will get there together.

16. What childhood challenge later became a strength?

Answer

I do not select one specific hardship because I do not normally categorize my life that way. I focus on where I need to go and what is required.

Before opening the first Panda Express, I studied what other restaurants and contractors were doing. I noticed what I liked, what I disliked, and where I believed I could perform better.

When Panda Express was being built in Glendale, I served as the general contractor. Although I preferred going to bed and waking up late, construction workers began at about 7:00 a.m. I changed my schedule, appeared every day, supervised the work, completed it on time, and believed I did it at a lower cost. That experience showed me that personal habits can change when the goal matters enough.

As Panda expanded, I could no longer perform every task myself. Growth required:

- Working through other people
- Explaining the reasons behind decisions
- Discussing different viewpoints
- Reaching agreement
- Building cooperation
- Protecting one's reputation
- Becoming trustworthy

People choose business partners because they trust them, believe they add value, and do not expect them to take unfair advantage.

C. The Panda Way, Leadership, and Giving Back

17. What Panda Way value should students practice first?

Answer

My first answer is: all of it. If I must emphasize one value, it is credibility.

Credibility means:

- Do what you say.
- Say what you do.
- Do not exaggerate.
- Do not promise something casually.
- When you agree to do something, show up and complete it.
- When a problem prevents completion, communicate honestly.

I also encourage generosity. If you are debating whether to bring a gift or whether to spend \$50 or \$100, stop overthinking and choose the more generous action when you can afford it.

Panda's inside-out development philosophy includes four dimensions:

- Physical
- Mental
- Emotional
- Spiritual

Physical development is the easiest starting point to explain. How people care for themselves, carry themselves, and show up can affect their confidence and the respect they receive.

Sharing success with managers

In our early stores, I gave managers and chefs a percentage of restaurant profits - in one example, approximately 10%. This aligned their interests with the business. Because they benefited directly when the restaurant performed well, I did not need to supervise every decision from California while stores operated in distant states.

When people share in success, responsibility and motivation become more natural.

18. How can young people give their time, energy, and resources to make the greatest impact?

Answer

Young people should become more engaged and more curious about other people's needs. I encourage them to:

- Go the extra mile.
- Participate rather than remain isolated.
- Earn and manage some of their own resources.
- Build relationships.
- Learn how communities support their members.
- Pay attention to what other people need.
- Use whatever capacity they currently possess.

Earning income increases a person's ability to make choices and contribute. The first job may pay relatively little, but experience and earning power can grow over time.

My community-observation example

I once visited a close-knit religious community where families regularly gathered, worshipped, ate together, discussed business and life, educated their children within a shared structure, and remained highly involved with one another. What impressed me was the strength of the community infrastructure:

- People regularly saw one another.
- Business and personal relationships overlapped.
- Children and adults belonged to an active support network.
- Members were interested in one another's work and lives.
- Community practices created repeated opportunities for connection.

I wanted to understand what elements of that communal engagement could be learned from and applied elsewhere. Impact does not come only from money. It also comes from belonging, connection, participation, and people helping one another consistently.

19. What inspired you to become a philanthropist?

Answer

The needs in society are much larger than any one person or organization can solve. Panda should give back because our restaurants succeeded through the support of customers and communities. Returning that support is both gratitude and responsibility.

I also hope visible giving will encourage others to begin:

- Start a charitable effort.
- Donate to an existing organization.
- Contribute time.
- Participate in community work.
- Help another person improve their circumstances.

I am concerned about poverty, social division, crime, anti-Asian attacks, and community safety. Panda cannot solve every issue, but success does not remove our responsibility to ask:

What more can we do?

I describe philanthropy as honoring one's blessings. My advice is:

- Extend help.
- Be an example.
- Say yes even when busy.
- Bring friends with you.
- Work collectively.
- Help people become capable of helping others.

One person's impact will always be limited. That is why participation must spread from one person to another.

20. How can students practice “No best, only better” without comparing themselves to others?

Answer

I focus on breadth and depth. Develop breadth by learning what is happening outside your immediate field. Develop depth by becoming highly knowledgeable in an area that genuinely interests you.

Learning how other people approach problems can expand your choices without turning life into a competition. I encourage students to:

- Be curious about other people.
- Learn from individuals with different knowledge.
- Explore several possibilities.
- Develop strong expertise in one or more areas.
- Use conversations and tools such as ChatGPT to ask questions and generate ideas.

The goal is not to become 'better than' another person. It is to become a broader, deeper, and more capable version of yourself.

21. Can one person inspire every human being in the world?

Answer

Not even the greatest spiritual figure can inspire every single person, and that does not matter. Do the best you can, knowing you will never reach or influence everyone. The process of trying still produces learning, growth, and benefit.

My practical conclusion is:

- Help more people by doing more.
- Improve through practice.
- Work harder.
- Do not make universal approval the standard for meaningful action.

22. Besides getting a job, how can students become successful and give back?

Answer

I challenge the assumption that success, employment, and giving back should be separated. Learning how a business works can itself prepare a person to contribute more effectively.

Rather than remaining in a narrow entry-level role, seek an environment where you can learn a broad range of functions:

- Cleaning
- Customer service
- Selling
- Scheduling
- Hiring
- Training
- Accounting
- Managing
- Leading people
- Understanding an entire operation

I did not originally know anything about quick-service restaurants. I was focused on full-service dining until someone invited Panda to open in a mall. By entering an unfamiliar opportunity, learning the model, and recognizing its advantages, we found a path to much greater growth.

My advice is to seek environments where you can learn how a successful operation functions as a whole.

23. What does it mean to build a business around people rather than products?

Answer

Every organization is in the people business because virtually everything must be accomplished through other people. Building around people requires:

- Discipline
- Training

- Communication
- Shared standards
- Alignment
- Persuasion
- Accountability
- Personal growth

Employees may initially think differently from the organization. Leaders need to explain the system, allow people to try it, and prove that it works. When something does not work, leaders should change it.

I also connect successful business to family stability. Without sufficient income and a functioning business, families face greater insecurity. I emphasize:

- Earning
- Saving
- Preparing for the future
- Buying a home when possible
- Creating a financial protection system
- Avoiding future dependency

Caring about people does not mean ignoring economics. It means building a strong operation capable of supporting employees and their families over the long term.

24. How do you remain humble while achieving more?

Answer

My life contains many unexpected turns, and I cannot fully explain why so many circumstances worked in my favor. I often reflect that:

- If I had stayed in Japan, the outcome could have been different.
- If I had remained in New York, opening and owning restaurants might have been much more difficult.
- If I had not come to California, Panda might never have developed as it did.
- If I had remained only in traditional full-service restaurants, Panda Express might never have emerged.

As a young man, owning one restaurant in Chinatown would have seemed like a major accomplishment. I could not realistically have imagined approximately 2,600 restaurants. I therefore consider myself extremely fortunate and blessed.

But gratitude should not remain a feeling. It should produce behavior:

- Be nicer.
- Help people.
- Say yes more often.
- Be generous.
- Use available resources.
- Continue working toward meaningful ambitions.
- Help others live better lives.

Even at age 78, I still have significant ambitions. With more resources than I possessed earlier, I feel an even greater responsibility to determine what additional good I can accomplish.

D. Advice to the Next Generation

25. How should I prepare myself to live a better life?

Answer

Begin with life purpose. Early in business, the objective may be straightforward: open the restaurant, solve the problem, and make money. Over time, you may discover something deeper that you genuinely stand for.

For example:

- You first work to support yourself.
- Then you want to buy a home.
- The home is not only for you; it is for your family.
- The purpose expands from 'me' to 'us.'
- Eventually, it may extend to employees, communities, or society.

The bigger the purpose, the bigger the action.

A larger purpose requires more time, people, money, practice, communication, and persistence. Do not wait until you are wealthy before helping. You can contribute through willingness, effort, service, relationships, encouragement, and going the extra mile.

26. What fortune-cookie message would you give every student?

Answer

IBL - Inspire a Better Life. And it starts with you.

You cannot wait for institutions, employers, mentors, or society to begin the process. First develop yourself, then use that growth to improve the lives of others.

27. How do you balance the fear of taking a risk against the fear of missing an opportunity?

Answer

Good decisions are easier when you are already in a reasonably good condition. If you are disorganized, overwhelmed, physically unwell, or surrounded by unresolved problems, decision-making becomes more difficult.

My starting advice is:

- Take care of yourself.
- Become competent at what you do.
- Organize your life.

- Continue developing personally.
- Clarify your purpose.

No one makes the correct decision every time, but making a decision is usually better than endless procrastination. My framework is:

1. Clarify what you want.
2. Determine whether you are prepared.
3. Act.
4. Work harder and more effectively.
5. Use available resources carefully.
6. Adjust when circumstances change.
7. Do not sit and wait for opportunity.

Think of an athlete: someone who wants to become a better basketball player must train, practice, prepare physically, and develop whatever talent they have. You must become ready before the opportunity arrives.

28. How can students remain connected to their communities and eventually serve them?

Answer

I focus first on personal development and how a future leader presents themselves. You need to become more powerful and credible in how you show up. That includes:

- Posture
- Voice
- Volume
- Confidence
- Clarity
- Preparation
- Willingness to be coached

Good intentions alone are insufficient. A future physician or community leader must communicate conviction so other people can recognize competence and trustworthiness.

The process of asking, thinking, receiving coaching, and having conversations may be as important as a single answer. My response is not a specific community-service program; it is a challenge to become the capable, confident person who can eventually lead and serve effectively.

29. Should students choose a secure path or a personally meaningful one?

Answer

Trust the direction that feels meaningful and ambitious. A supposedly secure path is not automatically the better life. Why deliberately choose less growth, less success, or less opportunity if you have the ability to pursue more?

My advice is:

- Trust what is in your heart.
- Do not remain timid.
- Speak clearly about what you want.
- Perform as though you intend to become excellent.
- Become engaged.
- Take action.

Do not let fear disguise itself as prudence.

30. What kind of person should a student become in relation to the world?

Answer

I would first turn the question back to you:

What do you want?

When a student is uncertain, I recommend Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as a useful map for life.

My direct coaching is:

- Everyone needs coaching.
- There is more potential inside you than you may currently express.
- Do more.
- Be in action.
- Speak as though you believe what you are saying.
- Put yourself into situations where confidence can develop.
- Do not allow fear of looking bad to silence you.
- Let your ideas and abilities become visible.

Identity is developed through action. Do not wait to discover a perfectly defined version of yourself before participating in life.

31. What should someone consider when uncertain about a career?

Answer

Emphasize action rather than abstract analysis. Develop a support group where you can discuss:

- Dreams
- Plans
- Actions
- Progress
- Work
- Personal involvement
- Obstacles

Begin with responsibilities already nearby:

- Clean your room.

- Help at home.
- Complete ordinary tasks well.
- Become less of a burden.
- Add value to your family.
- Find summer or part-time work.
- Contribute financially when possible.
- Practice talking with people.

Restaurant work can be especially useful for quiet or introverted students because it requires interaction. Employees must greet customers, cooperate with colleagues, solve problems, and become more engaging.

I may have been similar when I was younger, but I did not have someone to coach me as directly. My intentionally blunt comments are meant to accelerate that development for students.

32. What is the single most important thing the next generation should carry forward?

Answer

Life is not one thing.

Life cannot be reduced to a single principle. I bring together several ideas:

- Everyone has an inner purpose.
- People need to speak about their dreams.
- Communication creates possibilities.
- A goal becomes achievable when it is clear enough to see.
- Higher goals produce greater growth.
- Even falling short of a high goal may leave you better off.
- People elevate one another when they gather, communicate, and work together.
- Nothing happens until someone takes the next step.

My final challenge is:

What are you going to do now that you have been thinking about for a long time but have not yet started?

My central concern is not whether students merely enjoy or remember my words. It is whether they will do something differently afterward.