



When I Hire, My Most Important Criteria Are "Entrepreneurial Agency" And Perseverance

July 20, 2026

Allan Thygesen, Chief Executive of Docusign, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the power of direct, transparent leadership, why first-principles thinking beats managing from 30,000 feet, and how he hires for entrepreneurial agency and perseverance.

Bryant: What is core to your leadership style?

Thygesen: I've always been fairly direct and open. I appreciate that in people I work with, and I want to have that kind of relationship with my teams. I am very transparent, and I think that breeds trust and better decision-making. I want to be challenged, and I like to hear different opinions.

I'll often go around the room and call on people. I don't want the discussion to be dependent on whether someone is an extrovert or introvert, or whether they are highly opinionated. I want to hear from everybody to get the full picture.

Bryant: A lot of people are conflict-avoidant. It sounds like you're comfortable being direct.

Thygesen: I don't see it as conflict. The best way to avoid conflict is to get issues out on the table. The best way for things to blow up is to try to avoid them.

Bryant: What were some important early lessons for you?

Thygesen: A key lesson from my early mentors was the importance of first-principles thinking, being able to get at the underlying issues to understand things deeply. As a manager, an easy trap to fall into is managing at a high, abstract level. You've got to understand things at the root level. To make change, you can't do that from 30,000 feet.

Another early lesson was about leading from the front, showing people that you understand their problems and that you're willing to do the most uncomfortable things. In my first job out of grad school, I sat in a metal cage in a warehouse on an anti-static mat, working for a PC manufacturer. It was probably the least glamorous job of anyone in my business school class. But I'm willing to do that stuff, and I think people see that.

At the same time, humility is important. You want to lift others up, and you don't want to center things on your contributions. I always try to give people as much airtime and visibility as I possibly can, and I get a little suspicious of leaders who don't do that.

Bryant: A lot of leaders are changed by the CEO role, which carries a lot of powerful signals that the chief executive is the most important person. How do you guard against that?

Thygesen: I've got to check myself all the time that I'm not getting only positive feedback. And if you show vulnerability and seek out and elevate people who tell the truth, then you will have some people who will give you the straight scoop. I've got a couple of people on my team who are not shy. It's essential to have somebody who will tell you when something was not your best work.

Bryant: You have served on a lot of boards, in part because of your background as a venture capitalist. How did that experience shape how you lead as a CEO now, dealing with your own board?

Thygesen: It makes you better appreciate that you have to talk to your board at their level, because they fly at a different level than management. It helps you understand how to talk to them and ensure they're with you, not in front of you, not too far behind you, but right with you.

It also gives you the ability to zoom out. It's very easy to get insular and overly focused on your own company and lose perspective. Working in venture capital, where I got to see hundreds of companies every year, helps you develop pattern recognition and gives you a wider lens on the world.

Bryant: Leadership is getting harder every day. These CEO jobs aren't for everybody. Why are you drawn to the fire?

Thygesen: It's tremendously satisfying to know that the buck stops with me. There's a sense of ownership of the problem and the outcome. That sense of responsibility is very invigorating for me. It is also exhausting and all-consuming. If that bothers you, you probably shouldn't be the CEO, because that's the job.

Bryant: What were important early influences for you?

Thygesen: I grew up in Copenhagen. My parents were civil-service academics, so there wasn't a lot of talk about business at home. It was all about economics and government policy, and I ended up studying economics at the University of Copenhagen. I thought I was going to be a government official, and maybe

even a politician.

Then I randomly started working at a medical technology company in Denmark that exported all over the world, and I loved it. I got more and more responsibility, and I ended up applying to business school, which brought me to the United States in 1986. I started working in tech in the Bay Area after grad school, and I never left.

Bryant: To what do you attribute the sharp trajectory of your career?

Thygesen: People I've worked for have always appreciated my energy and focus. I've always been a high-energy person, and I can apply and focus that energy in a very intense way to make a lot of progress quickly. I have a sense of urgency, and most organizations generally want to continue the status quo. There's a lot of value to people who have a sense of agency and urgency.

Bryant: How do you hire?

Thygesen: My two most important criteria are entrepreneurial agency and perseverance. By entrepreneurial agency, I mean initiative. You not only think about the actions, but you will take the actions, and you don't need to be prompted and nudged to do so. That creates an energy around you and allows you to move organizations.

And I've learned the importance of perseverance from my entrepreneurial background. I understand that we're going to encounter times when we do better than we deserve, and there will be times when we do worse than we deserve. I want to see evidence that you've persevered through difficult times.

If you have those two qualities, I think almost everything else falls into place.

Bryant: What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

Thygesen: Clarity in communication is both the most important and the hardest leadership skill. You have to be able to clearly articulate a direction so that people understand where you're going and why. It's easy to write 10 pages about something, but to synthesize what's important and to communicate it in a way that is appropriate to the audience and consistent for different audiences is very hard.

It's a part of the CEO job that you don't exercise that much early in your career, because you don't have the opportunity to communicate at scale. But as you become more senior, it becomes the primary instrument through which you exercise your influence.