

“5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Became Managing Principal at Meridian Design Associates Architects,” With Antonio Argibay



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I would want everyone to join a movement to Put People First. We must think about the impact of all our actions in terms of how they affect all of us, because what affects one affects all sooner or later. If we let this guide us, we will all be a lot better off.

Today I had the pleasure of interviewing Antonio Argibay, AIA, LEED AP, who is Managing Principal at Meridian Design Associates Architects P.C., an award-winning global company headquartered in New York, with offices in Miami and Sevilla, Spain. Their portfolio of work runs the gamut of commercial interiors to retail to residential to healthcare. Since founding the firm in 1981, he has focused Meridian toward a strong social responsibility to find people-centered solutions, an area of great passion for Antonio. His primary area of practice is Media & Entertainment, where he and his team of visionaries plan next-generation spaces to work seamlessly with today's workflows and remain relevant for years to come through carefully projected future scenarios.

Antonio received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Pratt Institute. He is a member of the American Institute of Architects, LEED and National Council of Architectural Registration Boards accredited and a registered architect in over a dozen states. He is a member of the Board of Directors of Friends of the National Museum of the American Latino and has been recognized with awards from The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc. and Upwardly Global.

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Thank you so much for doing this with us Antonio! Can you tell us a bit about your “backstory”? What led you to this particular career path?

I studied architecture and followed the usual path after graduation by getting a job and working in a firm. I worked for an architect who was occasionally assigned media projects; I viewed them as workplaces that were unfriendly to the people working in them. So I proposed to my boss that we invest in new technologies and build a practice around humanizing high-technology facilities. He passed on the idea, but I couldn't let go of that concept. Soon afterward, I left to form my own firm, Meridian Design Associates, in 1981, which focused on that area of design.

My longer backstory is that I'm an immigrant born in Havana, Cuba. After Castro took over, I was separated from my parents as a child, when I was sent to Spain in a shipload of about five hundred child refugees. That event removed me from a relatively comfortable, urban existence to something quite different in rural Spain, where I lived with my grandparents. There was no school for my first year, only tutoring. There was no modernity, and children worked; we did not play. Fortunately, my grandfather had his books, and he educated me. The experience was important in my development as an artist and an archi-

tect. In Spain, I had to learn to play with rocks and sticks to tap into my budding sense of creativity.

My first interest was to be an artist, a painter specifically, but I gravitated to architecture because it afforded a greater opportunity to make a difference. What I found from studying the discipline was a combination of social consciousness and a love of design. I earned my bachelor's degree in architecture at Pratt Institute and continued on to complete a master's with a full-tuition scholarship while working.

What is it about the position of CEO or executive that most attracted you to it?

The role of an effective chief executive officer was something I grew into, as it was a necessity to create a successful architectural practice in probably the most competitive marketplace for those services: New York City.

Most of our readers — in fact, most people — think they have a pretty good idea of what a CEO or executive does. But in just a few words can you explain what an executive does that is different from the responsibilities of the other leaders?

I read a lot about leadership and the duties and responsibilities inherent in that role and most of the time I read material that fails to understand the true nature of leading a company and the bigger challenges. To me, the most overlooked is choosing those you will be leading and understanding their role in the larger picture of the company. The responsibility of hiring — and of course firing -- is the biggest differentiator. A company will be unable to succeed without having the right people in the right place — and without a leader who knows what the right place is.

What is the one thing that you enjoy most about being an executive?

Making a difference. The CEO as a steward of the company's values allows the company to become a vehicle to improve our world. I believe that to improve the world, you begin with yourself, and that which you can influence — your company.

What are the downsides of being an executive?

It is an ever-expanding role, so it consumes a tremendous amount of energy in all regards

-physically, mentally and even spiritually.

What are the “myths” that you would like to dispel about being a CEO or executive. Can you explain what you mean?

The biggest myth is that you do whatever you want, and you answer to no one. A company cannot last without leadership accountability.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by women executives that aren't typically faced by their male counterparts?

By far the biggest challenge is facing gender inequality. This is the illness at the root of the symptoms that result in female CEOs not being taken seriously, being patronized by colleagues, and having trouble raising funds for expansion.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company?

I'd like to touch on a period of upheaval that in hindsight was very challenging and certainly interesting. The time was the year 2000 and our firm's clientele was heavily media and entertainment as well as technology. That spring, the dot.com bubble exploded. We were financially very exposed, with a \$120 million project just beginning. The project was cancelled, and we were forced to negotiate just to get pennies on the dollar to remain solvent. I reached out to other colleagues, and managed to place all the staff in danger of layoff in other firms.

I was able to stabilize our situation in a few months and start the climb back. We were able to even bring some employees back. Then 9-11 happened. Our company was in SoHo and that area was closed because of the attack. We were closed for two weeks. It was a time with little hope and high anxiety, as bills mounted and projects came to a halt. I questioned our ability to survive as I had never before.

In the months that ensued, it seemed that we would not make it. We needed a miracle, and lo and behold a miracle happened. Out of nowhere we received a government check for about \$16,000 — not a lot of money, but the timing couldn't have been better. In this case, it was the straw that propped up the proverbial camel's back.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

Early in our history, we were less diligent with hiring and had yet to learn the importance of hiring the right person. For example, one of our first bookkeepers seemed nice enough. She was on time for work, and appeared to be working hard. Back in those days, checks were written by hand out of a checkbook binder and the checks were in numerical order. One day, after signing some checks, I noticed a check missing from the last page. Very odd. I found the statement and saw that it was a check for not too big and not too small an amount made out to and cashed by our bookkeeper. I contacted the bank to see a copy of the check and lo and behold it had been signed in my name with a very interesting detail: where the dots would be in “Antonio Argibay” were very cute hearts.

After contacting the police and her removal, we began the search for another candidate to fill the position with a better idea of what we were looking for in that position. The next bookkeeper, again, was nice and hardworking. The credentials were there: an MBA, good job record, etc. After two months of her being our bookkeeper, I received a call from our accountant, who stated in a calm manner — “I don’t think your bookkeeper has an MBA. As a matter of fact, I’m finding the questions somewhat troubling. Today, she asked me the difference between a credit and a debit.” Uh, oh.

The lesson for me was that hiring is one of the most important things you do as a CEO. Needless to say, I concentrated at excelling in this area.

What is the most striking difference between your actual job and how you thought the job would be?

There are several things that are quite a bit different between the actual job and the one I had fantasized about. I realize how naïve it was to think I would be omnipotent, that I would be able to implement all my ideas immediately and with no resources. That I would answer to no one. I could not have been more wrong.

Certainly, not everyone is cut out to be an executive. In your opinion, which specific traits increase the likelihood that a person will be a successful executive and what type of person should avoid aspiring to be an executive?

The traits that increase the likelihood of being a successful executive are the same ones that make a successful leader: a positive attitude, integrity and the ability to inspire.

What advice would you give to female leaders to help their team to thrive?

My advice is gender neutral. A successful CEO is a successful CEO, regardless of their sex. Hence, I would give the same advice that I said in the preceding question: have a positive attitude, integrity and the ability to inspire.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

The greatest gift I ever received was training and education. The year I started at Pratt Institute I met Vittorio Giorgini, an Italian architect from Florence who was my freshman year instructor. Ironically, it was his first teaching engagement in the United States, so in a way we were both freshmen. Vittorio became a guiding figure in the practice of architecture and in the ideals that underlie design. Subsequently, we worked together during my master's degree in supporting his ideas through documentation and editing of his writing.

In those years, Vittorio had developed a following of young architects that embraced his design ideas as well as his broader views. His SoHo loft was an exciting place to meet visiting architects from Europe: exchanging ideas over bowls of pasta and glasses of wine and watching our tight knit group grow in a variety of directions. Not all of us began practices, not all of us stayed in New York — yet all but a few to this day have not rifted apart. Vittorio, in a way, was my alma matter.

As I grew and began my own practice, I turned to Vittorio for counsel. He had a successful practice in Italy prior to coming to the United States. One thing I'll remember is that when I met the first existential challenge to the young firm's survival, I was despondent. I went to Vittorio asking for advice for something that had no solution. It was one of the cyclical economic downturns that leave architects wondering, shaking their heads — what do I do now? His answer was an inspiration to me then and has become a guiding light in the similar situations that ensued: "You must keep the studio open at all costs." In other words, to make every sacrifice, take any project because the studio is the vehicle and without it, there could be no way back to independence in architecture and design.

How have you used your success to make the world a better place?

I consider my success modest, but early in my career I realized that we were not only making architecture, but we were making architects. Architects who were trained with values as professionals and people that created a value for all. Now, after close to four decades of practice, I derive tremendous pleasure at having launched many other careers that like Meridian, work tirelessly to improve our world, through environmental consciousness, putting people first in our design and providing a great workplace in which to practice.

What are your “5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Started” and why? (Please share a story or example for each.)

1. Growth will absorb you. As your company grows, you become aware that you are needed for leadership, vision, decisions, defining values and that those needs create a chain reaction that drives the growth of a company. Hence, a company's growth will be the catalyst for a deeper immersion by leadership.
2. In the period that I've had the company, the most salient recurring change is technology. It is easy to predict there will be substantial changes in technology in the next five years — but we don't know where that change will be or in what order it may come when it comes. We however have a vision that allows us to allocate resources to implement advancements, such as incorporating 3D laser scanning as a service. We had to develop a budget, hire expert staff and verify compatibility of the end product with our present workflow so it could add to our services in a logical manner and utilize our existing client base.
3. You will be exposed all the time. You are always “on”. To be effective at your role, you must be visible inside and outside of the firm. There will be no anonymity or coasting under the radar as a CEO. All eyes will always be on you.
4. It is important to understand that the role of leader goes beyond what happens in the firm you lead. You must be willing to spend a substantial amount of time articulating the company values through action. I'm involved in several causes and for any executive, to do so you must come out of your day-to-day duties and bring vision and hard work to those causes. One such effort is my participation on the board of the Friends of the National Museum of the American Latino in Washington DC. The goal is to create a National Museum on the Mall within the family of the Smithsonian Museums. We meet with lawmakers and sponsors to pass the bills already in Congress, raise

awareness nationally and speak up as champions for this cause.

5. Leading is hard work. Leading is much more demanding than managing. As the first two points indicate, a successful leader is at the tip of the pyramid and must be able to accept the failures as his or her own but share and credit the successes with the team. I often speak on leadership and what and how it means. To do so successfully, I went through a research process. I visited 15 or so websites and made a matrix of their qualities against their different publications and found interesting that by far, three qualities resonated: a positive attitude, integrity and the ability to inspire.

After that, I asked myself what are the actions that feed those qualities? I spoke to other leaders and found out the following:

Vision — The vision of action — a verb — upon which you see further and can make timely corrections to stay the course.

Service — Leading is providing a service. You are doing a job that many don't want, and few can do well.

Sacrifice — What you must be able to endure to support your service.

For these reasons, I always explain leadership as a pyramid. My pyramid is upside down. It is a funnel, and all responsibilities sit on the shoulders of the leader.

1. Vision Vertigo. You look straight ahead to see what is coming and you trip on a little thing. You look down and you get hit by a bus. It took me some time to realize that being a CEO requires you to go beyond the concept of walking or even running. You need to be motorized. Being a CEO is less about my ability to self-propel but of bringing others along. So, I shift my focus frequently to do periodic checks under the virtual hood of the company to then drive forward with a sense of confidence that all systems are working as they should.
2. One of the most common versions of this happens when your firm is asked to provide a proposal for a new project in a competitive situation. The big picture/ looking ahead in answering a "Request for Proposal" is supposedly simple: gather qualifications, provide an experienced team, give a competitive fee structure and other similar tasks. The "looking down" is making sure the details are proofread, that the information is

collated, that all the components are in the response. For a successful proposal, we pull everything together in the big picture.

3. You make decisions — not give orders. Decisions come from examining options developed through some consensus process with staff. I found out early on in my career that giving orders created a risk, and limiting risks is one of the primary roles of an effective CEO. Working with others who have a better grasp of details of issues will not only guide leaders successfully through implementing decisions, it will give any needed implementations a better chance to succeed.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

I would want everyone to join a movement to Put People First. We must think about the impact of all our actions in terms of how they affect all of us, because what affects one affects all sooner or later. If we let this guide us, we will all be a lot better off.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

“We all want to find happiness.”

In my search, I looked in a lot of places and asked many questions. In the end, I have learned that my moments of happiness have only occurred when I’m grateful. I have yet to find a grateful person that was unhappy.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.

I have always had a strong interest in philosophy and more recently, on the possibilities that virtue brings in a secular society that guides our moral compass. Hence, there is a professor named Ernest Sosa whose acquaintance would be of interest.

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WRITTEN BY

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2x pet tech founder, publicist, writer, and dog mom. I love learning about what makes CEOs tick.



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