

Antonio Argibay of Meridian Design Associates Architects: “Managing a team successfully is a prerequisite in many organizations to climb the leadership ladder”



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Photo: Geandy Pavon

I had the pleasure of interviewing Antonio Argibay, AIA, LEED AP. Antonio is the 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 and his staff have proven the innovative quality of their work through projects such as the game-changing Warner Media HQ relocation to Hudson Yards and HBO's LAG Data Center. Meridian's other blue-chip entertainment clients include CBS, CNN, ESPN, Telemundo, A+E, ABC, Discovery and NBC. Antonio and his work have been featured in the Associated Press, Broadcast Engineering, The New York Times, The New York Post, The New York Daily News, EFE News and many other leading publications. He was recently profiled by Hispanic Executive Magazine — <https://hispanicexecutive.com/2018/antonio-argibay-meridian-design/>.

He is an active speaker in the areas of Media & Entertainment, Architecture, Diversity, Leadership and Sustainability at venues including Columbia University and M Booth.

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.



Thank you so much for doing this with us! What is your “backstory”?

I'm the founder and CEO of Meridian Design Associates, Architects, now nearing its 40th year. My first interest was to be an artist, a painter specifically, but I gravitated to architecture because it afforded greater opportunity to make a difference. What I found from studying architecture was a combination of social consciousness and a love of design. Those are as important to me as the sun and water.

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 from Havana to Spain in a shipload of about five hundred children as refugees. Eventually I was reunited with my parents in New York as a teenager. I earned my bachelor's degree in architecture at Pratt Institute and continued to complete a master's degree with a full-tuition scholarship while working.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started your career?

When my career began, I was still a college student working part-time during school and full-time during breaks. My boss was the manager of a small interior design firm and his style could only be called tyrannical. We had several projects going on at once but one in particular, a world headquarters for a company in Kansas City, had our team and me working feverishly — it was 3/4 of a million square feet of space. One day during work, I received a call from a vendor letting me know that my boss was on the floor ranting and that he had called 911. I ran the few blocks but by the time I arrived, my boss was gone. It so happened that he had a nervous breakdown and that was the last I saw or heard of him. So, I guess you could say, I was thrown off the deep end of the pool — Big Time! Since I was the person most knowledgeable about the project, it fell on me to take it over. I have been swimming in the deep end ever since.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first start-



ing? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

One of my favorites is showing up for a meeting in another state, fashionably early for a presentation, only to be looked at incredulously by the assistant and being told that “the meeting is back in your office in Manhattan” an hour-and-a-half away. I learned to distinguish from what I know and what I think I know.

Ok, let’s jump to the core of our interview. Most times when people quit their jobs they actually “quit their managers”. What are your thoughts on the best way to retain great talent today?

The best way is to put people first and communicate frequently with your staff members at all levels. You don’t want to be the last to know that an individual in a management position is toxic for the company –let’s face it, the manager won’t say it, and the staff will not share unless you communicate frequently and openly. To retain talent today or any day, you have to put people first. That is the philosophy by which I run our company.

How do you synchronize large teams to effectively work together?

The larger the team, the more important it is to be organized at every level so time can be adequately managed. Effective and focused short meetings are very helpful to maintain team cohesiveness. Very often, managers want to organize meetings that are just too large for all to be heard and weigh in. If you are kept from contributing by the sheer quantity of attendees at a meeting, it is tantamount to being told your opinion does not matter. More and smaller working meetings are the best way to keep all on the same page and to allow for all voices to be heard.

Here is the main question of our discussion. Based on your personal experience, what are the “5 Things You Need To Know To Successfully Manage a Team”. (Please share a story or example for each, Ideally an example from your experience)

Managing a team successfully is a prerequisite in many organizations to climb the leadership ladder. I often point out that leadership and management are two different aspects of heading a group of individuals -- be it a company, a congregation, or a team. While they all have similar underlying qualities, managers have a task to successfully achieve measurable results. Remember, a good leader is not necessarily a great manager of a team, nor is a great manager a successful leader of a company.

To successfully manage a team, you must be able to do these five things well and pursue the refinement of these skills in your career as a manager.

- 1. Be Knowledgeable.** To manage a process, you must understand the components of the process, the pitfalls, and the shortcuts. Experience is an important aspect of knowledge, but experience can become stale without constant upkeep. One very important aspect of being a good manager is having answers. Your team will look to you for them and your superiors will expect them on a moment’s notice. I like being proactive on getting answers prior to entering a meeting no matter how small, but I have also learned that making members of the team find the answers builds up their capabilities more than if I provide answers. Remember, as mentioned above: one thing is what you know and quite another what you think you know, so helping others verify will increase your knowledge.
- 2. Team Selection** is key to management success. It is the equivalent of “hiring and firing,” one of the key tasks of a leader. Managers that succeed, always have great teams working with them and maximize the individual’s capabilities to further the team’s objectives by placing them in the right role. I have learned from experience that putting the wrong person in a role can be very damaging. My preferred approach is the same one that I used for buying my children’s clothes: they have to fit, but there should also be some room to be able grow into it.

3. **Be Organized.** Teams come together to achieve an objective. This goal can be broken down further by tasks and these tasks have to occur in a certain order to achieve the goal. All this requires a strategy and tactical plan development. A team requires structure to work efficiently and a good manager becomes the glue that holds a team together in a coordinated manner. One of the key indicators of an organized person is if the person makes lists. Early in my career I learned that making lists really helped me to become organized and that being organized had a wonderful side effect — I felt less stressed by the pressures of the job.
4. **Master Communication.** To be effective when managing a group of people, you must be able to speak all the different “languages” that your team uses to communicate, and you must then help others on your team understand each other. This skill is often thought off as being a good speaker or a good writer; however, the most important part is being a good listener. It is not an easy lesson to learn for those of us that like talking, but remember if you are speaking, you are not listening and it takes two to communicate.
5. **Be a Politician.** Keep in mind that there is a political landscape in every organization and project. Managers must respond to their constituents and sponsors, much like politicians do. I like to call it “relationship making.” A manager waiting to start a relationship until she/he needs a person on their side fails, as I’ve seen time and time. It also has catastrophic consequences for team dynamics.

What advice would you give to other CEOs or founders to help their employees to thrive?

I always say, “Put the people in your company first”. They are your company, much more than what they make or produce on a daily basis. Live the values you speak about, and you will set an example of the primary qualities of a leader — vision, service and sacrifice.



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