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Leading with Heart: Mariah Kiersey Of Ankrom Moisan Architects On The Power of Authentic Women's Leadership

An Interview With Pirie Jones Grossman



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In *today's dynamic world, the concept of leadership is continuously evolving. While traditional leadership models have often been male-dominated, there is a growing recognition of the unique strengths and perspectives that women bring to these roles. This series aims to explore how women can become more effective leaders by authentically embracing their femininity and innate strengths, rather than conforming to traditional male leadership styles. In this series, we are talking to successful women leaders, coaches, authors, and experts who can provide insights and personal stories on how embracing their inherent feminine qualities has enhanced their leadership abilities. As part of this series, we had the pleasure of interviewing Mariah Kiersey.*

Mariah Kiersey is a Senior Principal at Ankrom Moisan Architects and the Co-leader of the Office/ Retail / Community Studio. She brings over two decades of architectural and design expertise, with a portfolio spanning the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. As a licensed architect and interior designer, her work encompasses everything from urban design and large-scale commercial developments to intricate interior environments.

In her leadership role, Mariah excels at synthesizing complex site conditions and user requirements while skillfully navigating intricate land-use challenges. She fosters a collaborative environment where project teams and consultants are encouraged to explore innovative solutions. Her inclusive approach ensures that diverse stakeholder perspectives and the team's collective experiences enrich each project.

Mariah's commitment to sustainable, context-sensitive design is evident in her ability to align corporate values with community needs, delivering spaces that resonate with the client as well as the community it sits within.

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Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series. Before we dive into our discussion about authentic, feminine leadership, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you share with us the backstory about what brought you to your specific career path?

I have wanted to be an architect since I was about six years old, designing and constructing cities with Legos and shoeboxes. While I didn't play much with the dolls themselves, I loved creating spaces for them to inhabit. I was also fortunate to attend a technical high school that offered architecture as a 'major.' There, I had the opportunity to lead a team of three other students in designing a house that was later built by our school's construction team. My first architectural project was both designed and built before I even started architecture school. There is so much I wish I could go back and change once I learned about all the different styles out there.

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

I had to work multiple jobs to help pay for school and rent as I went through architecture school, so I was not able to travel abroad to Europe or be an exchange student. Although I did love my job at Ankrom Moisan, when the opportunity arose to get a visa to work in Europe where they speak English, I could not pass it up. I lived and worked in Dublin, Ireland for five years as an architect, architectural technician, and urban designer.

The experience gave me a unique global perspective as I worked on projects across multiple European cities, northern Africa, and the Middle East. Working with people from various countries, with different experiences, made me a more dynamic designer and person. Living through the highs and lows of the Great Recession while there was a challenge — I experienced the uncertainty of living with the threat of deportation and knowing there was little waiting for me back ‘home.’ Despite those challenges, the decision to return to the Pacific Northwest was based on family. While I loved my career in Dublin, the pace of life, and the diversity of work, the pull of family brought us back to the U.S. When I stopped in to say hello to my friends still at Ankrom Moisan, I was offered a job to come back, which I gladly accepted.

Another funny story comes later in my career, when I became the project architect on a hospitality NDA RFQ. I didn’t know what the project was initially, but we were selected, and it turned out to be for Oregon’s first Hooters. I had to make sure that when I was walking around on site, I always had a set of drawings, and my fake glasses to look smart and professional. It was amusing (and challenging) when contractors assumed I was there for an interview in the trailer, only to realize I was the architect inspecting their work. That was a hard place to be in, but navigating that situation required confidence and a sense of humor, and I learned how to command respect by fully embracing my role as the architect.

What do you think makes your company stand out? Can you share a story?

Our company stands out by delivering a level of service that ensures clients feel supported every step of the way. We take care of the details — holding their hands, connecting the dots, and even lifting up the contractor when needed. While I occasionally go beyond the scope of work, my priority is always to ensure that my clients are never left in the lurch. I genuinely care about their experience and the success of their projects.

For example, when working with SAIF (State Accident Insurance Fund), whose team had little experience with the construction process, we guided them through every step. We ensured their leadership committee was involved and signed off incrementally at key milestones. By breaking down decisions — like massing, color, views, and daylight — we showed how each choice contributed to the overall design. When we finally revealed the full building design, it was initially overwhelming for them. However, as we walked them through the process and connected the dots, they quickly embraced it. It was incredibly rewarding to see their excitement once everything came together.

You are a successful business leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

- 1. Results-Oriented Leadership Without Intimidation:** One character trait that trumps all is my unique ability to drive results without relying on scare tactics or a heavy-handed approach. Instead, I focus on motivating my team through collaboration and clear communication. When discussing expectations with the team for a large feasibility deliverable, I clearly outlined all the components that needed to be included to be aligned with the owner's requirements. As the deadline approached, I noticed that the necessary sheets weren't being added, and the research wasn't documented. To address this, I reminded the team of the expectations and provided additional guidance. The day before the design was due, I still wasn't seeing the progress we had committed to delivering. To get everyone on the same page, I called a quick stand-up meeting to clarify roles and responsibilities. Normally, I don't have to reinforce expectations a third time. However, before I could intervene further, the team acknowledged that they were falling short and

understood the potential disappointment for both me and the owner. Together, we discussed how to support one another, divided tasks more effectively, and worked collaboratively to meet the deadline. A colleague later pointed out that while I do repeat my expectations, I always articulate them differently, recognizing that people absorb information in various ways. They appreciated that I didn't simply repeat the same instructions but adapted my approach to help the team achieve our goals.

2. **Genuine Care and Empathy:** I've always prioritized showing care and empathy for my team. Life can surprise us all — whether it may be a health scare, child emergency, or car accident it's important to understand that life is unpredictable and challenges can arise. For instance, when a colleague faced a family emergency, I stepped in to cover their responsibilities without hesitation. This created a culture of mutual support — when I later needed help balancing a demanding workload, my team stepped up to assist me without hesitation.
3. **Strategic Thinking and Adaptability:** This is a personality trait I thrive in — it's how my passion helps get my team on board. For instance, with the decline in demand for office projects — my primary area of expertise — I recognized the need to pivot. I started exploring new market sectors, identifying areas where funding and opportunities still exist, such as spiritual spaces. By aligning my team's efforts with emerging trends, I've not only kept us competitive but also opened doors to exciting and rewarding new projects.

Leadership often entails making difficult decisions or hard choices between two apparently good paths. Can you share a story with us about a hard decision or choice you had to make as a leader? I'm curious to understand how these challenges have shaped your leadership.

One such moment came when a team member, who was struggling with a health challenge, submitted a deliverable that did not meet our standards. In the rush to meet a deadline, the work was sent to the understandably disappointed client. When the client called to express their frustration, I chose to step in and take full responsibility for the situation.

In the meeting, I listened carefully to the client's concerns and acknowledged where we had fallen short, particularly in coordinating and communicating their exact requirements. I assured them that the corrections would be made and promised to deliver the revised work within 24 hours. Behind the scenes, the employee who had prepared the initial submission watched me take the criticism without deflecting blame. It was important to me not to throw them under the bus but to protect their dignity while still addressing how we could improve as a team.

As a leader, I firmly believe it's my role to be accountable — whether that means taking the heat or sharing the successes. Afterward, I spoke with team members about the feedback we received, highlighting lessons learned and how we could prevent similar issues in the future. This experience reinforced my commitment to leading with empathy while maintaining high standards.

Another pivotal moment came when I was six months pregnant and offered the role of principal. It was unexpected — I hadn't had a mentor to guide me through what this opportunity might entail — and it required buying stock using all my savings, right before my child was due. Either I had to buy in and commit fully, knowing I would need to jump in with both feet to meet new expectations after returning from leave, or I could turn down the opportunity and potentially regret it.

Ultimately, I took the leap. It wasn't easy, but it worked out, and I'm proud of that decision. The experience shaped how I mentor others today. When I guide someone preparing for their next role, I make sure they aren't surprised by what's ahead. I work with them to set clear expectations and goals, helping them feel prepared and confident to take that next step. I don't want anyone else to face the uncertainty I did — I want them to feel equipped to succeed.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. Can you share a personal experience where embracing your unique leadership style, which might not align with traditional expectations, led to a significant positive impact in your organization or team?

As a woman in leadership, there's often an expectation not to be bold or direct. That's not who I am. I'm straightforward and don't have a poker face, so I've had to learn to pause and choose to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively. It's a simple concept, but making that choice is hard.

One instance stands out when we were facing challenges with a contractor on a project and I took a beat, a practice I've been mentoring others to adopt as well. I received a particularly harsh and accusatory email from the general contractor about the quality of my team's coordination with civil engineering. The email wasn't constructive — it was designed to call me out in front of the client. I was angry and hurt.

When you write something down and someone can stew on it, don't do that. Have a conversation, be direct, so I went on-site to have a calm, face-to-face conversation. I explained that his email was inaccurate and seemed to come from a place of frustration rather than fact. I gave him the benefit of the doubt, assuming he didn't intend to be hurtful, and he explained that was indeed not his intention. I also shared that I hoped he could learn to take a beat when writing in anger and approach things from a less frustrated place.

It's not always easy to tamp down the natural “fight” reaction, but it's essential in maintaining professionalism, building trust, and fostering respect.

In your journey as a leader, how have you balanced demonstrating resilience, often seen as a masculine trait, with showing vulnerability, which is equally powerful, but typically feminine? Can you give an example where this balance created a meaningful difference?

In anonymous Gallup polls within my team, we ranked the highest in terms of my manager's care for me. I'm seen as firm and direct, but I also know when to show empathy and put myself in others' shoes.

On a large high-rise project I was managing, we faced a challenge during the value engineering phase of the building's design. The main mechanical engineer's father unexpectedly passed away, and he had to fly out to be with his family. Unfortunately, he was in mid-air and couldn't call into the meeting — and the client, frustrated by his absence, aggressively peppered the covering engineer and it was uncomfortable. The other engineer answered nearly two hours' worth of questions as we worked through the change in the MEP system that was being driven by the person grilling him.

There was one question the covering engineer couldn't answer because it had been discussed by the missing engineer, but it wasn't something that held up the meeting, and we had direction by the end. Despite this, the client expressed his anger during the call, even stating that it was “unacceptable” to miss a meeting for such an event. At that moment, the silence in the room spoke volumes, and I could tell no one agreed with him. I was glad the client couldn't see my face at that point, as this was before Zoom became widespread.

After the meeting, the client called me personally to express his frustration, even mentioning that he had moved his own mother's funeral to avoid missing an OAC meeting. I was infuriated by his comment — it felt heartless and showed a complete lack of empathy. I understood that the engineer cared deeply about the project, having been involved from the start, but family had to come first. I knew then that I never wanted to lead with such a disregard for personal life. While I do understand that it can be frustrating when someone misses a meeting, I try not to voice that frustration, especially when family emergencies arise. I've always made it a point to support my team when family comes first, because, ultimately, family is more important than work.

This experience was a reminder of how I try to balance being firm and resilient with showing compassion. I also learned a lot from the birth of my first child, which was a traumatic experience. I'm grateful that both of us survived, and I'm proud of how my team stepped in to cover for me during my eight-week recovery.

As a woman in leadership, how have you navigated and challenged gender stereotypes, especially in situations where traditional male-dominated approaches are the norm? What strategies have you employed to remain authentic to your style?

As my grey hair grew in, I also started to feel more authority in situations where I would correct deficient work on-site. For example, during a walk-through of a potential renovation, when I discussed the pitfalls of certain decisions and how they might affect the work downstream, I could tell people respected my insights because they saw me as experienced and knowledgeable.

I feel I need to keep my grey to keep authority, so I style myself in a way that is perceived as stern as it does make my job easier. I have only so much energy and don't want to spend more of it over-explaining to prove I know what I am talking about. I do feel I am taken more seriously in being more conservative in appearance than the edginess I want to show which is who I am.

How do you utilize emotional intelligence and active listening to create an inclusive environment in your team or organization? Could you share a specific instance where these qualities particularly enhanced team dynamics or performance?

We hold quarterly reviews and check-ins where I make a point to provide specific praise, constructive feedback, and mentorship for each team member. I want them to feel comfortable coming to me with any issues that arise, knowing they won't be met with anger or frustration. I don't raise my voice; that doesn't help anyone. Instead, we focus on learning from mistakes.

For example, there was an incident where we skipped a step in our internal QA/QC process to meet a tight deadline, and that lack of coordination led to change orders later on. When I worked with the same architect on a similar project, we ensured better coordination, particularly around the roofing transitions at the parapet. The first mistake had a learning curve, but we applied that lesson the next time around. I believe in "practicing" architecture, not pretending to be an "expert." In practice, mistakes are part of the learning process. All I ask of my team is that we learn from our missteps and make sure we don't repeat them.

What role has mentorship played in developing your authentic leadership style, and how do you communicate authentically to inspire and empower both your mentors and mentees?

I've worked hard to be the mentor I wish I had early in my career. I sought advice from various people, but I never had a consistent mentor or a clear model to follow. Early on, I had a boss who would yell at me and curse at me, offering no support or recognition for the extra effort we put in. That kind of work environment can be soul-crushing. While I pushed myself for praise, over time, the lack of positive reinforcement broke my spirit, and I eventually left that firm. I don't want anyone on my team to experience that.

Later, when I worked at another firm and a project manager yelled expletives at me, I immediately stood up for myself. I reported the behavior to senior leadership because no one should tolerate that kind of disrespect in the workplace. I learned the importance of setting boundaries and advocating for a respectful, supportive environment.

My personal "why" is to leverage my experiences to inspire and empower confidence in others.



Based on your experience and research, can you please share “5 Ways Leading Authentically As A Woman Will Affect Your Leadership”?

1. **Caretaking:** As a working mom, balancing our caretaking roles with work is always a challenge. I strive to do both well, but I’ve learned that if I excel at one, I will deprive the other. It’s a constant seesaw.
2. **Active Listening:** I focus on my body language and ensure that I’m not distracted when someone is speaking. It’s important to acknowledge what’s been said and follow up on it. For example, when I receive an email, I may not have all the answers immediately, but I always acknowledge receipt and let the person know I’m addressing their questions.
3. **Saying the Quiet Part Out Loud:** I don’t shy away from the truth. I believe in addressing the elephant in the room, especially in leadership. Why beat around the bush? Time is limited, so I go straight to the point and communicate facts without making it emotional — just clear, honest communication.
4. **Fire Fighting:** I take on the complex issues that others may shy away from. When problems arise, I jump in to untangle the mess and find solutions.
5. **Breaking Down the Steps:** Complex problems can be overwhelming, like the bundling overhanging the property line — but I focus on breaking them down into smaller, actionable steps. By connecting the dots and outlining the path forward, I communicate clearly with my team to ensure everyone is aligned and moving toward the solution.

Are there potential pitfalls or challenges associated with being an empathetic leader? How can these be addressed?

I care about my team, both professionally and personally, and with some of the hard challenges the architecture and design industry is currently facing, I have to resist absorbing their emotions. It’s hard to not over-identify with their challenges, as I want to put myself in their shoes and help guide them.

This past year I have had to work on my own self-care in taking down time at night and setting boundaries. With smartphones prevalent in our workflows, just because I can be reached at all times, does not mean they should reach out all hours of all days.

I have also mentored individuals with more experience in their careers to build a network of support within our team, ensuring that we hear challenges from all levels of experience. This allows each person to connect with someone they feel comfortable reaching out to, fostering the development of future empathetic leaders.

You are a person of great influence. If you could start a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

If I could pass a law at a national level, it would be for a minimum of six months of paid maternity leave for caregivers. After having two children, I returned to work after just eight weeks for one, and twelve weeks for the other — by that time, I was familiar with my rights. But if I had been given the opportunity to fully recover and adjust before jumping back into the chaos of work and life, it would have benefited both my family and my career. I truly believe this would make a significant difference in the lives of many, allowing parents to bond with their children and return to work more effectively and refreshed.

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