

Leadership Lessons

An Interview with Adrienne Arsht

EDITORS' NOTE *Adrienne Arsht is a business leader and philanthropist. Born in Wilmington, Delaware, Arsht is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College, where she earned her bachelor's degree. She later received her Juris Doctor from Villanova University School of Law. In 1966, she became the 11th woman admitted to the Delaware Bar. Arsht began her legal career at Morris, Nichols, Arsht & Tunnell, and later joined Trans World Airlines in New York, becoming the first woman in*

its legal department to work in property, cargo, and government relations. She moved to Washington, DC, in 1979, where she founded a title company, and eventually relocated to Miami in 1996 to lead her family's bank, TotalBank, as Chair of the Board. Under her leadership, the bank grew significantly and was sold in 2007



Adrienne Arsht

for a premium. Upon the sale of the bank, she made a commitment to give away all her wealth. Her strategic investments in the arts, resilience, and diplomacy have made her a transformative force in both national and international spheres. She made a landmark \$30 million gift to Miami's Performing Arts Center in 2008 and was honored that it became the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts. She later endowed the Center with \$11 million to establish a fully paid internship program, expanding access

to careers in arts administration. In New York, she has made historic contributions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, including a \$10 million gift in 2022 to support the MetLiveArts series and a \$5 million donation to establish the Adrienne Arsht Interns, making The Met the largest U.S. art museum to offer fully paid internships.

In 2012, her contribution of \$10 million to Lincoln Center was recognized with the dedication of the Adrienne Arsht Stage in Alice Tully Hall. Arsht founded the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center at the Atlantic Council to focus on the role of Latin America and the Caribbean in the trans-Atlantic community. She also created and funded a Center for Resilience at the Atlantic Council, which evolved into the National Security Resilience Initiative, and launched the Community-Based Resilience Solutions Initiative at the Smithsonian Institution. She has held numerous leadership and advisory roles, including Executive Vice Chairman, Atlantic Council; Trustee Emerita, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and University of Miami; Honorary Trustee, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Former Trustee, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; Chair, Arsht-Cannon Foundation Advisory Committee; Member, Council on Foreign Relations; Member of the National Advisory Board of the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy; Former President of the Vice President's Residence Foundation; and Former Board Member of the Blair House Restoration Fund. She has also led initiatives at the U.S. State Department, including the Patrons of Diplomacy campaign, and established the Roxana Cannon Arsht Law Fellowship at Volunteer Legal Advocates (formerly DC Volunteer Lawyers Project) to support legal aid in domestic violence and family law. Arsht's significant global initiatives have been recognized with numerous honors, including 2025 Horatio Alger Award; Order of Princess Olga, III Degree (Ukraine); Ecuador National Order Honorato Vasquez, Grade: Commander; Obtili Award (Mexico); Order of Rio Branco (Brazil); Order of San Carlos (Colombia); Orden de Isabel la Católica/Order of the Cross of Isabella the Catholic (Spain); Carnegie Hall Medal of Excellence – first woman recipient; and Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year in Finance (Florida). She holds honorary degrees from Mount Holyoke College, Goucher College, Barry University, and is an honorary member of Beta Gamma Sigma at Georgetown University. She is the daughter of the Honorable Roxana Cannon Arsht, the first female judge in the State of Delaware, and S. Samuel Arsht, a prominent Wilmington attorney. She was married to the late Myer Feldman (d.2007), former counsel to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.



Adrienne Arsht speaking at the Atlantic Council Distinguished Leadership Awards



Adrienne Arsht – 2025 Horatio Alger Award recipient

What does the word “leadership” mean to you?

When you shared the question, I did some AI research on how many books there are with leadership in the title; 57,000! It really underscores how multifaceted and deeply personal the concept of leadership is. Everyone seems to have a different lens on what leadership means. To me, leadership means the ability to inspire, guide, and empower others toward a shared goal and creating an environment where people can thrive. “Leadership” is different depending on the context.

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, and become more, you are a leader.”

John Quincy Adams

Do you feel that leaders are born, or can leadership be taught?

Effective leadership is the ability to get others to follow. It is being empathic and understanding and a good listener. That is how you get people to follow and to be engaged. I believe leadership can absolutely be taught. Leadership requires decision making. It takes courage to decide and to take action. Courage can be cultivated through experience, facing challenges and learning from them.

*“Leader – Guts to stand out.
Follower – makes a lone nut into a leader.”*

TED Talk

You’ve championed the idea of “resilience” in many sectors. How do you define resilience?

Individual resilience is mostly genetic, but it can also be encouraged. You can learn from watching others, and decide, “I’m not going to give up.” There are also situations triggered by

stress that can cause cell changes. This is called epigenetics. This aspect of genetics shows how your behaviors and environment can cause changes that affect the way your genes work for you as well as for future generations.

A large part of my interest in resilience was inspired by my sister, Alison. She was two years younger than I, and in 1969 at the age of 25 she was in the Soviet Union as a foreign-service officer and was taken by the KGB and accused of spying. The evidence was fake tape recordings. They released her the next day, but she came back shattered. Today we might recognize it as PTSD, but then there was less knowledge of how to help. She committed suicide when she was 29. What made her less resilient?

“Courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.”

Nelson Mandela

What makes a good leader, and how do you identify a leader?

A leader has followers. To have followers you must communicate clearly. Senator Bill Bradley, the former New York Knicks player, said that a coach is great when everyone knows what you want, and a great leader compiles a team not with the best player, but with the players who fit together best. A leader must be self-confident. If you don’t believe in yourself, why should others.

“No leader can be too far ahead of their followers.”

Eleanor Roosevelt

How did your upbringing shape your values around giving and community impact?

From a young age, my parents instilled in me and my sister, Alison, the importance of philanthropy and being active members of our

community. They taught us not just to give, but to step up – to take on the challenges that others might shy away from or simply be unable to tackle. I use this as the basis of my philanthropic decisions and like to think they are game changers. This is how I choose to make an impact.

“Our purpose in life is to help others along the way.”

Sandra Day O’Connor

With all the success that you have achieved in business and with your philanthropic work, do you think about your legacy?

I want to be remembered as a good friend and someone who had courage. Our time on earth is a gift. We pay rent for the time on earth and that rent is how we give back. Making the world a better place is the basis for all I do; it isn’t just a goal, it’s a responsibility. I learned these values from both my parents. My mother could have been the child of Don Quixote and Joan of Arc. She tilted at windmills and was willing to die for a cause. I hope that I would do the same.

“Your legacy is every life you have touched.”

Maya Angelou to Oprah Winfrey

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

To young people beginning their journeys, I want to say this: obstacles are inevitable. But staying still won’t get you anywhere. When you hit a wall, don’t freeze – rethink your plan. And if that new plan doesn’t work, try another. There is always another path forward.

“You can’t change the direction of the wind, but you can adjust your sails.”

Dolly Parton ●



Adrienne Arsht was awarded on behalf of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Order of Princess Olga, III degree presented by Oksana Markarova, Ambassador of Ukraine to the United States, October 2024