

THE PERFECT SPRINGBOARD

MELISSA & DOUG CEO **FERNANDO MERCÉ** APPLIED HIS INDUSTRIAL ENGINEERING BACKGROUND TO ACHIEVE C-LEVEL SUCCESS IN THE BUSINESS WORLD.



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FOR FERNANDO MERCÉ ('92), being chief executive officer of global toy company Melissa & Doug is "like playing in a sandbox."

Spending his days working with toys is a dream job for an engineer, he says. From classic wooden toys and puzzles to crafts and pretend play, Melissa & Doug creates timeless, sustainable products that are designed to ignite children's imaginations.

Helping children succeed is a driving passion for Mercé, who also serves on the board of Domus, an organization that helps place struggling youth on a path toward health and opportunity. Melissa & Doug's 30-year commitment to fostering early brain development and championing the health benefits of open-ended play drew Mercé to the CEO position two years ago.

"This is a job that allows you to go back to your childhood and think as a child again," he says. "It's very hands on—our toys are physical toys, not software. Everyone is so passionate about the company's purpose to bring these incredible toys to children everywhere."

LEADING WITH PURPOSE

Purpose has remained a common thread throughout Mercé's career. Before joining Melissa & Doug, he served as president and CEO of Nestlé Waters North America, steering a \$4.5-billion business and 9,000 associates at one of the largest healthy beverage companies in the United States. While there, he focused on improving the environmental sustainability of bottled water and increasing recycled plastic use in bottles. Prior to that role, the Brazilian-born Mercé served as president of Nestlé Purina, Latin America and Caribbean, where he managed 3,000 employees dedicated to bringing optimal nutrition to cats and dogs.

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“It was amazing to see how that purpose impacted not only the consumer, but also attracted people with a lot of purpose to the business,” he says. “It showed me that purpose helps drive performance and attracts people who are interested not just in the financials, but in the quality of the work.”

Mercé joined Nestlé in 1992 as an industrial engineer after earning an undergraduate degree in the discipline from Northwestern Engineering. He says working as an internal consultant on a team that went from factory to factory helping each to become more efficient was “one of the coolest jobs an engineer could have.” The experience felt like getting a practical master’s degree in industrial engineering.

“At the time, I didn’t want to go into an office; I wanted to be on the production floor experiencing what a factory looks and feels like and figuring out how to improve it,” he says. “I could apply everything I studied at Northwestern almost immediately, which was very fulfilling. It gave my degree and the time I spent at Northwestern a real sense of purpose.”

A LAUNCHPAD FOR SUCCESS

Mercé then earned an MBA from the University of Virginia Darden School of Business. He says his industrial engineering background became the perfect springboard into the business world.

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Mercé credits Northwestern’s whole-brain engineering approach with helping him develop skills outside engineering courses that became pivotal to his success, such as the classes he took in interpersonal communications and economics. “I appreciated the diverse exposure to different subjects, knowledge, and people that Northwestern allowed,” he says. “To me, that’s what the Northwestern experience is all about.”

A TRANSFORMATIVE TIME

It’s an experience he’ll be able to share with his son, who plans to study engineering at Northwestern next fall. When Mercé visited the campus with him, memories came flooding back.

“It’s almost like moving back in time as you walk into the building,” Mercé says. “There is that sense of wonder and constant learning. It was a transformative time for me.”

Mercé’s connection to Northwestern has remained strong. He supports the school with his philanthropy and with his time by serving on the advisory board of the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management Sciences. It’s a way to give back that reaps its own rewards.

“I’m able to learn about this generation of students—what they’re interested in and what’s important to them—so that we can design our workplace to be more attractive and more fulfilling for them,” he says. “There are knowledge gains on both sides. I love taking what I learn from those meetings back into my own businesses.”

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