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“It’s all about hearing the whispers among the noise”, says Karen Blackett, CEO of MediaCom, one of the UK’s largest advertising agencies. The ability to listen hard and with empathy has stood her in good stead with clients and fuelled a glittering career. Twice named ‘one of the 35 most powerful women in the UK under 35’ by Management Today, she is one of the few black women in the senior echelons of UK advertising, and one of three finalists for the Veuve Clicquot 2014 Businesswoman award next week.

But it clearly hasn’t gone to her head. There is not a trace of hubris on display as I walk into her office, thrown off guard first by the absence of a traditional ‘reception desk’ on entering the old Cable & Wireless headquarters in central London, and then by what appears to be a black labrador at a table. I have an almost uncontrollable desire to stroke it.

“We took all the barriers down, as we have a very collaborative open door policy” Ms Blackett explains. In fact, there appear to be no doors – her office is ‘just around a corner.’ “I was marketing and business director when we moved in, and I was trying to frame it as if you’re coming into a familiar home. There’s something about animals – and children - that is very comforting.” she says.

As a single parent, climbing the career ladder while juggling the demands of a small child has all been part of the journey. It began when her parents, first generation immigrants from Barbados, moved to the UK’s ‘mini Barbados’- otherwise known as Reading.

“Dad worked on buses, then did apprenticeship training and became an engineer. He believed very strongly in the value of education, and the importance of independence. I can change a radiator and tile a bathroom because he taught me how. But independence can also be a bit emasculating” says Ms Blackett.

West Indian families have ‘good rooms’ – ones for guests – and “the ones you hang out in” she explains. When she was about 15, and Diane Abbott had just become an MP, her father called her into that ‘good room’ for a serious chat. “You are female and you are black: you will have to try twice as hard” he said. Today, having made it, she says “It’s about celebrating differences- and your own value.”

But at the start, she had no idea what to do with her life, although being an air traffic controller appealed – they were in charge of all those flights to Barbados. Her sister trained as an accountant, while she opted to study Geography at Portsmouth University. “The advertising industry is full of people who did Geography” she confides.

Answering an advertisement for a ‘media auditor’ at CIA (now CIA MediaNetwork) she was redirected “purely by chance” she says, to a different bit of the business: media buying for the direct response/call to action advertising. I ask her - “what did they see?” “A sense of honesty – I just talked” says Ms Blackett.

Moving on to planning client campaigns, she joined Zenith Media in 1995. Headhunted by the Media Business Group, in 1999 she was promoted to the board of directors of the newly merged MediaCom and Media Business board. By January 2003 she was MediaCom’s marketing director. Her predecessors in the role had become CEO, and she followed suit.

How does she explain her success? “It’s about reading a brief and hearing what it says but then talking to people and finding out what it really says – and then making the agency shine in answering the brief” she says, making it sound very simple.

“I remember pitching for Wrigleys UK. I was given full control of the reins and allowed to take some risks. I put on something like a West End theatre production. I realised I had to answer the brief and give them more, so I put that stake in the sand” she says. MediaCom doubled in size at that point and after becoming COO EMEA in 2008, she became CEO of the UK business in January 2011.

SkyTV, a client won in 2004, is now its biggest client. “We have grown because Sky has grown” she says, while I remember out loud to a time when “everyone hated Sky” and marvel at the change.

In her role now she gets excited about the apprenticeship programme at MediaCom, launched in 2012. “I was lucky enough to go to university because there were these things called ‘grants’ then: today’s young people face so many obstacles” she says.

“We set up a government-approved apprenticeship scheme for 18-24 year olds; the only other organisation doing the same is Channel4. We started with 10 school leavers, and I want to be able to grow it: those on the programme are pioneers creating an energy in the business.”

I ask if she ever thinks about another direction in which she may have gone. “When I first started my career there was almost no one of colour. I have always been vocal on injustice. I would have done something about representing people who have not got a voice or are not being heard” she says.

Today, with her young son she divides her time between Chiswick and the Cotswolds. But she has a home too, in Barbados, and this is where she goes to “recharge the batteries.” “Everyone needs someone who will tell them the truth. That is what Barbados is for me. There I am just ‘Danny’s daughter from Reading’” says Ms Blckett.

Words of advice ?

“What my Dad always said: you have two ears and one mouth: use them in that proportion. It’s important to have an opinion but it’s very important to listen before you speak.”