



Interview Behiye Hassan

My business life **Vicky Bullen**

The CEO of Coley Porter Bell joined the brand design agency 20 years ago and worked her way up to the top job. Here she talks about her inspiration and work ethic, and the lessons she's learnt along the way

My greatest childhood inspirations were my parents.

They gave me my work ethic, a real belief that the only way to succeed is to work hard. My parents were from a generation where they weren't particularly effusive with praise so I was always looking to be just that little bit better.

I fundamentally believe that if you work hard you will do well.

I won a scholarship to a private school when I was 11 and I was the first person in my family to go to university. My dad had wanted to go but his parents said that they couldn't afford to send him, so I always had this sense that I had to make the most of it. I never think of myself as somebody who is naturally academic. I had to work really hard to do well, so again I think that really fuels my drive and determination.

My first job stood me in really good stead. It was advertised in the *Daily Telegraph* as a marketing job at a printing company but it was really an account executive role. I learnt the fundamentals of account management and client service. I also learnt something that has been incredibly useful to me in a career with a design business; the fundamentals of the print process. While it feels like a strange place to start, it was

CV

Born Guildford, 1965

Position CEO, Coley Porter Bell

Previous roles Joined Coley Porter Bell in 1995. Worked up from account director to board account director and managing partner, before becoming CEO in 2005.

Interesting fact She is particularly interested in the science behind consumer decisions and using neuroscience to create more powerful brand solutions.

very, very useful and taught me both soft and hard skills.

If you don't ask, you don't get. I joined Coley Porter Bell as an account director and I was eventually made a board account director. I had a conversation with my boss and mentioned that my aspiration was to be on the board. I just naturally assumed that she knew – I never thought that conversation would result in her promoting me to the board. It was a really valuable lesson in terms of recognising that you have to tell people what you want.

Building relationships is the most important thing you can do. Understanding your clients and building relationships with them is going to make you better at your job. It's one of the most important lessons I learnt and I learnt it quite fast.

To get the best talent, you have to be a good employer brand.

If you want to be a business that people want to work for, you have to be constantly doing interesting things, staying fresh and demonstrating that you care about your people and their growth.

The book that has influenced me most in my business was *Decoded* by Phil Barden. It just helped us [in the business] to understand what we'd always

known in our guts but never understood the science behind – the idea of design as a powerful influence on brand choice. It made us completely rearticulate the agency's offer.

Just be yourself, don't try and be someone you're not. Somebody said that to me when I became chief executive. There's a lot of richness in that thought as it's about believing in yourself, being true to yourself, being authentic about who you are and what your values are.

I read this lovely quote from Oprah Winfrey: "I was once afraid of people saying, 'Who does she think she is?' Now I have the courage to stand and say, 'This is who I am'." That sense of courage really rang true for me and it took me back to the advice I'd been given when I started.

I would like to run a multi-office global agency one day and stretch into some other areas of design and branding. Another aspiration is to take on some non-executive roles.

If I wasn't a CEO I would spend my life cooking and gardening. I escape to the kitchen and garden. I love gardening, it is my way of expressing my own creativity as I love playing with colours and textures. I find it massively therapeutic. **D**

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