

Here at AWS_ S1E01

Speakers: Geetha Annamalai & Karen Mae Ching

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Karen: If I remember it correct, Jeff Bezos has said that if we want to innovate, you need to be uncomfortable with the idea that you have. The more uncomfortable you feel, the more the idea should be stronger.

Geetha: Hi, I'm Geetha. I've been part of the AWS digital marketing team for about two years now. It's been a wild ride, but it is challenging and rewarding work. It's not always easy, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I think that's how a lot of people feel here.

When I joined AWS, something that stood out to me was that people of all backgrounds work here, and we all have different viewpoints and opinions. This is so useful to have at your disposal when you're trying to solve a problem.

So, for this podcast, I'm talking to some wonderful, talented colleagues that I don't normally get a chance to speak to. Welcome to Here at AWS.

Karen: I went to the Serengeti and my tent got attacked by a water buffalo.

Geetha: That's Karen.

Karen: So, the scariest thing was before the pandemic, when I peaked Kilimanjaro. So, for me, the scariest part of there is ascending and you see a lot of people really surrendering on the climb, and you just need to push on and push on.

And yeah, we reached the peak and when I reached the peak, I run out of literally a breath, run out of it, just cried. And then you just need to stay three minutes there and then you have to go down. So, for me ... and it was planned within 10 days. Just within 10 days, my friend just asked me if I want to do it and we did it.

Geetha: And when she's not fighting large mammals or even climbing mountains, she's a GFS partner sales program lead. Originally, from the Philippines, Karen's route to AWS was not necessarily direct.

Karen: So, I started my career in the media, and then my father is an engineer, told me I have no career there. I need to go to during the time, in the late eighties, banking and finance, engineering, nursing.

If you're Asian, you're either a lawyer, a doctor, or an engineer. Yeah, it's acceptable. My dad said, "You don't want to be either of the three, then you go to the bank." So, I started my career at banking. I started in operations in one of the multinational banks.

So, I really started at the back office and got trained there to be part of the management program. Sent to business school. So, I left the Philippines in 2011, first to India, and then from India, in the U.S.

Geetha: So, Karen knew where she was going, treading a path in finance, she was destined for the USA.

Karen: I grew up in the American bases because we used to have the U.S. base in the Philippines. And my dad is a civilian engineer there. So, really grew up with them. And when you go to my country, it's like an annex of the U.S. So, it's very aspirational, this American dream, this Western dream that you go there.

My dream was to go there as an equal and not just another subordinate to another. And what I've learned is it took me around 15 years to be able to fight for that space. And someone found me and sponsored me.

You need to have that sponsor who believed in you, who likes to develop you. And when the doors open, it's just open, it just flowed. For me, I've lived in the Philippines for 40 years of my life, and then all of a sudden, my life has been packed into suitcases and one small carry on. And that has been my life until I settled in the UK in 2014.

And my journey here is serendipitous. There's an opening in AWS, so it matches, financial services industry. So, I just tried it. I don't have any technology background, but I understand it a bit. So, I just took it one day at a time, and as everybody's aware, our interview process is quite different.

So, that was a different experience for me, a good one at that. The phone screen, when I don't see anybody and a person telling me about customer obsession, I said, "What is this" on the first interview.

Geetha: At AWS, we have something called customer obsession. It means always putting the customer first. We live by lots of principles like this.

Karen: So, everything that we do, we need to think about not only our customers, but also, how regulated you're going to run your business and your operations. You have to think about that.

Security is probably the same in AWS is job zero. But for us, where I came from is security comes first before the customer, it's what I've learned. And then you also work for profits. You're a bank at the end of the day.

And when I come here, my first face-to-face meeting was a workshop and everybody was saying "Save a vacant chair." And I said, "Why?" Because we need more chairs in the room. We need to pretend or imagine that the customer is in the room.

Geetha: I'm really interested in how people adjust to the culture here. It sounds like Karen had very strict learned beliefs about her career and the workplace. I asked her what was different about AWS.

Karen: Well, in Southeast Asia, we're very scared to say no. But for me growing up, I think I'm quite more direct than my peers, and even my friends. I've always thought I was adopted or born into a foreign country because I feel that I'm quite different.

So, if there's one person not following the rules, you can spot me easily to it. Because I always ask the question, "Why?" And as Asians, if you ask a lot of whys, that means disrespect to the elders. You need to follow the hierarchy.

But for me, I think I was born to challenge it. Some say I'm very aggressive. So, when I came here, I thought I'm prepared for it. Here starts with what's in it for me. Where I come from is for the greater good before myself. So, those are two opposing school of thoughts. So, you have to marry those things together and find that environment that could culture that.

[Music Playing]

Geetha: It seems like it was a big leap for Karen. While AWS is a large company, you're really given space to innovate. Karen found a sense of freedom that she hadn't experienced before.

Karen: I used to be a director in one of the banks here in the U.K. and I have one project manager reporting to me who's moved to Amazon. And I've been really interested because ever since I saw how Amazon changed the way how we order books and read books and how accessible it is, it really amazed me about how the culture is. I came from suits, black suits every day. I said, "What is this?"

Geetha: Another change was moving from an office setting to a virtual one.

Karen: It was a virtual interview during the time when the COVID explosion happened in Milan fashion week. So, that started with what are we going to do in the UK? Are we going to go in in the lockdown? So, they decided to do it rather than the face-to-face one.

Geetha: And how was it as an experience being a virtual hire?

Karen: Well, for me, I'm the type of person that I go to the office Monday to Friday. And during actually school, I'm the one who hates holidays because I don't go to school. It's the same going to office. Call me a nerd or a geek, but I'm that person.

And then all of a sudden, you're stuck there without meeting anybody of your teammates. Some of them have already left AWS and I haven't met them face to face.

Well, I moved here at the dread of winter. In 2014, it's so dark after having 365 days of sunshine where I come from because I'm from the island, like 7,101 of them. And then I barely knew anybody here because I don't have any relatives here. All of them are in U.S., in America.

[Music Playing]

Geetha: Personally, I do a lot of work virtually, my initial worry was that I wouldn't get the full AWS experience. In reality, I've still managed to connect with colleagues. Karen feels the same. She's formed great relationships with a really global team. But how does that work?

Karen: There's this bit of isolation, which I think everybody felt. But what's nice about AWS is the activities on the new high keep on going. Like you have these meetings, you have this group interaction.

I think at AWS, there's a sense of belonging, even if we're dispersed virtually. So, that really helped us, helped me go through. Some of them, I've met face to face, but some of them I wasn't able to.

Every Friday it's our learn and be curious day. And we have our weekly stand up where we just talk anything under the sun, what's happening because one of us is based out of Texas, the other one is in Boston, New Jersey.

Nobody really is like in the desk, for example, in New York. And some of us are here in the UK, London, and Scotland for that matter. It's just 30 minutes of pure team talk that what's going on in your life? How can we help? Are there any challenges?

And of course, we have a lot of mechanisms in AWS, like you can just Slack or ping someone if you have a question and people are there to help. This is one of the amazing things I found here is a lot of people are willing to help.

Even people you don't know, such a big organisation. And I'm happy that I've known you now. So, if I have a question on digital marketing, probably you're the person I would call.

Geetha: Working from desk all over the globe, Karen's team managed to connect in meaningful ways.

Karen: I think the word there is empathy because the world right now, if you observe how we converse, even in a conference room, we're all vulnerable to what we've experienced the last two years.

So, I think that brought down some barriers and people, not only empathy, but the courage to disagree and commit. Because some people, even if you say yes in your heart of hearts you know somehow will go wrong.

Like for example, if you work for risk and compliance, you always think of what's going to go wrong? Listen more, not harder. Because when you listen more, then you have an open mind to whatever suggestion there is, try it out.

I don't know if everybody's a fan of Star Wars here. In Yoda, Yoda said, "There is no try, it's just yes or no." What I've learned is don't tell me no, tell me you will try it, and then we'll talk again what happens.

Geetha: Love it. I like the Star Wars reference as well.

Karen: Yeah.

[Music Playing]

Geetha: Empathy really is the key to effective teamwork. It's also how we can achieve a more diverse and more equal workforce. Maybe Karen is right, maybe we should be thinking of each other in a kinder way.

Karen: We have this interesting emotional quotient session with AWS because we have a lot of advocates in AWS. So, it helps the team to anchor ourselves more to our emotions and be vulnerable at work, I think it helps.

They said Amazon is known as the number one producer. Of course, we've got like these all products that we have in our Amazon website, helping business owners, technology for AWS.

I said, "No, we're number one producers of stress." So, we were all like, "Okay." And then during that session we found out that 80% of the stress is created by ourselves because there are two things that I've learned, perception and reality.

Perception is what you think is not real. And then when the reality kicks in, that's when stress comes. When somebody says no to the idea that you have, what will you do? I experience it every day.

Especially if you work from home where everything is in proximity, like you see the dishes that are not washed. And then you go down, you see, for example, the room is a mess, but you still have to put up a face in the camera and do the conference and think straight for work.

So, that's stress because you're thinking a lot of things. Especially if you're myself, like I'm thinking a lot of things sometimes at the same time, which is not helpful.

But for me, is it's how you deal with it, how you compartmentalize it. If I would say, you put them in one box to the other, the first thing that I need to do needs to be out now because I know there's another thing coming.

So, just keep them out, keep them out. So, I don't leave it for a day or to be hanging. So, that's my experience because our velocity here of ideas is quite quick. So, I don't advise people to be quick, but I want them to be rational about it.

Geetha: So, is empathy a priority at AWS?

Karen: So, here in AWS, I've learned that one is everybody's voice is heard when we do a doc read.

Geetha: A doc read is Amazon's way of presenting a document to a team.

Karen: You see the feedback, and when you read the feedback, regardless of who you are in the organisation, it was a surprise to me when I first joined the doc read here, for 30 minutes you're reading.

But if you take a look at the feedback there, for example, it's a virtual doc. Regardless of who you are in the organization, those feedback are considered. And

working for 20 years, it's the first time that I've heard, "Oh, what about the feedback of Karen?" I've never heard that.

Like each and every feedback is considered and also like how we do the forte. So, it does not limit you just to ask people that you work with, people that you've interacted with, somehow you had an impact.

It's so good because it removes the process of, should I just say nice things, or I could also say development areas where this person's superpowers can further improve?

So, it's all for the greater good, which is I'm a fan of because as they would say, I know this is poetic, but they say world peace. We always forget that it needs to start with us. So, that's what I learned with this each and every individual here has a contribution to everything that we do.

[Music Playing]

Geetha: Karen has such a wealth of experience. It was so good to chat with her. She's worked in some really different environments which have all helped her to form who she is today. It's so refreshing to hear her advice as well.

Karen: Oh yes. And this advice was also given to me by my hiring manager. I always pass on this advice that he gave to me because where I work right now, we all came from the industry, and somehow, when you're working 15, 20 years, you have that ego in you.

So, he called me before my first day one, I said, "What is this?" She said, "Karen, I have four important things and please listen very, very well cause this will help shape your development and career in AWS."

He said, "Leave the ego at the door, unlearn whatever you know — unlearn it because you will learn a lot of things here and it'll be wonderful learning and practice not only at work and in your life." The third one is have the focus. And the fourth one is you have to have fun with what you're doing.

So, I mean those four, I give them to all those people who've been introduced to me as new hires because I think somehow, you need to unlearn to be flexible, to be open to new ideas so you can help our customers.

Because if you don't unlearn, what more can you learn? And there's a lot of learning in this company. So, that's what I'm going to give them.

Geetha: Absolutely. And it's always like day one, like they say, there's always something new to learn, some new tool that you'd like to sort of get into.

Karen: Yes. I think what aspect is the people I work with, because I'm already on my second role. When I told my previous manager that I want to grow more, there's no hesitation of support, there is always something that you could do to help our customers.

Because the first question that came to me, “How this new role will help your customers, Karen, our customers Karen?” And the second question is, what will you be owning?

So, those are clear questions that you are working with purpose. So, that's one aspect. And one thing is everybody is like what they say, like everybody's welcomed in London. I think everybody's welcome here, is that aspect of AWS and Amazon.

Geetha: So, onto the big question, where does Karen see herself going next?

Karen: Well, my ambitions for my future is one is given the opportunity, I would like to build a team because I think that opportunity here is very vast and nurturing because I like nurturing talent.

I have some of my direct reports that are now vice presidents in different industries. They've started where we've started before and I wanted to do that because I always tell them, whatever support I've given you when we're building the team, you have to pay it forward. So, they're also building teams.

I know that no man is an island. For us to make the world a better place you need a team. So, given that, that's my aspiration here in AWS. I don't know when you want to be a Chief Executive Officer, a lot of people would say, but I just want to be an enabler. So, that's how I see myself.

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Geetha: Part of a diverse global team, Karen has found somewhere she can really show her skills. In a hybrid situation, she's flourishing. There's so much to learn from what she mentioned today.

I'll leave you with an instruction, something from Karen. When you're going about your day, think about empathy.

Thanks so much to Karen for a fascinating discussion and thanks to you for listening. It's always so fun to chat with new people from this AWS family.

Constance: Exactly. No one here is just an email address. Everyone is building something and they all have a story to tell.

Geetha: That's it for now, so don't forget to subscribe.

Constance: And hey, if working up here in the cloud seems like fun, why not check out our websites in the bio, you may just be the person we're looking for.

Geetha: We'll see you next time on Here at AWS.