

# Pivot Perfect

A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group

## Karima McDaniel: Leading with Harmony – Building a Brand to Inspire Change

Karima McDaniel, President of 4U by Tia, is a leader whose career has been defined by her ability to transform brands, empower teams, and connect deeply with consumers. Her professional journey spans the worlds of beauty, consumer-packaged goods, professional services, and wellness, showcasing a consistent focus on innovation, empathy, and purpose-driven leadership. With a foundation in marketing at Hampton University and an MBA from the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business, Karima joined the Business Solutions and Think Tank teams at PricewaterhouseCoopers. Afterward, she gained hands-on experience at Johnson & Johnson’s Neutrogena division, where she was a member of the branding team that repositioned iconic product lines and introduced imaginative strategies to connect with diverse audiences. Karima later brought her expertise to Rodan + Fields, where she spearheaded groundbreaking product launches and developed digital tools that redefined how brands engage with consumers.



Now at the helm of 4U by Tia, the haircare brand launched by actress, founder, & creative director Tia Mowry, Karima leads with a commitment to celebrating individuality and fostering community. She draws on her deep experience to create products that empower consumers to embrace their natural identities while prioritizing innovation and authenticity. Karima shares her insights on aligning vision with purpose, the emotional resonance of the beauty industry, and the art of building brands that inspire confidence and connection.

**Timothy Boerkoel (TBB): Our life stories are often written like great novels, where the characters are not fully formed from the start; they evolve as the story unfolds. Tell us about your formative years and the role your family and upbringing played in fueling who you are and your confidence and drive.**

**Karima McDaniel (KM):** I smile when I think back to my childhood because I was this incredibly curious kid with amazing parents who knew exactly what I needed - even before I did. I grew up with a very

strong support system and am truly grateful. As a child, I was focused, driven, and passionate – some of it nature, some nurture. My parents exposed me to a variety of experiences, particularly around education and art. Learning was very important in my household and always prioritized. While other kids were winding down for summer break, I was in year-round school, practically bouncing off the walls with excitement for all the extracurricular programs I could get my hands on. It wasn't about being perfect – it was about the *thrill of discovery*. My

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'superpowers,' as I like to call them, were taking shape: as an insatiable curiosity and this deep love of learning that still drives me today.

What makes this story even more meaningful is understanding my parents' perspective. They were focused on creating opportunities for me that they never had for themselves and opened doors to everything from science experiments to art projects – they wanted me to try it all almost like we were experiencing it together. I was raised in an encouraging environment – being given the safe space to learn and to fail without pressure. I still remember when I received my first bad grade; and my parents simply said, “Don’t be so hard on yourself; it’s not that big of a deal.” That moment of compassion taught me more about life than any perfect score could have.

My parents pushed themselves through school; their paths were very different from the ones they paved for my sister and me. My sister is younger, and although we are very close in age, we could not be more different – which is a good thing. My parents approached us as individuals, seeing both of us uniquely, and putting no pressure on us. I’m probably the typical eldest sibling, very driven and responsible. And now with two small children myself, it all mirrors back and I see reflections of this in my own family. It's fascinating how life comes full circle – now I see these same dynamics playing out with my own kids. My eldest reminds me so much of my younger self, it sometimes makes me laugh.

For our early education through the 5th grade, my sister and I attended a unique school focused on student-directed learning, without traditional homework, tests, or grades. We were exposed to lots of classes with an emphasis on the joy of hands-on learning. For example, I will never forget the power and freedom I gained from the concept of “inventive spelling,” where however I spelled a word in my mind, was not only good enough, but correct, which encouraged me to get my thoughts out into the world and not worry if they were perfectly

crafted every time. I didn’t realize it at the time but the constant lessons and reinforcement in this environment were aimed at shaping confidence and creativity. Then in 6th grade, we shifted to a traditional style school, and fortunately, I thought homework and tests were actually fun and interesting, having never experienced them before. My school settings definitely set the tone for a lifetime of curious learning. As I think about those times today, I understand the seeds that were being planted then that allow me today to be comfortable not knowing everything and to embrace the experience of learning new concepts and perspectives.

Life has a way of weaving these seemingly random threads into something meaningful. All these experiences – the supportive family environment, the diverse educational settings, the freedom to explore – they've created this foundation of confidence that lets me tackle new challenges with enthusiasm rather than fear. And now, watching my own children begin their journeys, I'm struck by how these stories continue to unfold across generations.

**TBB: “Award-winning” is a term frequently used to describe actors’ careers, but it applies to other professions as well – and certainly yours! You have been achieving awards since your university days (probably long before). How do you pursue your own goals and awards while simultaneously promoting collaboration and partnership at work?**

**KM:** Awards can be like surprise guests at a party you're too busy hosting to notice. I've been blessed with some wonderful recognition throughout my career – new product awards, leadership awards, internal team awards, etc. –, but they've always been more like happy afterthoughts to the real joy: working alongside brilliant people to create something amazing.

I’m an *ideas person* by nature and love to create and can get lost in that process. My approach to work has always been collaborative; I genuinely enjoy working with people. Successfully accomplishing

business goals with my colleagues and team members is always my primary mission. If I focused on doing those things well, the awards followed naturally. I rarely pause to acknowledge those accomplishments – maybe to a fault! – because I’m often quickly moving to the next challenge.

Years ago, I received some feedback from a 360-review: I was recognized as a strong team player, someone everyone wanted on their team, but I was also told I struggled to take credit for my own successes. And that’s something I’ve worked to develop as my career has advanced ... how to value collaboration and working with people while simultaneously taking credit for my contributions. This doesn’t come naturally to me, but I’ve learned with confidence and grace to call out those moments. As a leader, while there are many people that are working together, you’re the one with the vision, empowering others to reach the common goal.

A particular memory stands out from several years back when I’d started at a new private-equity-backed company, Rodan + Fields (R+F). The company was growing and scaling, aspiring to transform from a direct-to-consumer business to a larger consumer-focused skincare brand. One of my goals as Director of Brand Marketing for New Targets was to serve three target audiences: Gen Z, young millennials, and multi-cultural customers. During my time there, my team and I identified multiple new opportunities for the business and achieved award after award (some recognized only within the industry).

One of our project launches became a significant moment in the industry, and not until I was updating my resume and reviewing some numbers did I realize, *this was huge!* It validated that I’m actually really good at this! What made this particular accomplishment really special was knowing we had created something that didn’t exist before. It was a pivotal career moment for me to have previously enjoyed success at Neutrogena, which was such a

notable brand, and then surpass that success at another company, R+F. That was kind of fun! My time with R+F allowed me to foster new products and assist in shaping them into a consumer-facing company, as they were new to their industry. I learned the art of storytelling and how to connect products with consumers across different channels.

It’s really exciting to discover personal growth and experience success simultaneously. I’m the type of person who is 100% committed to the brands I’ve worked for. I’m a believer in the product, the people, and the vision, and become extremely connected to whatever I am working on. The goals of an organization become my own personal goals – it’s pure synergy.

**TBB:** Our own deeply rooted character traits often mirror what we value and seek in others. You have expressed your appreciation for intellectual curiosity and straightforward communication. What has shaped your leadership style and influenced how you bring out the best in others on your team? Who has modeled brave leadership for you throughout your career?

**KM:** My leadership style focuses on the team dynamic; the more harmony that exists within the team, the better the overall result. I’ve now moved into roles where I’m forming my own teams and am very intentional in my approach. Intellectual curiosity is a key value I seek when I’m interviewing people. If one has a passion for figuring things out ... they ultimately can figure out *most* things. Here’s a little quirk about me that my team knows well: when someone comes to me with a question, I’ll usually respond with, “What have you tried so far?” It’s not about brushing them off – quite the opposite! It’s because I believe in that magical moment when someone discovers they’re capable of more than they thought. I find myself hunting for that special spark of curiosity in people and really gravitate toward building a team of problem-solvers. It’s not

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about having all the answers; it's about having that burning desire to find them.

I've also had the opportunity to work with a variety of wonderful leaders; even some I haven't loved but have benefitted from their leadership style. I tend to gravitate toward mentors that empower the team. At Rodan + Fields, I was mentored by Julie Garlikov, who was Group Vice President, Global Marketing, and who I have had the privilege of working for multiple times. She shares a passion for brand building and really helped me to refine that skill and think bigger with my ideas. Julie has an incredible ability to foster collaboration across teams and encourage innovative thinking. Her guidance has been instrumental in shaping my approach to marketing strategy and leadership. Being lucky enough to work with Julie a few times consistently reminds me of the importance of cultivating strong relationships with people you look up to.

I'd learned early on from a few leadership models to "figure out what you're really good at and prioritize that." Too often we try to correct for our deficits; and typically, if you're not great at something, you don't enjoy it – and there's probably someone else who can do it better. Taking the time to figure out my strengths and find the right partners to balance out my weaknesses has been meaningful. Finding that balance between self-awareness and leaning into your superpowers is essential in leadership.

As I think back to the beginning of this conversation when we talked about how I was raised, I am feeling grateful. I witnessed and lived in an environment where I received permission to lean into my strengths without being punished for my deficits. It's an important lesson in leadership.

**TBB: You've been described as a brand-builder with an innate understanding of the consumer, honed through experience at big companies, and often by building smaller brands within them. How does this depth of experience help you to develop a brand in today's market with a smart**

**consumer who desires storytelling, education, and to feel seen and heard?**

**KM:** I truly love the art and science of consumer work and brand building. In the CPG (consumer packaged goods) industry, with brands like Campbell's Soup and Neutrogena, companies have a strong interest in why people make the decisions they make. Earlier in my career while at Neutrogena, that was a big focus of the brand. We would visit our customers at home to gather information and were always seeking the "why" in consumer decisions. Through focus groups, we learned how people felt about themselves and the pressures of aging. It's fascinating to tap into people's minds. When creating new products in the beauty space, you are trying to solve self-image challenges. It's one of the reasons why I enjoy the beauty category – it can be very emotional. Some people see it's a surface-level industry only, but when you dig deeper, you realize that people are simply trying to find the best ways to express who they are and feel good about themselves. It requires being intuitive and connecting with people and their decision-making. Building brands is the outcome of that process. Beauty products are not that different from other product types; it's always about understanding the driving factors of why something is desired and responding accordingly.

And now I am in a position where we're creating a brand from scratch with 4U by Tia – it's both exciting and challenging at the same time. It utilizes the same driving principles of identifying what is missing and finding a unique solution, producing a tangible product at the end. People can feel so connected to a brand that it becomes part of their identity. It's wonderful to witness brands resonating with different people and their specific needs. When I was at Neutrogena, a brand with multiple sub-businesses within it, and therefore different consumer groups, we learned to retell stories to a variety of audiences. The core principles are the same, but when selling a men's product, the story is

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a little different from that of an acne product; what's motivating one is going to be different from the other, even within the same brand.

Most of my work at big companies has focused on new product or category development, whether we're hoping to reach a new consumer target or explore a different channel. So, although the companies may have been large, the project scope of finding new opportunities and consumers would be quite similar to what my team and I are doing at 4U by Tia today. Ironically, my roles have never been straight forward; they've always eventually expanded, and usually involve a completely new project. Even now in my current role, we are always thinking about new categories and new lanes as we digest consumer feedback. With a startup like 4U by Tia, we can move faster and try more things; being small and nimble allows us to adjust in real time, making pivots back and forth in reaction to our market. Consumers today want to feel heard, and we want to respond quickly to their suggestions, confirming that we are listening and that their input is valuable. Customers have higher expectations of the brands they are loyal to.

When we first started 4U by Tia, there was a core group of influencers, consumers, and experts that shared their voice with us. Asking them questions, understanding frustrations, and identifying what was missing for them was an integral part of the building process. Wherever possible, we incorporate their feedback and voice into our brand decisions.

**TBB: At 4U by Tia, embracing the natural self is in the DNA of the brand, extending beyond just external looks to support the natural correlation between our personal and professional identities. How do your personal and professional selves align, and what challenges or risks did you encounter when making the latest pivot in your career?**

**KM:** One of the things that resonates with me the most about 4U by Tia began during our early stages, and we're now circling back with the consumer and learning what is new: sitting in this intimate space with them and really listening to their thoughts. The interesting thing about hair, and especially natural and textured hair, is that it provokes deep emotion. When we created the original immersive experience for our consumer, people showed us how much of their identities was built into their hair, especially for black women. Being able to support that journey has been very fulfilling because of my own personal experiences, as well. We help people feel comfortable and confident to show up as themselves. That's a big deal.

The brand also embodies all of the professional things that I've loved to do. I'm now able to apply them in an area that I'm personally invested in. With kids of my own who are learning about their hair, I've realized that many of us of the older generations grew up not embracing our natural hair – we'd straighten it or relax it because having curly hair wasn't widely seen as desirable; today is a very different time. Many people did not celebrate or even begin to understand their natural hair until they were adults; often thanks to incredible online communities promoting self-education. It started on YouTube where people were giving tips and tricks and providing an engaged and safe space for each other. The newer generations won't be experiencing this for the first time as a young adult ... they will grow up knowing, embracing, and appreciating their hair exactly as it grows out of their head.

At 4U by Tia, we aim to provide that experience for the world. For me, I'm experiencing professional and personal alignment working within the world of beauty and being mindful about the visuals and messaging our brand shares. I'm able to do all the things I wish I had seen when I was younger, which were once voids in the marketplace. It's very

empowering to have a role in making a meaningful impact on the world.

There are always risks in this environment of a much smaller company. Bigger companies offer more resources and larger teams; smaller ones require us to think creatively and differently, knowing there is less stability and limited resources. It's a welcome challenge. I have been pleasantly surprised to connect with other startups and discover a truly supportive community. There's an openness to sharing what's working and how, even among competitors in the same category. There's just a willingness to lift each other up; you never feel alone, with all of these people going through the same thing and offering to support each other.

It is inherently riskier to start something brand new. 4U by Tia has been around for two years now and it has presented its challenges. We actually launched and sold the business in the same year! Clearly, that was not our intention, but we were able keep the business moving forward with new partners and without disrupting our momentum. For the curious learner in me, it was an amazing professional growth opportunity; I'd never sold a business before ... and now I have. It's just the nature of the startup journey, where you constantly have to change plans, redirect, shift, and figure out what's the new top priority as you simultaneously build and sustain.

**TBB: The idea of cultivating a garden comes to mind when considering how 4U by Tia takes special care to nurture its community. Liberty Hyde Bailey, the father of American Horticulture, once said, 'A garden requires patient labor and attention. Plants do not grow merely to satisfy ambitions or to fulfill good intentions. They thrive because someone expended effort on them.' How has your career prepared you for this 'gardening,' and what makes this chapter at 4U by Tia unique?**

**KM:** There is something of importance to be taken from all parts of my career; where I sit right now is a very intentional space. My greatest learning lesson came when I was appointed the Global Chief

Marketing Officer of NewAge, Inc. in 2021, which was a masterclass in team building and management. I joined the executive team of a company that was in the midst of an acquisition spree and my role was to bring together the marketing teams across regions and create a global portfolio of products and marketing processes and strategy. This was a huge role with so many great lessons but the biggest was the importance of fostering strong internal culture within a team to help fuel success. That starts with a united mission or goal that everyone is aligned on.

The beauty of learning through the growing pains of companies as they are merging is that you are forced into a lot of conversations where you are trying to align objectives and purpose, while hearing a variety of different perspectives. Because of that experience, now I am so much better at direct and frank conversations.

I think the next big pivot was the shift from leading Marketing in an organization to becoming the President of 4U by Tia, which broadened my scope into driving all areas of the business. That is a big shift to do that in a business that is starting from scratch in every sense and being fully responsible for successes and failures. Leading a startup is not easy, and our team has navigated through challenges that could have closed many businesses, like changing operational partners.

And back to your example of planting a garden that thrives – what I'm trying to cultivate today at 4U by Tia ... is *harmony*. We are so aligned because our teams are invested in the mission and all feel so strongly about the brand. Everyone is working diligently on the same goal. Our garden has been planted in the perfect soil, the climate is just right, and we are all set up to thrive.

Our founder and creative director, Tia Mowry, and I have been aligned from the beginning, and *I am all in on the vision*. She and I have remained in sync and on the same page even as the environment has shifted. My job is to bring Tia's vision to fruition, so

it's critical that we stay closely connected. The experience of selling a stake in the business was a true team-bonding experience; it's why we all feel such passion around the brand, having journeyed the road together. We all believe we are working towards something extraordinary, and it keeps us motivated through the uncertain times to continue reaching higher.

The most valuable piece of wisdom that I've gathered over my career is about the significance of a shared team vision; it is critical for success. All of us must believe in the goal, and if that goal is clear, we can adjust the journey as necessary to reach it. As I reflect on my experiences, I know that wherever my career path takes me, the vision will be crystal clear, and I will ensure that the whole company, and particularly the leadership team, stands united in pursuing it.

### About The Brownstone Group

*The Brownstone Group was launched in 2015 with a mission to offer the most effective executive search, strategic consulting, and leadership advisory services. We introduce exceptional talent to brands and their leaders, transforming businesses and careers. Founder Tim Boerkoel possesses more than 25 years of retail, consumer, hospitality, and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for startups and global corporations alike in their searches for CEOs, Presidents, Board Members and C-Suite talent. Brownstone, along with its global network of affiliate partners, operates as a true partner to clients ensuring swift yet long-lasting results.*

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