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Confronting the Model Minority Myth

By the *Asian, South Asian and
Pacific Islander Affinity Group*
at Spencer Stuart

During Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, we celebrate the contributions and influence of Asian, South Asian and Pacific Islander Americans to the history, culture and achievements of the United States. The first major wave of Asians arrived in the 1800s. Since then, waves of Asian immigrants from across the region came to America and, today, 22 million Asian Americans trace their roots to more than 20 countries in East and Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Asians, South Asians and Pacific Islanders have achieved success in fields spanning business, science, technology, the performance arts, sports, music, politics and activism.

Despite these achievements and this community's outsized representation in higher education, the sciences and in certain sectors such as technology, Asians remain relatively underrepresented in boardrooms and corporate C-suites. Why is this? Could this be in part because of the model minority myth?







What is the model minority myth, and why should we confront it? The term “model minority” referring to Asians, South Asians and Pacific Islanders is seen by some as praise for the community’s success across academic and economic spheres. At a superficial level, the model minority moniker reflects the success of Asians in America, who as a group have attained higher levels of education and higher household incomes than U.S. averages, according to the Pew Research Center.

But there is a dark side to the model minority stereotype, one that affects individuals’ lives and careers. On one hand, it masks the different experiences across this highly diverse group. It also can grant permission to ignore or underplay the challenges Asians face, including the documented rise in anti-Asian violence, or suggest that Asians do not experience racism. The stereotype reinforces biases that can limit opportunities — especially related to what leaders are supposed to look and act like — and it is often used as a wedge to pit Asians against other racial and ethnic groups. Finally, and perhaps most disappointingly, this myth encourages Asian Americans to avoid doing anything that might risk this “model” status: Do not speak up. Do not step out of line. Do not complain, and always remember that you have attained this status based on your continuing performance.

To better understand the impact of the model minority myth on Asian executives, members of our affinity group spoke with successful pan-Asian leaders about how they experienced this and other stereotypes in their own careers, how they overcame biases, and how allies and advocates can better support their Asian, South Asian and Pacific Islander colleagues.



The celebration of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month has its roots in a 1978 congressional resolution that established Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week in the first 10 days of May, marking the arrival in the U.S. of the first Japanese immigrants (May 7, 1843) and the contributions of Chinese workers to the building of the trans-continental railroad, completed May 10, 1869.

A double-edged sword

Excellence in math, science and other technical disciplines. Hardworking. Diligent. Well-prepared. Respectful. Those are some of the positive characteristics associated with the model minority myth. “I have both benefited and suffered from the model minority stereotype,” says Courtney Fong, chief operating officer at CompTIA, trade association for the IT industry. “It projects a certain aptitude or intelligence when it comes to math, science and engineering. I don’t think anyone would admit it, but I was given the benefit of the doubt or given some opportunities early in my career that I may not otherwise have.”

The flipside of the stereotype: Nonconfrontational. Timid. Insular. Indecisive. Antisocial. These are characteristics that are not traditionally associated with leadership in the US. “There’s definitely a stereotype,” says Asheesh Advani, CEO, Junior Achievement Worldwide. “It includes things like being good at school or being particularly good at engineering-oriented fields or medical-oriented fields. On the more negative side, it’s not being very athletic, not necessarily being a leader, but being a follower — particularly in a professional setting. There are stereotypes associated with ways in which you’re a risk taker or not a risk taker. There are stereotypes associated with the ability to get along with different types of people. For example, there’s a perception sometimes that South Asian and Asian Americans tend to stay together and are not as social as other people.”

These stereotypes have real consequences for the careers of Asians, South Asians and Pacific Islanders. In the workplace, studies have found that Asians are the least likely racial group to be promoted from individual contributor roles into management, even in sectors like technology, finance, accounting and law, where they are well-represented in entry- and early-career stages. New Goldman Sachs research found that Asian Americans account for 13 percent of professional positions at large employers, yet just 6 percent of senior management roles. Despite their underrepresentation in leadership roles, Asians often are not included in diversity metrics, data or programs.

Stereotypes also serve to hide the vast disparities of experience across the large and diverse pan-Asian community. Income and educational attainment, for example, vary widely. Asian Americans from India, China and Korea tend to have higher education and income levels than their counterparts from countries such as Pakistan, Vietnam and Cambodia, the Goldman Sachs research found.



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ASHEESH ADVANI
CEO, JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT WORLDWIDE

“It would be wrong to paint everyone with the same broad brush,” says Sandy Leung, EVP and general counsel for Bristol Myers Squibb. “People fail to understand that Asians are very diverse and many need help, but they are not getting the attention and the services they need because people think, ‘You’re Asian so everything must be okay.’”

Among the more destructive aspects of the model minority myth is its use as a wedge to divide underrepresented groups and to create pressure to conform to “white” standards to fit in and succeed. “Because of this model minority myth, Asian Americans are often left out of the DEI conversation. For some Asian Americans, they may subconsciously feel like they have to pick a side when it comes to DEI, as if it’s a zero-sum proposition,” observes Daniel Kim, chief operating officer of Natural Resources Defense Council.

Yet, behaving against the stereotype can court backlash. Most of the leaders we talked with had stories of getting push back or negative critiques from bosses or colleagues when they asserted themselves, asked for a raise or promotion, or otherwise acted against the stereotype. Jean Lee, president and CEO of Minority Corporate Counsel Association, had a career coach who told her to smile more. “When you speak up,” she says, “it is really hard for a lot of people to embrace because they don’t expect me to have an opinion. I cannot tell you the number of times that people expected me to be quiet and just do the work. And when you do speak up, you are not seen as a good team member.”

The dissonance between the stereotype and reality can be an even greater burden for Asian women. As Vivian Liu, CFO and head of global merchant operations for Wish, explains, “I try to communicate in a very succinct way that conveys a level of competency and clarity because that’s what people seek from the leadership — a clear point of view delivered with conviction. But, of course, you also need to communicate in a way that doesn’t come across as rude or aggressive. It took me a long time to get the balance right.” Elinor Hoover, chair of the global consumer & retail group in Citigroup’s Banking, Capital Markets and Advisory (BCMA) division, recalls working on a trading floor earlier in her career and having to be louder and more aggressive than usual one day to get a complicated transaction done. She ended up getting negative feedback from coworkers about the incident. “If I had been anything else than an Asian woman, the reaction might have been like, ‘wow, a go-getter, aggressive, getting it done.’ But for me, it created tremendous dissonance and even led to questions about whether I was the right leader for the business. I had to become very aware that sometimes stereotypes do exist and biases do exist.”



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SANDY LEUNG
EVP AND GENERAL COUNSEL
FOR BRISTOL MYERS SQUIBB



Asian, South Asian and Pacific Islander leaders: How they see their role

The leaders we spoke with acknowledge that their success has made them role models for others in the pan-Asian community. As a result, they say they play a role in educating their organizations about the Asian experience and the stereotypes and other barriers that keep more Asians, South Asians and Pacific Islanders from advancing. In addition, they serve as mentors, sponsors and advocates to help increase representation at every level and as executive sponsors for employee resource groups.

“I take an unapologetic approach to eliminating bias in our meetings, in our products and our services. We have to call out those damaging behaviors regardless of what level that person is in the organization.”

– COURTNEY FONG

“I would really encourage members of the API community to be part of the conversation. We have a great opportunity to enrich that discussion. Oftentimes I see people talk about the white community or the black and brown community, but rarely do I hear about the Asian American community. And why is that? We represent the fastest-growing population in the U.S. I think that means we must engage, be more vocal and represent ourselves.”

– DANIEL KIM

“In terms of the team I manage day-to-day, one role I can play is making sure I’m not making the same wrong assumptions about individual style and equating them with capability. So in my team, I truly promote people based on their capabilities, while being mindful of the importance of maintaining a culturally diverse team.”

– VIVIAN LIU

“When I came to the US, I thought ‘If you work your butt off, you get the opportunities.’ Everything I did was to adapt. Getting to CEO was a bit of a struggle. There is a model CEO that many people have in mind — white male, charismatic — that I realized I was not going to fit. Now, I want people to express who they are, rather than do what my generation did: hiding some of ourselves to adapt.”

– PRAKASH PANJWANI



Confronting the model minority myth: What can leaders do?

Breaking down stereotypes that limit opportunities for the Asian community starts with learning more about your Asian, South Asian and Pacific Islander team members and their experience. It requires confronting your assumptions and biases to promote real understanding. “It’s really simple: just don’t assume anything,” says Fong. “That’s where the model minority myth starts: You see my surname or profile picture and assume something about me. Get to know people, and you’ll find that we have a lot more in common than you think, even if we were born thousands of miles apart.”

Here are some other ways leaders and others can help confront the myth and support their pan-Asian colleagues:

Understand that leadership comes in different styles

Letting go of pre-conceived notions of what good leadership is and what it isn’t based on individuals’ style will open doors for Asians and people from other underrepresented groups who don’t fit traditional stereotypes of what leaders look and act like. Spencer Stuart’s research and work with organizations around the world finds that leadership selection should be grounded in the context and the desired outcomes for the role; there is not one best or right style of leader. Defining the experience, capabilities, character traits and other leadership attributes that matter for success in a particular position and assessing people against those requirements can help organizations find the person best equipped to create the conditions for success in the role.

“The generalization that Asians tend to be quieter, a little bit reserved, nonconfrontational, respectable and collaborative can generate the misconception that they lack the decisiveness required to be a true leader. The reality is those traits have nothing to do with a person’s decision-making capabilities. It is just a different cultural or personal style,” says Liu. Adds Hoover, “I firmly believe that in the workplace, it behooves us to look beyond the stereotypes that exist. We must do that to actually understand the person and understand the attributes of the person, because that’s really the only way we’re going to be able to elevate people’s strengths and play to each other’s capability and build teams that work well from a culture perspective.”

Be intentional about diversity, equity and inclusion

To make progress in diversity, equity and inclusion, organizations must be intentional about their goals and the progress they want to make. The goals may be different at different organizations, but as Prakash Panjwani, CEO of WatchGuard Technologies, argues, “People are afraid to be intentional. You have to get to the point where you are willing to say, ‘Diversity matters in this organization, and diversity of ideas and identities is an important factor as we look at this position.’ You do not get change unless you are crisp and clear on your intentions.”

If the goal is to address the underrepresentation of Asians, South Asians and Pacific Islanders (and other underrepresented groups) in leadership, organizations need data to understand the current state and diagnose what's driving the lack of diversity. "Is it the process by which we evaluate people upward? Do they not have good mentoring or good representation? Is it a supply issue? Do we have unconscious bias when we recruit people? Are we recruiting people inherently to think, look and act like ourselves?" says Hoon Lee, board member and west tax regional managing partner for BDO. Once leaders understand the current state, they can develop a clear set of values, principles and behaviors to consistently apply to the process.


Working at the organizational level is important because systemic solutions are needed to increase diversity and create more inclusive workplaces. "You need to look at the system and how you promote people and how you retain people," says Jean Lee. "The only way you're going to start to understand how the system perpetually disadvantages one group over another is to look at the processes and data. Because if your standards are applied equally and require the same of every candidate, why is it that one group does not advance like the other?"

Leaders also can be intentional about how to talk about the value of diversity and inclusion to the organization, removing the us-versus-them mentality that can derail diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. "I believe there needs to be language that allows people to feel that all boats are lifted by virtue of giving people who have historically been either underrepresented or ignored more of a voice — so everyone's goals are more likely to be achieved," says Asheesh Advani. Similarly, Daniel Park, CEO of Imperfect Foods, says efforts should focus on appreciating what each individual brings to the table. "It's not about trying to be someone you're not. It's appreciating the unique backgrounds that people have come from, and then celebrating that and believing that cohesively all these different backgrounds and experiences — which are a reflection of our customers and the broader population — lead to better outcomes and decisions."

Be a mentor, an ally and an advocate

The Asian, South Asian and Pacific Islander leaders we spoke with all talked about the mentors, allies and advocates who have helped them in their careers. Mentors and advocates fuel career advancement in a variety of ways. They provide advice for getting and succeeding in new roles, use their influence and connections to open doors, and remove barriers to advancement. They also can provide feedback about how certain behaviors might be interpreted and encourage those they mentor to take risks they might hesitate to otherwise — for example, to try for a new role or high-profile assignment sooner than they might feel ready.





For many Asians, South Asians and Pacific Islanders, touting one's accomplishments and advocating for a promotion does not come naturally. "I grew up thinking it was bad to talk about yourself or boast. I also had a hard time looking people who were senior to me in the eye, because culturally we were raised to listen and defer to your elders or people senior to you," explains Leung. "But the reality is, in the workplace, it's important to talk about your accomplishments in a way that's authentic and real to you and articulate your career aspirations. If you don't make eye contact, you risk people thinking you might be hiding something or they'll distrust you."

Bosses and advocates — both outside of and within the pan-Asian community — can be supportive by helping Asian colleagues to see themselves in stretch roles and advocating for them and their work behind the scenes. Park credits many of his past managers for their support but wonders if his career progression might have been even faster if managers had recognized that he was unlikely to advocate for himself, "if I had a manager who better understood the fact that I'm going to be less vocal about my accomplishments and more modest and said, 'Hey Dan, you're ready for this next thing. Let me put you forward.'"

Advocacy and allyship is important because it shifts the burden for change away from the individuals from underrepresented groups to the majority and the organization. "You need the 85 or 95 percent to recognize that there's a problem and, ideally, agree on a potential solution and be part of advocating for the change, rather than placing all the burden on the minority to solve it themselves," says Hoon Lee. Delving into issues of equity, inclusion and diversity at work can be uncomfortable, he acknowledges. "We also know that people can be afraid of saying the wrong thing or think, 'Why is this relevant at work? We should talk about EBITDA or profits or margins or square footage.' But if you work with people and you want to retain the best people, we're going to have to talk about this. Lean in. Be comfortable getting a little uncomfortable."



All of us have the opportunity — and responsibility — to contribute to the creation of more equitable and inclusive workplaces. Leaders and allies can help challenge the model minority stereotype by being intentional champions for change, taking time to empathize and listen to the needs of the community, and seeing past the stereotype to the individual.



This article was authored by the **Asian, South Asian and Pacific Islander Affinity Group** at Spencer Stuart

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