

Expanding the Leadership Pipeline:

Four Insights to Overcome Cultural Blind Spots in Organizations

How organizations benefit by looking beyond “the loudest voices” to embrace varied leadership styles.

Every leader brings their unique strengths and characteristics to the role. While this may be understood by organizations, some fall short of supporting and leveraging the talents of their workforce. At times, organizations still prioritize and reward individuals who are savvy at promoting themselves, emphasizing their own achievements and standing out. This approach shrinks market reach, constricts the leadership pipeline and slows innovation.

The consequences are clear: talent pipelines shrink, employees feel undervalued and innovation stalls. Organizations also miss strategic opportunities to develop a leadership bench that reflects and understands today's rapidly shifting markets.

At a fireside chat hosted by Spencer Stuart's Asian, South Asian & Pacific Islander (ASAPI) Employee Resource Group, Joy Chen, CEO of the Multicultural Leadership Institute, presented on this topic. Chen is an expert in global cross-cultural leadership development and is widely published including in *Harvard Business Review*. In her talk with ASAPI, Chen shared how cultural blind spots can prevent companies and leaders from fully recognizing and cultivating talent. Here are four valuable takeaways from her talk.



1. Recognize that leadership excellence takes many forms

In today's complex business world, there are many ways to be an effective leader. Taking initiative, asserting opinions and standing out as an individual are all traits that have long been valued in many corporate environments.



Cultural diversity is what we need for innovation but that depends on our ability to leverage that diversity into high performance.”

JOY CHEN

CEO OF THE MULTICULTURAL
LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

However, when a company culture primarily rewards “the loudest voices” in the room, as Chen reflects, organizations risk overlooking those who lead by supporting others and silencing other potentially transformative voices. Individuals who take a quieter, more humble or behind-the-scenes approach are often mischaracterized as “worker bees.” As Chen emphasized, “When given the right opportunities, they can become extraordinary leaders.”

Organizations that foster a culture that values multiple leadership styles enhance decision-making and drive stronger innovation. Spencer Stuart's research

study of 5,000 employees across the world found that when leaders showcase an inclusive mindset (intentionality, cultural agility, openness to change and adaptability), talent thrives. Specifically, when leaders embrace these qualities:

- » Employees are two times more likely to feel they develop professionally at the organization.
- » Teams are 17 points more willing to surface ideas before making a decision.

2. Change the way leaders are selected and supported

“Cultural diversity is what we need for innovation but that depends on our ability to leverage that diversity into high performance,” according to Joy Chen. Embracing diverse perspectives and demographic differences requires deliberate effort. Chen recommends that organizations first assess the value assigned to certain leadership traits and the way leaders are chosen. Addressing bias in the process of evaluating and selecting leaders is an important next step. For example, boards and hiring managers can reevaluate selection criteria, challenging which leadership strengths and capabilities are valued over others, and why. By rethinking selection systems, organizations can reduce risk of groupthink and tap into a broader range of leadership potential.

Chen urges leaders to address the pervasive barriers that hold talent back from ascending to critical leadership roles and opportunities. Additionally, a focus on managing succession and building broad pipelines early could clear pathways to identify leaders.

It's equally important to support leaders from nontraditional professional or organizational backgrounds through their leadership journey. When adding people who bring cultural richness to teams, the risk of "organ rejection" can be high, making intentional scaffolding critical to their success. This includes building systems to recognize and capitalize on their unique perspectives.

Mentorship and sponsorship play a vital role, especially when advocates are present "in the room" during key succession and development opportunities. Success requires more than good intentions; it requires a willingness to recognize and embrace diverse leadership styles.

Given today's shifting legal landscape, it's essential that structured support systems are designed to be open to all. Research shows that such systems are most often used by those who need them most — and when done right, they benefit the entire organization. Organizations that implement open, inclusive development structures gain long-term returns in strategic agility, leadership depth and market insight.

3. Leverage the unique strengths of talent

Chen suggests that the notion of "culture fit" can inadvertently reinforce a bias that you must fit a certain way of doing things to be successful within a company. Organizations can gain a competitive advantage by embracing the ideal of "culture add." This involves intentional efforts to create teams that bring fresh perspectives, problem-solving approaches and lived experiences.

Reframing "culture fit" to "culture add" invites and challenges organizations to think differently about what makes a "good" leader. This mindset shift also creates opportunities for individuals to be authentic — embracing their unique strengths, talents and backgrounds while learning business norms to maximize their leadership impact in the specific workplace culture. At the organizational level, this approach builds adaptive capacity and positions companies to outperform in fast-changing global markets.

As Chen says, "creating workplaces where employees feel empowered to lead authentically drives deep engagement and strong team performance."



Creating workplaces where employees feel empowered to lead authentically drives deep engagement and strong team performance."

JOY CHEN
CEO OF THE MULTICULTURAL
LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

4. Adopt a broader perspective on leadership

“Leadership isn’t about how a leader looks or sounds — it’s about how they deliver results in ways that align with the company’s vision and values,” says Chen. Her insights remind leaders of the importance of cultural awareness — not only of others’ cultures but also of their own. The next frontier in leadership is not about finding leaders who fit traditional molds; it is about recognizing leadership in all its forms.



Leadership isn’t about how a leader looks or sounds — it’s about how they deliver results in ways that align with the company’s vision and values.”

JOY CHEN
CEO OF THE MULTICULTURAL
LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Supporting non-traditional leaders is not just a matter of fairness — it is a strategic investment. Organizations that equip leaders to bridge cultural divides will outperform competitors, drive innovation and build a future-ready workforce.

By expanding how leadership is defined, companies can move beyond cultural blinders and foster workplaces that are truly innovative, engaging and competitive. The key to future success lies not in finding leaders who fit a mold, but in empowering leaders who can harness the power of inclusion to achieve remarkable outcomes.

As Chen explains, it’s not about checking boxes — it’s about positioning your organization to lead in an environment where every individual’s contribution and unique talents drive business results. For companies operating in global markets, a “culture add” approach will unlock new opportunities and sharpen competitive advantage.





About Spencer Stuart

At Spencer Stuart, we know that leadership has never mattered more. We are trusted by organizations around the world to help them make the senior-level leadership decisions that have a lasting impact on their enterprises, on their stakeholders and on the world around them. Through our executive search, board and leadership advisory services, we help build and enhance high-performing teams for select clients ranging from major multinationals to emerging companies to nonprofit institutions.

Privately held since 1956, we focus on delivering knowledge, insight and results through the collaborative efforts of a team of experts — now spanning more than 60 offices, over 30 countries and more than 50 practice specialties. Boards and leaders consistently turn to Spencer Stuart to help address their evolving leadership needs in areas such as senior-level executive search, board recruitment, board effectiveness, succession planning, in-depth senior management assessment, and many facets of culture and organizational effectiveness, particularly in the context of the changing stakeholder expectations of business today. For more information on Spencer Stuart, please visit www.spencerstuart.com.

Authors

Lynn Wu (Los Angeles)

Joy Chen (CEO of the Multicultural Leadership Institute)

