

LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES FOR CAPITALIZING ON CULTURALLY DIVERSE TEAMS: THE BAMBOO CEILING REVISITED

by Jane Hyun

Do the small things that we say and do make a difference in how people perceive us as we conduct business on a global stage? Definitely yes. However, one of the things I've noticed about interactions in business is that people often focus on obvious or stereotypical traits, overlooking the unspoken cultural nuances in human behavior. The fast-paced virtual business environment can exacerbate this dynamic. When managers do notice the subtle differences, they are likely to attribute them to personality, gender distinctions, or, worse, a character flaw.

Author's Note: Certain names in this article have been changed to protect identities.

What are the implications from a leadership development perspective? I'm not referring to cultural acceptance in terms of external demonstrations of culture (like appreciating Mexican food during Cinco de Mayo or catching the latest Hong Kong action movie). In the leadership development of our employees, it is the invisible values-driven aspect of culture that lies at the heart of behavior, communication, and how we respond under pressure. This aspect of diversity trips us up. For example, let's say Raymond, a new addition to your team, doesn't speak up much when you're in meetings. After a few times, you may chalk the behavior up to "lack of initiative" or "quiet personality." However, you might consider the possibility that he may not be contributing as much as you expect because you're in the room and are the one with the more established reputation with the client. As described in *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling*, behavior is often misinterpreted by people from different cultures, because it is visible, unlike motivations, feelings, intentions, and thought processes.

In today's global marketplace, if we don't get the small things right, from a management perspective, we will have missed out on a critical element that can mean the difference between fully realized talent or disengagement and lost opportunity. Companies are tapping into their diverse employee population to gain cultural insights to unleash innovation. If we don't invest the time and effort to understand the cultural makeup of our team members, including an exploration of their deeply embedded cultural values, we will lag behind others in navigating global teams, and underuse the very people who can fuel innovative thinking, and we risk missing the chance to reach more diverse customers right here in the United States.

Moreover, few businesses will retain their competitive edge if they fail to practice cultural competence. Organizations who have invested their resources to figure this out in the past few years will be able to use their multicultural talent resources to fuel innovation. We can no longer ignore the risk of not being adept at working effectively with customers from different cultures.

In the past year, Asians have been the topic of fascination propelled by the heated debates surrounding "tiger parenting." In *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Amy Chua penned a book depicting her Chinese parenting journey, raising children with unusually strict standards (for example, no playdates and no sleepovers), and more recently, Wesley Yang's New York magazine article "Paper Tigers" questioned the impact of tiger parenting and inquired if this type of parenting produces healthy adults. Since the initial research on which we have embarked around the "Bamboo Ceiling" effect (the individual, cultural, and organizational challenges that Asians encounter on their way to reaching the top posts in corporate America) in 2005, we have learned much about what it takes to develop Asians inside our client organizations, and realize that both the individual and the organization must work in conjunction to bridge the gaps and blind spots that exist when it comes to recruiting and retention across a variety of cultural lines. We have made numerous discoveries that directly impact Asians, as well as other professionals from a variety of ethnicities and backgrounds. These principles, outlined in this article, also easily apply to the diverse cultural traits found across many segments of corporate America.

To begin this conversation, I would like to share with you the needs and opportunities exemplified in helping Asian leaders (and, by implication, other multicultural executives) advance inside an organization. The "bamboo ceiling" is a combination of cultural and organizational or systemic barriers that keep Asians from rising to the top management. These barriers are often subtle and difficult to recognize, as they are not always obvious upon first meeting and require a careful exploration of underlying assumptions and beliefs to understand fully.

Until recently, Asians were rarely talked about in the corporate diversity platform. The factors that keep Asians from being perceived as "leadership material" in organizations still exist, despite the paradox of the Myth of the Model Minority, which erroneously assumes that employees who have Asian ancestry are overachievers and can therefore be excluded from pro-

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grams designed to enhance the retention of top diverse leaders (female and multicultural).

When we started researching Fortune 500 companies seven years ago, we noticed an organizational phenomenon of Asians being stalled in their career trajectory on their way to the top. They had a great deal of aspiration and were well educated, but for many, the top of the career ladder seemed out of reach. On a broader scale, we discovered that what we really need is a wide-angle lens for developing culturally diverse populations of people. Most leadership training programs emphasized (and still emphasize) a “fix the women, fix the minorities” approach to developing their diverse talent, and not enough emphasis was placed on accommodating a variety of cultural expressions of leadership.

Has the dial really moved? A 2011 study by the Center for Work Life Policy confirmed that not much has changed since 2005. Today, while Asians are the most educated (50 percent have college degrees) and make up a good share (15–20 percent) of the entry-level workforce in certain industries, Asians make up

only 1.5 percent of corporate board members in the United States.

Anna: Bringing Her Full Authentic Self to Work

Anna, a Chinese American educated in China as well as the United States, had worked as a financial analyst for 12 years, moving through the ranks at a large consumer products company after spending 4 years at an accounting firm. Due to the focus on diversity efforts, she began to get involved with the Women’s Network as well as the Multicultural Employee Resource Group in her company, where leaders emphasized the importance of “bringing her full self” to the workplace. She was the director of Finance and Planning. Because of her strong track record, she was selected to attend one of our leadership programs. Until our interaction, much to my surprise, she had never thought that her cultural insights and language fluency would be of interest to her employer, even though the company focused on developing new products that would be more attractive to the Asian consumer. It may seem astounding that she held these beliefs, but her reasons were understandable. She didn’t feel comfortable revealing her cultural background as she did not want to play the race card. However, by keeping her perspectives and the understanding of her Asian community hidden, she prevented her organization from taking advantage of the wonderful cultural assets that enhanced her leadership capital.

During one of our cultural roundtable sessions with other leaders, Anna recognized that she was not alone, and that there was a part of her cultural knowledge that was not being tapped in her organization. Once she realized that the company valued those cultural insights, she was able to verbalize her interest in work-

An Important Note About Culture:

Not all cultural norms apply to every person within that cultural group. The norms described in this article should not be used to stereotype ethnic or cultural groups, as there are Asians who don’t always demonstrate these cultural norms in their leadership style. Not all the cultural dimensions described in this article are owned by all Asians and there will certainly be many who are not Asian who will demonstrate these Asian cultural traits. Recognizing individuality is important as you become increasingly aware of cultural norms.

ing with the multicultural group in the Foods Division charged with creating new flavors for future products that might better target the palates of a new consumer segment.

What can organizations do to tap into the full potential of a diverse team? Perhaps some of these practices could be applied to Anna's organization and may help both Anna and her employer to capitalize on her unique perspective.

A Strategic Approach to Developing Multicultural Talent Is Good for Business

As you consider developing a multicultural workforce, it is critical to consider the impact of culture on leadership development. In turbulent economic times such as these, it becomes even more important that we hold on to our top talent. As the need for qualified talent increases, engaging and developing a workforce that understands the needs of a broad customer base is a critical imperative for large multinationals. Those managers who are adept at tapping the full potential of everyone will thrive in today's rapidly changing work environment.

In a corporate setting, the dominant culture is not always aware of the differences that might be impacting those from a different cultural context. And since, as the saying goes, "You don't know what you don't know," the informal business culture often continues to reinforce the measures of success determined by the dominant culture. Organizations need to find ways to infuse cultural awareness into the entire organization at all levels so that teams of people (not just a few) understand how to lead and motivate professionals from a variety of cultures. Here are some steps for building a culturally sensitive leadership selection and management process.

1. Provide managers with more strategic direction in managing diverse teams of people. Ensure that performance measurement processes are clearly communicated and in alignment with the organizational objectives.

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Recognize that confidence may not look and sound the same in every culture. In the United States, we tend to place an emphasis on aggressiveness, on brash, overt displays of personal charisma, and on the ability to promote one's agenda. Individuals from Asia or Asian Americans who were raised in traditionally Asian homes may hold different cultural values, and those who feel uncomfortable with those demonstrations of "conviction" or "passion" may be overlooked during promotion discussions. Before dismissing a candidate as an ineffective leader, the HR executive should help management examine the process by which that disposition may have been made.

Additionally, it is important for both the high-potential managers and the executives making promotion recommendations to have more clarity about why someone should be promoted and not rely on vague descriptions of leadership potential. Clearly defined competency models are an essential part of this process as well as a strategic succession plan.

2. Rethink the structuring and rollout of mentoring programs.

Multicultural professionals report a lack of key mentor and sponsor relationships as a major barrier to their career advancement. Allow for opportunities for a diverse array of managers to meet current executives. No senior executive can sponsor a middle manager for a new position or a promotion during a succession planning discussion if that manager is an unknown entity.

Foster mentoring programs that allow current executives to meet potential multicultural protégés. Consider

setting up small, intimate gatherings where potential mentors and protégés can meet each other in natural settings, such as lunches, after-work cocktails, or breakfast meetings. Organize events where mentoring pairs can meet and naturally form relationships, with opportunities to follow up with each other. Potential protégés who have been raised in a hierarchical family and community tend to place a strong emphasis on the hierarchical structure (as defined by title, status, and role) in a work relationship, so they may find it difficult to engage mentors in an organic way. Consider ways to decrease the gap between mentors and protégés by creating opportunities for mentors to reach out to protégés.

It is important that you select from a variety of social venues that are equally comfortable for both parties involved. Instead of choosing a sporting event, consider alternating a variety of venues, and give opportunities for protégés to offer some alternatives.

3. Highlight cultural skills and a global mind-set as key leadership skills and reinforce them by sustaining the dialogue with all levels of management, not just the C-Suite.

Don't stop at C-Suite awareness. As with any important leadership initiative, the most senior executives need to have bought into the need to develop its diverse talent. However, those managers in the front lines (to whom day-to-day management responsibilities have been granted) may have yet to feel its urgency. Recent studies have shown that companies who are innovating by having diverse people represented and implementing culturally fluent strategies for developing women and diverse team members are finding success. In other words, begin with and engage CEO and C-Suite commitment, but seek to engage the middle management population and those on the ground about the importance of investing in a diverse pipeline.

Professionals from other cultures or ethnicities may find that their core cultural values are at odds with dominant corporate culture. Many of the participants in our leadership programs, for example, have shared with us that self-promotion of their ac-

Seek to engage diverse talent as soon as people walk in the door.

complishments (so necessary to navigating a career trajectory in the firm) is difficult for them because of early family messages that emphasized humility. Highlighting their strengths and accomplishments seemed to be an uncomfortable task for many of them. As one Indian American manager who works in a professional services firm put it, "It feels downright dirty when I have to resort to that level of talking about myself."

4. Push leadership coaching for emerging talent to lower levels in the organization.

Don't reserve executive coaching for the most senior levels inside the organization. Invite high-potential leaders one or two levels below middle management into coaching and leadership development programs, and monitor their careers as they progress through these developmental hurdles. If potential leaders are not identified early enough, they might not have the opportunity and the requisite experiences to acquire the management and personal leadership skills required to advance. Offer opportunities to take on high-profile, career-enhancing assignments that may give them a chance to test out their new skills.

Definition: Bamboo ceiling: a combination of individual, cultural, and organizational factors that impede Asians' career progress inside organizations.

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The Impact of Culture and Cultural Values

Don't underestimate the impact of culture and cultural values of developing a ready pipeline. And as we learn to flex our approach to developing emerging talent, we may find the critical talent we seek for our open positions sitting right under our noses, waiting to be tapped, but possibly invisible because of a cultural penchant for humility. Seek to engage diverse talent as soon as people walk in the door. The bottom line and overall health of your organization depend on it!

These principles extend beyond the Asian experience: What are the implications for creating the optimal work environment where *all* emerging leaders have the opportunity to contribute their best ideas? Employers and employees must have a parallel approach to these questions. It's not about fixing the person, and it's not about fixing the company: it's about making adjustments in both realms to garner win-win outcomes.

Jane Hyun, executive coach and global leadership strategist, is president and founder of Hyun & Associates, a New York-based consultancy focused on achieving positive business results through effective deployment of talent. Their expertise resides in assisting Fortune 500 companies, schools, and nonprofit groups to apply talent retention tools, cultural fluency, and a global mind-set to the way they do business. She is a frequent guest on a variety of national and international media outlets, including CNN, National Public Radio, and CNBC, and has contributed to The Wall Street Journal, Fortune, and Newsweek, as well as various Asian media. Formerly, she was a vice president of HR and talent development at JPMorgan and director of recruiting at Deloitte and Resources Global. She is also the author of Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: The Essential Guide to Getting In, Moving Up, and Reaching the Top (HarperCollins, 2005) and is working on her next two books.