

Ax the Bamboo Ceiling, Build a New Base



Judy Tso

Asian American numbers are increasing so significantly that they're expected to reach 10 percent of the country's population by 2050. As a result, more Asian American women will be in the work force, yet these women face unique barriers to career success. There's a phrase coined for these barriers – the "bamboo ceiling."

The following advice for combating the bamboo ceiling is aimed at Asian American women as well as non-Asian co-workers, team members and managers. If you are Asian, you will want to explore ways to overcome the barriers. If you are a co-worker, you'll see ways in which you can be supportive of your Asian American colleagues. If you are a manager, you will learn how you can be a better coach and mentor in order to develop the skills of your Asian American direct reports.

Asian American women as a whole suffer from a number of preconceptions or stereotypes that are often contradictory:

- Quiet and passive, keeping to themselves and not voicing opinions;
- Inscrutable or difficult to figure out;
- Too aggressive and tough, something akin to the old Hollywood image of the dragon lady.

Tips for Asian Americans

No one likes to have the added pressure of stereotypes or preconceived notions to contend with, but Asian American women do need to be aware of how these stereotypes are affecting them and their work relationships.

• **Develop your own voice.** Although you do not need to turn into a hyper-aggressive Type A person, you do need to express your ideas and opinions. You do need to be persistent about communicating and con-

tributing to meetings. Even if you dislike speaking up in public, in the American business environment, meetings are a major opportunity to contribute your ideas. If you have an accent, do not be bashful about having people wait until you finish your thought. Do not feel badly that you are taking too much time. Make sure you do claim your time and teach others to be more patient with accents.

• **Vary your style.** If you are very outspoken, sometimes easing back a little gives people space and they will not expect it. One default style does not fit every situation.

• **Don't be silent.** Although various Asian cultures may teach you not to rock the boat and not to cause trouble, if there is an issue, the only hope of solving it or improving the situation comes from speaking about it. Also realize that a good number of Asian Americans leave rather than get a situation resolved. You need to be able to work through problems rather than leave to escape them. Leaving has a cost to you and you never learn how to get your needs met. Make sure you don't default to leaving as a way to deal with problems.

• **Choose to modify.** At times, you may feel resentment because you feel pressured to change who you are. Think about it in this way: In every culture there are rules, norms and expectations. Everyone must conform to a certain degree to the prevailing norms, yet people also don't want to lose their individuality. Remember that modifying your behavior is not the same as changing who you are. If you think of change as a choice you are making to be more effective rather than taking the view that you're changing something fundamental to who you are, you will find change easier to do. Human beings have the ability to adjust behavior at any given moment. It doesn't mean becoming a totally different person.

• **Find support.** If you are feeling down, depressed or losing confidence, take action. Don't let another's opin-

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ion get to you. Make sure you bring up the issues. Go and talk to people you trust in the organization. If you don't have many people you trust, this brings up another issue, needing to have supporters who understand and champion you.

Tips for Non-Asian Managers

- **Be aware.** As a manager, you want to be sensitive to the prevailing stereotypes and make sure that you and other co-workers are not reinforcing those stereotypes or feeding them. If you discover you do have some stereotypes, be courageous, confront yourself and modify your own thought process.

- **Be a supportive coach.** If you see there are behaviors that would help your direct report's career, be candid about those behaviors. If you need to know the person's ideas and input, be clear about that. If you don't understand the person's career objectives, find out.

- **Bridge the gap.** If you feel there is a cultural gap, bring that out and seek to inform yourself of your direct report's culture and background. A good place to start from a historic perspective is to read "Asian American Dreams" by Helen Zia and "Strangers from a Different Shore" by Ron Takaki.

Tips for Non-Asian Co-Workers

- **Be accent sensitive.** An accent does not mean a person has less intelligence; it means a person learned English as a second language. Be patient and generous when listening to someone with an accent. Ask questions and probe if you are not sure you understand. Feel free to paraphrase what you heard and check to see if you heard correctly. It is not acceptable to ignore what the person said because you did not understand, or to dismiss someone because the communication can be slower or more challenging.

- **Don't jump to conclusions.** Be gracious rather than suspicious when people speak their native language around you. They are not talking about you but likely find that speaking in their first language can be easier and more efficient.

- **Become knowledgeable.** Be sensitive to the different backgrounds people have and learn more. Know whether your co-worker was born in the U.S. or when he or she immigrated. These two circumstances are not the same. Those born here likely consider themselves to be American, not foreign. Know how the person views his or her own identity, how he or she self-identifies. Know which ethnicity they come from and learn more about that cultural background. All Asians are not the same. Asia is full of diverse countries, ethnicities, religions and customs. People also have different class backgrounds, just as with most societies. When in doubt, ask politely.

Whether you are Asian or non-Asian, choose to be a force of change to break down the bamboo ceiling and help create a more inclusive, supportive work environment.

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