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Business Challenges in Pan Asian Community: Making Tradition Work By Kamesh Nagarajan



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In the American business world today, the Pan Asian community has a significant—and growing—role to play. Approximately 6 percent of the U.S. population is of Pan Asian descent; Pan Asians in the United States are among the wealthiest and most educated ethnic groups in the country. Already 1.5 percent of Fortune 500 companies have a Pan Asian CEO. Business leaders such as Vera Wang (fashion designer), I.M. PEI (architect), Indra Nooyi (CEO of PepsiCo), Jerry Yang (co-founder of Yahoo! Inc.), Fareed Zakaria (journalist and commentator), Elaine Chao (former U.S. Secretary of Labor), Ajay Banga (CEO, Mastercard), Wei Sun Christianson (CEO and managing director of Morgan Stanley, Asia), and Bobby Jindal (governor of Louisiana) are all blazing a trail for future Asian executives.

To some degree, though, we must still contend with the “bamboo ceiling”—the perceived cap on our achievements in the business world. Some of the reasons may have to do with our upbringing. However, I believe that when we recognize obstacles to success, we can overcome them—and perhaps even make them work for us. Here’s how:

Our parents teach us to be quiet and humble and to avoid conflict. This can work in our favor; in business, as in life, we can often go further if we seek to resolve conflicts by finding common ground. We don’t need to be loud and aggressive to assert ourselves.

We tend to work in isolation and do not take assignments outside our comfort area. Learning to be a team player and sharing ideas with our peers is a must for advancement. We should push ourselves to work in groups and to challenge ourselves with new and exciting work opportunities. In any position, there is ample occasion for solitary contemplation and individual assignments.

We tend not to speak up or take credit for our achievements for fear of self-promotion. Speaking up and accepting credit for a job well done is not the same thing as boasting, bragging, and shameless self-promotion. People admire the former and loathe the latter. Speaking up quietly and humbly and giving credit to others where due are excellent strategies.

We tend to avoid working together for fear of negative perception. Sometimes when Asian business leaders reach a senior level, they avoid other Asian professionals for fear of being seen as biased. Other communities don't necessarily think this way; the Jewish community, for example, works hard at being successful while at the same time creating opportunities for other leaders within the community. We should place a premium on striving toward common interests and goals.

Our culture puts a significant emphasis on family and the value of helping our brother or peer. These are great traits within our community. This is how we create a network of support. This is how we stay grounded. This is how we work as a collective.

Asian cultural heritage places a significant emphasis on education and hard work. Our upbringing rewards success and defines failure as a "family shame." While we certainly don't want to emphasize the negative, it is a great incentive to want to make our family proud.

We are ingrained with humility. The tenet to "never feel as if we have learned everything" marks our continuing pursuit of knowledge and living up to our highest capability. This means that as professionals we have a strong work ethic and are always willing to aim higher.

Pan Asian wealth creation is the fastest in the world. The individual countries' gross domestic product growth and demographics suggest significant progress and business opportunities for U.S. corporations. Asian professionals who understand the cultural norms and unique characteristics of the area can help their companies flourish. Of course, fluency in languages such as Mandarin and Hindi will be a key differentiator in these companies. As long as we can continue to focus on all our positive attributes and not let perceived challenges hinder us, we are poised for significant success. ●

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