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## 7 Things Never to Say to Asian-American Executives

By Yoji Cole

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Jae Requirio remembers her friend's story vividly: Following a meeting in which her friend was the only Asian-American woman, a male colleague said to her, "You're not at all like my Asian wife ... you speak up."

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"It was a big slap in her face. She didn't even know what to say to him," says Requirio, who is Filipino American and a manager of diversity consulting and inclusion strategies at Toyota Motor North America.

Stereotypes are like a slap to the face because they shock and sting. They are usually uttered without much forethought and reveal the speaker's ignorance. And in corporate settings, they can reveal why someone is excluded from after-work networking events or passed over for promotion.

Asian-American executives too often find themselves fighting to disprove the "model minority" stereotype, a group that works hard, is rarely controversial, but ultimately is not "American" enough for leadership opportunities.

Here are seven questions and comments Asian-American executives have frequently fielded from coworkers and why you should not repeat them:

### "You must be the IT person."

Linda Akutegawa, who is Japanese American and vice president of resource and business development for Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP), says that too often it is assumed that Asian-American executives are not leaders but support staff. Read about the business case for immigration in [September 2007 issue](#) of *DiversityInc* magazine.

"Implicit in that statement is that you're good at numbers and technology so you're good behind the scenes but not good at leadership," explains Allan Mark, who is Chinese American and the America's director, diversity strategy and development for Ernst & Young, No. 43 on [The 2007 DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity list](#).

For Asian-American executives who recently immigrated to the United States, the problem is two-fold. Not only are they stereotyped as not leadership material, but their cultural norms are interpreted by U.S.-born executives as proving the stereotype.

"In America, the leadership skill is defined by how confrontational, direct and

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aggressive you are," says Sameer Samudra, Six Sigma black belt at Cummins, No. 38 on the Top 50 list.

Samudra, who was born in India and came to the United States as a student in 1998, remembers a boss questioning his commitment to work because he was reserved during meetings. "We respect authority and come from a hierarchical culture," says Samudra. "Our leadership style considers how well the team members get along, so there's an emphasis on team building and learning in the process."

### **"You aren't like them" or "You don't act very Asian."**

There are many variations to this comment. Akutegawa has an Asian-American friend who for a significant amount of time had organized a regular tennis outing with a group of white executives. One day, one of the executives turned to her friend and said, "I didn't know people like you play tennis."

"He was shocked," Akutegawa remembers her friend saying.

"Many times you feel caught in the middle," says Mark. "You feel like you're in no man's land where you're not part of the mainstream Caucasian culture, while at same time you're not part of the group that recently immigrated."

### **"Asian Americans are not risk takers."**

"My response to that comment is 'Why do you think we all gave up our old country and came to this country?' We walked away from our families and a comfortable life and came to this country. That's a huge risk," says S.K. Gupta, vice president of operations, Lockheed Martin Space Systems.

### **"Where are you from? No, where are you *really* from?" or "When are you going to go home?" Or "How often do you go home?"**

These questions assume that all Asian Americans are recent immigrants. "We call that the double-sum question," says Akutegawa, who points out that especially among Chinese and Japanese Americans, there are families who have lived in the United States for at least six generations. "They ask you the first time and you say 'California,' but that's not what they're looking for. When you're asked the second question, it's truly frustrating."

"I was born in the [San Francisco] Bay area. I can drive home in a few hours" is how Requirio answers questions implying she is a foreigner.

### **"Oh, you speak English good!" Or "Do you speak your language?"**

"Don't tell me I speak English good," says Requirio. "I should because I was born here and it's my first language." And often, parents who are immigrants do not teach their children their native tongue in order to ensure their children assimilate into American culture. Requirio's parents did not teach her Tagalog, the Philippines' native language.

"I'm Filipino-American, of course I speak English," says Requirio.

"The implication is that we're all foreigners and saying 'good' reveals their own ignorance of English," says Akutegawa.

Also, inherent in being surprised that an Asian American speaks English well is the assumption that an

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Asian American, who speaks with an accent, has difficulty communicating. Gupta's boss, early in his career, gave him a low score on a performance review because he said Gupta was difficult to understand when he got excited. Gupta took the criticism in stride. He enrolled in an accent-reduction class, but after a few classes, the teacher kicked him out. The teacher said he didn't have a problem communicating or being understood. His boss couldn't hear the words coming out of Gupta's mouth because he only heard his accent.

Now Gupta says, "I use my accent as an ice breaker. I make speeches and presentations all the time and I often start by saying, 'If some of you detect an accent, please remember that I didn't have one until I came to this country.'"

### **"You're not a minority because all Asians are rich and successful."**

This comment reveals the damage stereotypes cause. Gupta remembers a time 20 years ago when he was told that Asian-American executives should be last to receive a raise because they don't need money.

Mark says that while it's true that a high percentage of Asian Americans graduate with college degrees, the number of Asian-American senior leaders, CEOs and corporate board members remains woefully low. "If you look at executive levels and more senior management levels, you don't see many Asians and obviously not at the board level," says Mark.

Asian Americans currently occupy 1.5 percent of corporate board seats among Fortune 500 companies, up from 1.2 percent in 2005, according to the 2007 Corporate Board Report Card by the Committee of 100, an Asian-American corporate-advocacy organization.

### **"You're not Asian, you're from India."**

For the record "Asian American" is a general term for Asians and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) living in the United States. According to *U.S. Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting*, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders refer to people who can trace their original background to the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands, including Native Hawaiians.

Gupta adds that the Asian-American community needs to come together under its common cultural traits. "We Asian Americans need to figure out how to substitute the individual configurations for the overall Asian-American culture," says Gupta.

Why? Because many believe that Asian Americans are too disparate as a group for marketing efforts.

"At IBM, I attended an Asian industry conference about two years ago. A senior leader said it's too hard to do anything with Asian Americans because they're not one homogenous culture," Gupta recalls hearing. "My response was that our culture may not be one but our values are the same, so let's focus on the community's values rather than the different cultures."

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