



ASIAN AMERICAN EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP REPORT 2020

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To all of the leaders who participated in this research study, we express our sincere gratitude. Your openness and kindness while sharing your stories served as great inspiration. Your reassuring voices and compelling stories will propel the current and next generation of leaders forward as we navigate a new landscape created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the movement for Black lives and racial justice. During this time of unprecedented change in society, your confident and empathetic spirits will provide leadership and guidance to all.

Our appreciation and thanks to LEAP Research Sponsor:



PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

Asian American representation at the highest levels of corporate, nonprofit, higher education, and the government continues to be documented. Yet, despite some progress in a few industries and sectors, there is room for considerable improvement. For example, according to the 2018 EEOC data, Asians represented as Executive/Senior Level Officials and Managers was 6%, with White representation at 84%.¹ In a survey of 315 largest nonprofits, Asians in executive ranks were a mere 3%.²

Lack of representation is not the only gap; literature in both academic and popular press focuses mostly on Asian stereotypes and ways to overcome barriers into leadership. Such examples result in the implementation of leadership development efforts concentrating on overcoming perceptions of being non-assertive, poor communicators, or lacking in personality and presence.

Few studies have focused on Asian Americans who have advanced through the challenging, and at times, seemingly subjective pathways into leadership. For Asian American leaders who have secured oft-desired high-ranking positions as C-suite or senior executives, little research is available about how they achieved those roles.

To better understand the journey of Asian American executives, our **central research question** is:

What are the characteristics of successful Asian leaders across multiple sectors in the United States?

A quantitative study will not adequately uncover the depths of one's lived experiences. To gain insight into unique stories of Asian American executives and support our research question, we designed a qualitative research study incorporating narrative inquiry. The research design explored the life journeys of 24 Asian American executives across multiple sectors. The leaders in the study currently hold executive roles in Fortune 500 companies, higher education institutions, government agencies, and the largest nonprofits in the U.S.

Using a narrative inquiry approach allowed us to delve into each of the leader's distinct experiences of navigating the varied organizational structures.

Our aspiration in sharing this research study are as follows:

- Contribute to the limited, yet steadily expanding literature about Asian Americans in leadership.
- Provide insight into each of the executive's stories and encourage the next generation of Asian and Asian American leaders to pursue a career in executive leadership.

1 From "2018 Job Patterns for Minorities and Women in Private Industry (EEO-1)." U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. https://www1.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/employment/jobpat-eeo1/2018/index.cfm#select_label

2 From "The State of Diversity in Nonprofit and Foundation Leadership." Battalia Winston. https://www.battaliawinston.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/nonprofit_white_paper.pdf

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As authors of this research study and Asian Americans working in the field of leadership development, our interest and perspectives on this topic shaped initial assumptions about what we might uncover in the data. In particular, we anticipated personal accounts of prevailing over career advancement challenges and systemic issues. As the interviews unfolded, we discovered these leaders did not dwell on the negative stories from their lives. Instead, they discussed the many attributes that helped them evolve into the leaders they are today.

Two critical characteristics, common to all the leaders across the sectors, emerged and are highlighted in this study. One is centered on curiosity, and the other is the desire to serve others. In addition, we present key insights based on our interpretations of the research findings and lastly, we share lessons from the leaders for individuals on a path toward leadership and organizations aiming to develop diverse and inclusive leaders.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Characteristics of Asian American Leaders

Key Characteristics

Findings from data collected

Curiosity

Desire to Serve Others

Examples from life stories

Adapt to different environments

Understand, support, and guide younger professionals and team members

Bridge cultural gaps and build connections

Develop teams capabilities

Solve challenging business problems

Give back to the Asian American community

Desire to learn and expand knowledge and expertise

Contribute to the betterment of society

Gather experiences

Desire to be an impetus for change

KEY INSIGHTS:

Interpretation of Research Findings

MOST VISIBLE
ASPECT OF
THESE LEADERS

Leadership Style

Each leader spoke about exhibiting different styles. The following were commonly shared styles across all the leaders:

Collaborative

Empowering

Open to On-Going Feedback

SOMEWHAT VISIBLE

Mindsets

These three overarching mindsets were prevalent in each of the leaders' narratives and enabled them to attain high-level leadership positions.

Inquisitive

Positive

Confident

LEAST VISIBLE
ASPECTS OF
THESE LEADERS

Values

The leadership achievements of the executives demonstrated that the values typically attributed to Asian cultures can play a positive role in leadership attainment. For this group of leaders, the following values emerged during the interviews:

Continuous Learning

Collectivism

Humility

LESSONS FROM LEADERS

Suggestions for Individuals and Organizations

Individuals



SELF REFLECT

Develop the ability to self-reflect and evolve as a professional.



OBSERVE OTHERS

Observe other successful leaders and identify what makes them successful.



PUSH BOUNDARIES

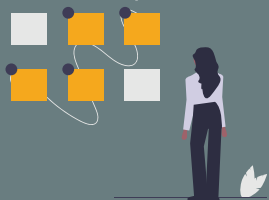
Push beyond boundaries to develop new perspectives and skills.



BE OPEN

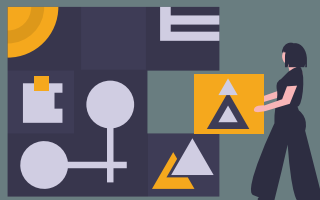
Be open to opportunities by developing experiences and skills.

Organizations



REDEFINE LEADERSHIP

Reconsider the definition of leadership combining the uniqueness of Asian Americans and, organizational, and societal needs.



CREATE SPACES

Offer programs that embrace leadership styles, mindsets, and values that develop and align to Asian American leaders.



REACH OUT

Include Asian Americans' diverse perspectives and mindsets when navigating change and uncertainty.

RESEARCH METHOD

To gain insight into the characteristics of successful Asian American leaders, we applied a qualitative research methodology which allows text-based data collection. Specifically, we designed a narrative inquiry approach focusing on life stories. This method facilitates the process of “storytelling,” enabling the participant to share significant events from one’s life.³ By examining each of the life stories as a whole, we uncovered key insights that contributed to answering the central research question.

Data Collection

We used open-ended questions to give participants space to share what they deemed most important in their life journeys. When developing the interview questions, we relied on the literature on Personal Identity, Social Identity, Ethnic Identity, Minority Identity, and Asian Identity Development Models.⁴ The literature provided a theoretical framework to understand how the participants viewed themselves within their social environments. The use of open-ended questioning resulted in the leaders’ recalling their upbringing, as well as current interactions with colleagues, managers, and team members.

Before the interview, we emailed an Informed Consent and a brief Demographic Questionnaire to each of the participants. These documents, along with the Interview Protocol containing the interview questions, are included in the Appendix section of this report.

The 24 interviews ranged from one to one-and-a-half hours per person. The introductory question prompted the interviewee to share their origin story of how and why their family immigrated to the United States. Some of the interviewees shared their life stories in a consecutive manner beginning with their primary school experiences. Others focused mostly on their career journeys and spent less time sharing their adolescent years.

³ Chase, 2005.

⁴ Identity Models include: Erikson, 1959, Marcia, 1976, Deaux, 1993, Cooley, 1902, Turner, 1987, Hogg and Abrams, 1988, Phinney, 1989, Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998, Sue and Sue, 1971, Kim, 2012.

Participants

To understand the characteristics of successful Asian American leaders across multiple sectors in the United States, we used purposeful sampling to seek out participants who met the research criteria. The use of purposeful sampling allows the identification and selection of participants who could provide a depth of information to answer the research question.

The criteria and demographics are outlined next:

Ethnicity	Gender	Corporate	Higher Education 4-year and 2-year	Nonprofit	Government
East Asian	Male	Within three	Within two reporting	Within two reporting	Senior
South Asian	Female	reporting levels of	levels of the President	levels of the CEO or	Executive
Southeast Asian	Non-Binary	the CEO of a Fortune	or Chancellor of a 4-year	Executive Director of one	Service (SES)
		500 company	or 2-year U.S. university,	of the 100 largest U.S.	Level in the
			college, or community	nonprofits	U.S. Federal
			college district		Government

We initially leveraged our professional and personal networks to compile a list totaling 122 potential participants. Next, we contacted each participant through email, LinkedIn, or phone to explain the purpose of this research study and ask for their participation. We interviewed 24 executives; our target was 25. Qualitative research studies generally focus in-depth on relatively small samples, and in some cases, as low as N = 1 if selected with purpose. In other studies, the number of participants has been either 15 or more or ten or fewer participants⁵.

5 Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009.

Two-thirds of the participants were U.S. Born, and one-third were born outside of the United States. A majority of the leaders obtained graduate degrees, with two-thirds of the participants holding a J.D. or a Doctorate. Those who identified as male or female were represented almost equally and spanned a broad age range.

Sector	Number of Participants
Corporate (Fortune 500)	6
Higher Education	8
Non-Profit	5
Government (Senior Executive Service)	5

Gender	Age Range	Country of Birth	Ethnicity	Degrees
13 Female	38 - 66	16 U.S. Born	East Asian	2 Bachelors
11 Male		8 Non-U.S. Born	South Asian	6 Masters
			Southeast Asian	16 Doctorates

Data Analysis

The *holistic-content perspective*⁶ was used to analyze the data that emerged from each of the participant's life stories. The analytic method preserves the variance in the life stories while also providing insight into how the unique stories contribute to overarching research findings.

The holistic-content approach of data analysis seeks first to understand the "Global Impressions" of the story. In other words, gaining a sense of what the participant's life story may be about. The next step is to identify a "Main Foci," which is the central theme that evolves throughout the participant's life story. The final step is to follow each theme/content and note conclusions about that story.

This analytic approach allowed the two characteristics of *curiosity* and *desire to serve others* to emerge as these were most prevalent in the narratives of the leaders. As previously discussed, each interviewee shared their life stories in distinctive ways, and while the participants' life stories were unique, there were some commonalities across the stories.

In the next section, we will first describe the characteristics of successful leaders supported by quotes from the participants. We then provide insights based on our interpretation of the research findings. Participant quotes have been anonymized for privacy; however, we preserved the voices and essence of the leaders.

⁶ Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

CHARACTERISTICS OF
ASIAN AMERICAN LEADERS

As leadership development professionals and researchers studying the life journeys of Asian American executives, one of our assumptions was that the leaders would speak of the systemic barriers experienced as an Asian American in non-minority environments. Another assumption we held was that the leaders would cite specific examples of Asian characteristics that impeded or delayed career advancement and that they overcame.

However, despite any roadblocks they encountered as Asian Americans professionals in the U.S., the leaders in this study spoke about their life journeys in primarily positive ways. In analyzing their collective experiences, we identified two key characteristics of these Asian executives who span across multiple sectors. To preserve the stories and unique voices of the leaders in this study, and to provide the reader with a sense of the leaders' mindset, we've included some of their quotes.

Key Characteristic:

Curiosity

The theme of curiosity emerged in the data and permeated throughout each of the leader's stories. There wasn't one discrete manner in which the leaders conveyed a sense of curiosity. It surfaced in unique ways across all of the life stories. Some leaders were curious about life, some about work, and others about the people around them.

We found that for these leaders, curiosity, regardless of how it was embodied, impacted the decisions they made in their lives, aiding their rise into leadership. What we learned is that their curiosity led them to seek opportunities to build alliances, resolve challenges, take on expanded roles, or strategically adapt to their environments.

One leader stated they were genuinely curious about people. For them, seeking knowledge about other people helped to fulfill their desire to learn. As a result, they were able to establish relationships with influential stakeholders in the organization, an unintended and positive benefit.

"I'm very curious about people. I'm very interested in people. I'll ask a very high-status person, 'What was your first job? How did you get to where you are? Tell me your story... tell me about your family. What makes you tick?' Because that also makes you more familiar to them and they are more familiar to you... you're starting the relationship. But I'm also really interested in, wow, how does someone get to be CEO?"

Another leader shared an example of overcoming hurdles in their professional life by applying a sense of curiosity to solve challenging business problems. Their explanation indicated a willingness to work through the obstacle. Instead of seeing the issue as a negative, they reflected on the notion of professional growth that ultimately prepared them to resolve complex problems in the future.

"I think this is something that I continually have to improve on - it's thickening my skin because it's a real tough world out there. It's about not letting disappointment or failures hold me back. There are times when things do not necessarily pan out. There were obstacles - career-wise - when I've encountered certain roadblocks. Rather than trying to just put my head up against a brick wall, it's working around it and not letting the obstacles or things that didn't pan hold me back."

Seeking out new positions and professional experiences came out among the life stories. One leader spoke of the motivation to expand their knowledge and expertise rather than pursuit of a title. As a result, their desire to satisfy their curiosity and learn about diverse businesses, set in motion a series of events that led to advancement into an executive role.

"As opposed to chasing positions and titles, I was always interested in gathering experiences. I was just thinking about this the other day... if someone said, 'What is it that you want to do?' I don't actually have a position title in mind, I don't have a company in mind. I know that I like to be involved in things that affect certain areas."

This leader shared how being inquisitive about the people they met shaped their career, introducing them to a professional field that piqued their interest early in life. This led them to intentionally fuse their interests, and subsequently defined a path to contribute to society through their work.

“I had met other people that worked for my mom at the bank in several capacities; noting the role of finance in a lot of these capacity-building projects around the world. So that made a very strong impression on me. And that’s why - but also the fact that the environmental movement kept growing and consciousness was building - I wanted to find a field that merged both where I could go and do more good in the world.”

Two of the leaders understood the hindrances that can arise from being perceived as foreigners, e.g. lacking fluency about American culture. Their curiosity led them to examine how they could adapt to the majority environment. They found that learning about their peers’ extracurricular activities helped to bridge cultural gaps and build connections.

“So I learned some of the tricks of becoming a ‘normal-ized’ office colleague, whether it’s music or sports... people want a common interest as a basis for interaction. From there, you can talk about anything you want. Eventually, they wanted to know about my background. But that ‘normal’ means of communication, I felt was important.”

“Starting when I was 24, I made a conscious effort to travel and to go to restaurants, where frankly, White people go. It was a conscious effort to spend money and invest in different things - to go to Napa, France and Paris... to travel Europe - because I also had an age disadvantage... People in my position tend to be late-40’s and 50’s or 60’s. This was to get them to at least be able to have a conversation. The universal things with White people or wealthy White people... is food and travel and the culture and the news. Basically, being attuned to the politics and being attuned to events. So those are the things - since my early 20’s - I attuned to and focused on.”

As highlighted in the narratives above, curiosity manifests as a catalyst toward action. Curiosity combined with other factors, such as desire to serve others, and their unique leadership styles and mindsets had a profound effect on their career advancement. It helped these leaders overcome potentially self-limiting beliefs and take concrete steps to advance into leadership.

Additionally, many of the executives in this study pursued advanced degrees. Yet, none of the leaders attributed it to spoken or unspoken expectations from parents. Despite the stereotypes about Asian tiger parents, we interpret this as a testament to this groups’ willingness to learn and develop expertise, fueled by their sense of curiosity.

Key Characteristic:

Desire to Serve Others

Another theme that emerged from the life stories was the leaders' desire to connect to others and make a difference in their lives. Not surprisingly, this theme manifested primarily in how the leaders led their teams. However, the range of examples that defined desire to serve others varied across the leaders' life stories. While all the leaders are focused on impacting people, several leaders provide direct support and guidance to people, other leaders aspire to serve a broad group of people by bringing on societal change and some seek to contribute to society and help other people by giving back to the Asian American community.

One leader possessing decades of experience, shared their desire to provide support and guidance to young professionals.

“So one of the things I am interested in, especially with all of my experiences, is helping, and when I talk to younger women and men, I try to give them support and shore-up their confidence.”

Another executive spoke about how money and status were no longer contributing factors to his definition of success as a leader. Instead, they talked about the importance of developing their team's capabilities and understanding their career needs.

“Well, leadership is relative. I still think position and role is important, but I also think how you treat people is just as important. I think the value you place on a work-life balance is important. And as a leader, how much do you foster that and encourage the non-monetary, the non-traditional stuff? So now I place more of an emphasis on how much you develop people. It's a very critical role of leadership.”

When asked about why they wanted to contribute to the betterment of society, this leader stated:

“I think it came from feeling like I was a downtrodden person as an Asian in America, and being discriminated against, and how awful that was. That's why Martin Luther King was my hero and also JFK. I just wanted to get beyond that, and have everybody, especially Asians, be treated fairly.”

Another leader spoke about being an impetus for change through their work with the Federal Government, resulting in far-reaching and positive consequences.

“If you want to make a big difference, you change policy; you’re not just feeding the person on the streets. You have to change policies. It kind of broadened my thinking that I could be going in different directions with a degree in public management. I could still work for the state, but I could certainly work for the federal government.”

When asked about why they chose to participate in this research study, two leaders stated a desire to contribute to increasing the body of knowledge to advance more Asian Americans into leadership roles.

“I’ve been involved in a lot of other organizations that focus on Asian American development. It’s still a very hard thing to not see Asian Americans at the C-level. So I have a very strong interest in helping us to figure that out. Because it’s certainly not that Asian Americans as a whole don’t have the intellect, because we know that we do. The work ethic is there for sure. So some of it is... is it the packaging piece of it? Is it the relationship piece of it? What is it? And then find a way to crack that nut.”

“One of my favorite areas that I like to focus on is our Asian business partnering group, our ERG. I want to help the next generation and help them see that they have a path, and... it’s probably a blend of skills that I see people needing to focus on.”

From the stories the leaders shared about their life journeys, leadership was a way of being rather than just a position in an organization. It was the embodiment of their experiences, choices they made, attitudes they cultivated, and resources they leveraged. Like the theme of curiosity, being in service to others, when combined with their unique leadership styles and mindsets and overlaid with curiosity, led to each person desiring to continue evolving as leaders, developing their teams, and positively contributing to society.

KEY INSIGHTS:

OUR INTERPRETATION
OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

We share our interpretations in the next section by integrating the leader's life stories with our knowledge, experience, and background in Asian American culture and values, Asian identity theory, leadership theory, and leadership development practices, both broad and Asian American specific. We designed this study with a straightforward intention to uncover the characteristics of successful Asian American leaders but implied in the central research question is an inquiry into Asian American identity. As we embarked on the data collection journey, we anticipated that the topic of Asian American identity would surface explicitly in the life stories.

Specifically, we thought the leaders would offer connections between being Asian American and the skills needed for advancement into executive management. By examining the data collected, we arrived at three insights representing the most visible to least visible aspects of the leaders. We found that their experiences and career journeys were defined by inclusive leadership styles, specific mindsets, and guiding values that enabled success in their lives rather than struggles.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

We first start with the most visible aspect of these leaders, which is their leadership styles. When we explored the concept of leadership styles, the leaders were clear on their styles for two reasons. One, they exhibited high levels of self-awareness and two, they received ongoing feedback from their teams and managers.

Each leader spoke about exhibiting different styles. For example, a few of the leaders considered themselves to be challenging yet fair. The majority spoke about being a supportive leader. However, each of the leaders shared the importance of collaboration, empowerment, and being open to on-going feedback from their teams.

“Well, my new team, they’re probably still trying to get to know me, but I think it’s clear to them that I’m authentic. I try to be who I am at all times, regardless of whether I’m talking to the CEO or the Board, or if I’m talking to my assistant or the front-line employee. I am who I am. I think they feel that I’m approachable. They feel like I’m inclusive. I think they would say that I do have high expectations, because I do make that pretty clear. I’m decisive, although I collaborate and I include people, I’m pretty clear about what are things that I want you to weigh in on, so I have some thoughts, versus we’re going to make this decision as a group.”

“I think the team would say I trust them to do what they need to do. I’m not involved in their day-to-day, but I expect results regardless. I do think I’m demanding, but at the same time I think I’m fair.”

“...the team would say I give them a fair amount of freedom to drive their work. But then I’m available to engage on the details because I make sure that I understand the details well enough to be a thought partner to them. I think most of them view me as a thought partner for their pieces.”

“...they would probably say that I’m a supportive manager and I’m always open to feedback. So, I’m always wanting a continuous loop in feedback because I’m all about the team. I don’t see myself as their boss. I see myself as their team member. Sometimes they carry more, or I carry more, but I have an amazing team, so I can’t even begin to imagine what my job would look like if I didn’t have them.”

MINDSETS

Less visible than leadership styles, we uncovered a critical insight: the mindset of leaders connects to the leaders' characteristics of curiosity and desire to serve others. We discovered three overarching mindsets that were prevalent in each of the leader's narratives and enabled the 24 executives in this study to attain high-level leadership positions. The mindsets consisted of being inquisitive, positive, and confident.

Inquisitive

For the leaders, approaching life with a mindset of continuously seeking context and information by understanding self and others may be an extension of being a "minority" or "different" due to their Asian heritage. In other words, searching for answers about how to best fit into an environment or strategizing ways to navigate an organizational setting was integral for the leaders in this study. The desire to demystify organizational dynamics impeding career advancement may have required the leaders to be inquisitive and seek solutions. For example, the leaders spoke about gathering feedback from their teams, finding ways to overcome business problems, and also, determining ways to create opportunities for the next generation of Asian American leaders.

Positive

Some of the leaders shared stories about resiliency and the ability to bounce back from setbacks and hardships. Some described racial discrimination and forms of harassment that occurred early in their lives. None of the leaders dwelled on the negative memories and instead, presented those experiences as part of who they are as Asian Americans.

Confident

Throughout the interviews, while the leaders never referred to themselves as "confident," an essence of confidence was noticed by the interviewer. Also, the executives were informal and conversational throughout the interview, yet their tone and pacing projected a self-assured, confident presence. What was clear to the interviewer was the leaders attained professional and educational success, despite the odds stacked against them. No one declared, "I overcame the hurdles." Yet, it was clear to the interviewer that each of the leaders had a sense of pride about their life journeys and achievements, resulting in a spirit of confidence but not arrogance.

VALUES

Values are the least visible aspects of the leaders. Values can be cultural, personal, family, religious and societal and could be overlapping. The leadership achievements of the executives demonstrate that the values typically attributed to Asian cultures can play a positive role in leadership attainment. Similar to the unique leadership styles, there are different values that seem to influence each leaders' styles, attitudes and actions. However, we noted these values shared amongst this group of leaders.

Continuously Learning

This value is indicated by the leaders' characteristic of curiosity and supported by their inquisitive mindset and being open to on-going feedback from their teams.

Collectivism

This value is demonstrated by the characteristic of desire to serve others as well as the leadership style of being open to on-going feedback from their teams.

Humility

This value emerged during the interviews and highlights their confidence but not arrogance.

LESSONS FROM LEADERS

In this section, we continue to provide a glimpse into the leaders' life stories and from it, offer suggestions for Asian Americans to learn from. The following recommendations are by no means complete or exhaustive.

Each of you will have a unique journey into leadership. As we reflect on the leader's life stories, and using the words of leaders, we encourage you to take inspiration from their stories and directly apply it into your life. In other words, you have to apply the lessons that you feel are most authentic to you and most relevant to your organizational culture.

We also provide commentary on ways that organizations can leverage the findings in this study to develop Asian American leaders. We encourage both organizations and Asian Americans to understand the intricacies of navigating the organizational culture.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Self-Reflect

For the leaders in this study, an outcome of being curious resulted in the capacity to self-reflect and evolve as a professional. Some of the leaders exhibited this skill by making connections about their upbringing and the impact it had on their lives. Others effortlessly recalled moments when they learned significant life lessons that helped them grow as professionals.

One leader spoke about how they did not feel like they belonged due to being different. They evoked a memory when their mother instilled a sense of pride about the Asian culture and impressed upon the idea of developing a strong work ethic leading toward career success.

“Well, my work ethic was huge. Always be the hardest-working person ever. So that’s what I did. I was always the hardest-working person ever....being respectful, obviously that’s kind of like an Asian value, but it actually served me well because in addition to sort of having a really great work ethic, you know, my boss always knew that I was going to serve that boss the best than anyone could.”

Another leader shared an example of how they learned the importance of navigating corporate America from their father. The leader reflected on experiences that helped them in their career. For instance, it was not necessary to be the expert in the room but instead, having a depth of awareness about self.

“Really, if I think about the things that make me successful, it’s that I don’t think I’m smarter than anybody else. In fact, I’m probably the least smart out of my family, since I’m the only person that’s not an engineer or a doctor. But I think what I have is not the intellectual IQ, as much as it is the social EQ.”

Reflecting back on unsuccessful attempts at work did not cause distress for one leader, but instead, they acquired valuable knowledge about their capacity to do more in their profession.

“There were a couple times when it just felt so devastating and you’re kind of like, ‘Oh my gosh, how could this possibly happen?’ But then when you get to the other side, and you realize that - you’re no worse for the wear - you know what your capabilities are, and you focus on that.”

Self-reflection involved receiving - at times - difficult feedback. While the feedback may have been challenging to process at the time, critical feedback was a key factor contributing to how the leaders achieved higher levels of status. Seeking out and applying developmental feedback assisted the leader’s growth over time.

“People said I’m intimidating. People said I’m rude, too demanding. It shocked me. It just completely shocked me that people didn’t view me the way I viewed myself. So I spent quite a bit of time trying to understand what I was doing that intimidated people. And I learned a lot in that process. And I had my first CEO, who really gave me a great piece of advice. In the last 20 years, I’ve adjusted and became more patient, more understanding, and less harsh in my communication style.”

Observe Others

Another outcome of curiosity is the eagerness to learn about others. Specifically, how to lift up into senior leadership. As expected, mentorship plays a role in organizational settings and enables career advancement. However, not all of the leaders in this study had formal mentors. Instead, the leaders in the study spoke about observing desirable behaviors in people they admired. The behaviors consisted of being people-centric, exhibiting charisma, or holding a strong sense of self.

Surprisingly, the role models were not all Asian, but instead, White male leaders or women of color.

“It was a family run business, and one of the leaders of that business was a great person and a great leader. And I would watch him. He just had this magnetism, like this charisma in the way he interacted with people. You always felt good. Even if the conversation was hard, you never left feeling demoralized or unvalued. I mean, he challenged you. You felt like he was challenging you because he knew you could do better, not that you were stupid. So he’s someone that I always admired and some of the leadership practices I put in place, I took from him.”

“She was a very strong, experienced, African American woman who just really knew how to get things done and knew how to say things in a way that, you know, made people feel good about working harder. Not like they were being scolded. She actually became a really good mentor in the sense that ... I would just emulate what she did and how she did it.”

One leader shared how they learned about leadership by avoiding the mistakes of leaders they did not want to emulate.

“I just realized that there were certain people that I tried to listen to and learn from. And actually, I learned more from people that were making mistakes than I did from people that were doing the right thing. Because there were probably a lot more people making mistakes and I noticed that.”

Push Boundaries

Exhibiting curiosity often led to taking action in their lives. As described in their own words, for these leaders, being curious led to pushing beyond their boundaries (perceived or otherwise) to achieve their personal and professional goals. Several leaders spoke of getting out of their comfort zones and expanding their life experiences by traveling around the world, or even living abroad to learn about themselves and the environment around them.

“To me, life is about experiences. The more experiences you have in life, the more enriched your life is. That’s my point of view... I feel that the leadership experiences that enrich my life, give me another dimension of experience in my life, and also helps to make me a better person.”

Others discussed pursuing positions that appeared beyond their current capabilities but achieving growth by overcoming the challenges presented in that role.

“And so, over time, just many, many experiences of learning along the way, and being successful, and then adapting, and doing it a little bit differently. Just towards the end you’re like, ‘Yeah, I can do anything.’ Right? I can take that risk, because not that I’ve done it before, but I’m confident in my ability to land and have learned something from the experience. And in some cases, I’ve done things and as I said, it hasn’t been as successful as I thought, but I learned something.”

The ability to push beyond the boundaries set by family or society. For one female leader, not following a predetermined path led to forging a path into leadership.

“...the girls would be expected to be doing more of the womanly stuff and all of that, and if then they would ask well what do you want to do when you grow up, are you learning how to cook, what kind of husband do you want, I was more like, I want to be a scientist, I want to be a researcher.”

For some leaders, their inclination toward pushing beyond their boundaries led to being open to taking on new opportunities. Many of the career journeys were unplanned and as jobs came up, they pursued the role not knowing that the decision would lead to career advancement.

“Every job I’ve had has been like that. I have the slide [about career] that shows all the different places I’ve been. My first comment when people see that, is, ‘None of this was the plan.’ In fact, quite the opposite. Everywhere I’ve been, I thought, ‘Oh, I like it here. I’ll stay here. I’ll retire from here.’ And then something comes along that disrupts my plans.”

“I looked at the job description, and I remember I looked at it, I was like, ‘I do not even qualify for this job. This doesn’t make any sense.’ But with a good friend saying, ‘I think you’d do great here, I want you to consider it,’ I decided to apply.”

Be Open

For some leaders, their inclination toward expanding their life experiences led to being open to take on new opportunities. Some of the career journeys were unplanned as the leaders did not know that the immediate step they were taking would lead to a whole of opportunities. For some, “luck” played a part in their careers. For those leaders, being prepared (from an experience and skill set perspective) would lead to recognizing career opportunities.

“I think it’s just, you put yourself out there for the opportunities that come out... and feel comfortable in the uncertainty rather than trying to script everything out.”

“Yes, of course I made the most of the opportunities that I had, and I’m not trying to discount that fully, but every step of the way, I can look at it and say, ‘Yeah, you get the opportunities because of luck. And then what you do with them is the effort that you put in. Then whether they pay off or not - is also luck.’”

FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Our recommendations for organizations come through our observations and insights gathered from the data. First, we encourage organizations to reconsider how leadership is defined within its unique environment. In other words, we found that a variety of leadership styles emerged from this set of diverse Asian American leaders. Their styles were unique to who they were as individuals, informed by their cultural background, gender, personality, and organizational settings they led within.

Second, to successfully develop diverse leadership styles, a partnership is required between the organization and the leader.

For example, Asian Americans who are on a path into leadership must apply a sense of curiosity to find ways to move around, over, or through the barriers that lay between them and their leadership aspirations. For organizations, we advocate for practices that enable the pathway into leadership for Asian Americans. Organizational structures are often replete with underlying cultural attributes and politics that even the most seasoned executives can have difficulty understanding and successfully managing. By creating inclusive onboarding and leader integration practices that allow Asian Americans to grow into effective leaders, a mutually beneficial partnership can flourish.

Today, companies, institutions, and organizations are experiencing dramatic changes. The Covid-19 pandemic and the Movement for Black Lives calling for greater racial and social justice is an opportunity to rethink and redefine leadership. As we have witnessed during this time, inequities will likely continue to exist in society, yet it is a time to rebuild structures that are more inclusive and equitable. As such, considering ways to cultivate leadership mindsets and behaviors that are viewed as effective during times of change and uncertainty - like the state we are in now - requires new and diverse leadership.

Leaders who exhibit mindsets of being inquisitive, positive, and confident, may be more resilient in times of change. As a result, Asian American leaders are well-positioned to lead during this challenging time and organizations may benefit from embracing the innate characteristics, mindsets, and styles of this diverse and talented population.

For organizations who want to engage in this important dialogue, we welcome you to connect with LEAP.

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AUTHOR BIOS

Yon Na, Ph.D.

Dr. Na is a researcher, professor, and consultant. As an organizational effectiveness consultant, she helps companies enhance performance and employee engagement by applying a scholar-practitioner approach. Dr. Na specializes in incorporating research, theory, and decades of experience in corporate America to develop solutions. Her 20-year corporate career spans leadership development and organization effectiveness in high-growth companies, some of which include Warner Bros., The New York Times, Microsoft, Johnson & Johnson, and Nordstrom.

In 2019, Dr. Na founded Radiance HQ, an organization dedicated to the advancement of Asian women in the workplace. She developed the Radiance Leadership Development Program, which combines her research on Asian American identity, organizational psychology, and her experience working in Fortune 100 companies.

Dr. Na earned her Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University. Her dissertation study focused on the experiences of Asian immigrant women and their journeys into corporate leadership.

Linda Akutagawa

Ms. Akutagawa is President and CEO of LEAP (Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics) where she is responsible for LEAP's strategic direction, sustainability, relationships and collaborations. A passionate social entrepreneur for over 25 years and beneficiary of LEAP's leadership programming, Ms. Akutagawa is an advocate for diversity and believer in the value and urgent need for diverse, equitable, and inclusive leadership. She has dedicated herself to continuing the cycle of leadership development and inspiring Asian and Pacific Islanders to step up to leadership roles across sectors, industries, and communities. She is a nationally recognized speaker and facilitator on leadership, diversity, equity, and inclusion, nonprofits, and board governance.

In her role as an advocate for diverse corporate boards, Ms. Akutagawa is the Chair of the Alliance for Board Diversity of which LEAP is a partner organization. She is an appointed member of the California Department of Insurance (CDI) Diversity Task Force and a member of the Asian/Asian American Institute Advisory Board at California State University at Los Angeles. Ms. Akutagawa is also active in the community as a Board member of Japanese American Community Services (JACS), a community grant-making organization and a Board member of the Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council (A3PCON).

Ms. Akutagawa received her B.S. in International Business with a minor in Economics from California State University at Los Angeles. She also has a Certificate in Nonprofit Board Consulting through Boardsource. She is married and a fur-mom to her Queen-of-the-home cockapoo, and aunty to eleven nephews and nieces.



APPENDIX - INFORMED CONSENT



LEAP (Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics)
327 E 2nd St #226
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Research Study: Asian American Leaders in the Workplace

Thank you for responding to the recruitment letter and volunteering to participate in this Research Study about the experiences of Asian American leaders in the workplace. The primary investigator on this Research Study is me, Yon Na, Ph.D. I will be working with Linda Akutagawa, CEO of LEAP (Leadership for Asian Pacifics), to conduct this Study.

Please excuse the formality, but I write to obtain your consent to use the information we obtain from your participation to further the purpose and objective of the Research Study. The purpose of the Research Study is to understand your experience as an Asian American professional and your journey into leadership. The objectives of the Study are to generate knowledge about the experiences of Asian American leaders who have achieved levels of success in leadership. The findings from this Study may be used for public presentations and published literature. Your story, along with that of several other Asian American leaders, will help to advance the knowledge about Asians Americans in leadership.

Your total time commitment will be approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. The majority of this time will be used for a one-hour one-on-one phone interview. Prior to the interview, I will email you a demographics questionnaire to fill out. The demographics questionnaire will help me collect general background information about you. During the interview, I will ask you a series of questions about your life experiences and your journey into leadership. Your story will be recorded.

By signing below, you agree to the following:

- 1. My participation in the Study is voluntary and without compensation or reimbursement. At any time, I may refuse to participate, decline to answer questions, or withdraw from the Study.
2. You and LEAP may use without any compensation the information I share during my participation in the Study (hereafter, my "Experiences") in furtherance of the Study and in any public presentations and literary publication of the Study. In any public presentation or literary publication of the Study, you agree to take reasonable steps to keep my personally identifiable information ("PII") confidential. In the event that you need to disclose my PII to a third party (e.g., transcriber), you will require the third party to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to beginning the work.
3. Subject to the obligations of confidentiality above, all rights to my Experiences as used in the Study and in any subsequent public presentations and literary publications of the Study vests in you and LEAP.
4. I waive all rights to approve the Study or any public presentation or literary publication of the Study.

327 E. 2nd Street, Suite 226 Los Angeles, CA 90012 213-485-1422 p 213-485-0050 f

LEAP.ORG

If you consent to the forgoing, kindly sign and date in the space provided below and return to me via email at yna@leap.org Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to call me at 415-515-9137 or Linda Akutagawa at 213-485-1422 x4115.

I look forward to working with you!

Sincerely,

CONCUR:

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT _____ DATE _____

PRINTED NAME OF PARTICIPANT: _____

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER _____ DATE _____

327 E. 2nd Street, Suite 226 Los Angeles, CA 90012 213-485-1422 p 213-485-0050 f

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APPENDIX - DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE



Demographics Questionnaire

1	Name:	
2	Age:	
3	Ethnicity:	
4	Religion (if applicable):	
5	When did your family come to the U.S.?	
6	How long have you been living in the U.S.?	
7	What languages do you speak?	
8	Which U.S. states/cities have you lived in?	
9	What is your highest level of education?	
10	What is (are) your major(s)?	
11	What are your occupation and industry?	
12	How long have you been in a leadership role?	
13	How many direct reports do you have?	
16	What is the position of your direct manager?	

APPENDIX - INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Note: To remain consistent with the open-ended interview process, not all of these questions needed to be asked. This interview protocol served as a framework to inquire into the characteristics of the Asian American leaders in this study.

Introduction

Thank you for speaking with me today. I'm interested in learning about your personal and professional journey. I will start by asking you a series of questions about your career experience. The reason for my questions is to understand, from your point of view, what it was like as an Asian American entering the U.S. workforce. Your experiences may have influenced you as a leader.

There are no right or wrong answers so please feel free to speak openly. If you don't remember something right away, we can always come back to it. Please share what you feel comfortable sharing.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Do you give me permission to record the interview?

Interview Questions

Introduction

Where did you grow up?

How did your family end up there?

What were some of the earliest memories you have of being Asian? What was that like?

If there was a time when you noticed you were different than others, what was that like?

[PROBE: Describe how you came to the realization that you were different.]

Tell me what it was like growing up in the United States.

If there was a time when you noticed you were different from others, tell me about it.

Think back to when you were growing up, what cultural or family values were instilled in you as you were growing up?

[PROBE: Tell me a little bit about what happened during special occasions such as holidays or birthdays. What did your family do on those days?]



Minority Identity Development

When you think back to your adolescent years, how was your home life different than your life at school and how did you experience that difference?

[PROBE: Give me a sense for how you viewed yourself, as a young child, growing up in a foreign country; for example, compared to your peers (or siblings).]

[PROBE: At home, who took care of you? Who made sure you ate, had clean clothes and did your homework?]

[PROBE: Think back to a time when you felt a sense of independence from your family. What did you feel? What were you doing?]

[PROBE: When you were growing up, who were your closest friends? What were they like?]

What is your present home environment like compared to your upbringing?

Early Career

Was there ever a time in your career when you felt like you got a “big break” in anyway? What was that like and how did it influence your career journey now?

Who were influential in your early career?

How did you choose your career?

Leadership

Earlier, you mentioned you experienced _____ at school and _____. How have any of those experiences shaped your sense of who you are today? Or have not?

In your professional life, was there ever a time when you faced obstacles because you were Asian American? Tell me about the experience.

How do others perceive you as a leader in this organization? How is this perception different or similar than how you see yourself?

As you think back on your journey into leadership, who/what helped you advance your career?

What mindsets or perspectives helped you with your career?

Closing

My last questions are about your overall experience today. Tell me what it was like for you to think back to your experiences. What was it like to share your experiences with me today?

What made you decide to meet with me today?

Is there anything else you can tell me that would help me to understand your beliefs and values that would help me to understand you as an individual?

I would like to thank you for your time and openness.

Do you have any questions?

Thank you.

End.

APPENDIX - STATISTICS

BLS Labor Force stats

<https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2012/01/art3full.pdf>

<https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

157,538,000 employed over 16

Group	Management Occupations As of 2019	Business and financial operations occupations as of 2019	Professional and related occupations as of 2019	Civilian Workforce Population Expected by 2020
White non-Hispanics	83.6%	78.4%	76.7%	62.3%
Hispanics	10.7%	9.5%	9.9%	18.6%
Black	7.8%	9.9%	10.5%	12%
Asian	6.1%	9.0%	10.0%	5.7%
All other groups (multiple racial origins, American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islanders).				2.5%

EEOC data

https://www1.eeoc.gov/eeoc/statistics/employment/jobpat-eeo1/2018/index.cfm#select_label



Executive/Senior Level Officials and Managers

Racial/Ethnic Group	Men	Women	Total	Percent
White	533,547	230,074	763,621	84.45
Black	14,795	15,439	30,234	3.34
Hispanic	26,394	14,241	40,635	4.49
Asian	39,802	16,141	55,943	6.19
American Indian	1,532	923	2,455	0.27
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	1,128	723	1,851	0.20
Two or more races	5,800	3,688	9,488	1.05
			904,227	

First/Mid Level Officials and Managers

Racial/Ethnic Group	Men	Women	Total	Percent
White	2,403,851	1,555,364	3,959,215	73.77
Black	196,793	204,062	400,855	7.47
Hispanic	285,659	188,699	474,358	8.84
Asian	260,222	153,224	413,446	7.70
American Indian	11,772	8,147	19,919	0.37
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	9,315	8,172	17,487	0.33
Two or more races	44,055	37,435	81,490	1.52
			5,366,770	

Professionals

Racial/Ethnic Group	Men	Women	Total	Percent
White	3,949,602	4,508,046	8,457,648	68.90
Black	337,601	666,530	1,004,131	8.18
Hispanic	385,014	474,568	859,582	7.00
Asian	859,671	740,578	1,600,249	13.04
American Indian	18,474	24,006	42,480	0.35
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	18,455	23,722	42,177	0.34
Two or more races	111,939	157,592	269,531	2.20
			12,275,798	



Nonprofit Sector

Survey of 315 largest nonprofits

http://www.battaliawinston.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/nonprofit_white_paper.pdf

Group	Ethnicity
White	87%
Hispanics	4%
Black	6%
Asian	3%



ASIAN AMERICAN EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP REPORT 2020