Things NOT to Say to Asian Americans

Akutagawa

Anand

Requiro

Confronting unconscious biases and stereotypes about race is a frequent occurrence for many professionals in the workplace — in particular, those from traditionally underrepresented groups. While many comments and questions are raised merely out of curiosity or ignorance, it doesn't lessen the offense.

"Stereotypes make people feel like they don't belong, like they're an outsider looking in," according to Linda Akutagawa, a Japanese American and CEO and president of Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP). "It's not necessarily the phrases or comments said, but the insinuations and how things were said."

What can your organization do to improve cultural competence?

According to Jennifer "Jae" Pi'ilani Requiro, a Filipino American and national manager of diversity and inclusion for Toyota Financial Services, everyone has a choice of how he or she addresses negative comments. "In a case where there is a personal relationship and a certain degree of trust, I encourage people to have a private conversation to explain the negative impact," she says.

Educating employees and exposing them to diversity is "critical to addressing comments born of ignorance," says Dr. Rohini Anand, who is the senior vice president and global chief diversity officer of Sodexo and is Indian American. "These impact how Asians are represented in the workplace."

Here are seven things NOT to say to Asian Americans:

1 **"You speak English well. Where did you learn it?"**

Typically meant as a compliment, this is one comment that really "pushes my buttons," says Anand. "Just because a person has an accent — and possible appearance — that's different than the mainstream" there should not be an assumption that a person can't communicate.

2 **"You need to improve your communication skills."**

Akutagawa does note that with globalization, there are increasing numbers of professionals who speak English with accents. And this can become an issue during performance reviews: Many times, Asian employees are simply told they need to improve their communication skills but are not given any elaboration on what that means.

"No one wants to come straight out and address the accent," Akutagawa says. "It's a two-way street: The manager has to think about what they're doing to listen fully and be present in conversations."

3 **"Asians are not discriminated against. All of my doctors are Asian, and the Asian kids in school are the ones getting top honors.**

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It's the white kids who are at a disadvantage."
Even positive stereotypes are damaging: The myth that all Asians want a career in medicine, math and science is limiting. Additionally, you should never assume that an Asian employee is the IT person.

4 **"Asians are good workers but seldom want to become leaders."**
There's a strong stereotype that while Asians are good individual performers, they are not leadership material — and that's okay with them, according to Akutagawa. As a result, she says, there is an unconscious bias that prevents Asians from being considered for more senior-level positions.

For example, Requiro recalls an anecdote someone shared with her: "After voicing her opinion in a meeting, my colleague's male manager said to her, 'You're not like my Asian wife. You speak up.' It is hard to forget a story like that."

Anand says the issue lies in a lack of cultural competence. Many Asian Americans with strong non-Western cultural roots might have a quiet leadership style, more behind-the-scenes than what is considered mainstream. The solution? Draw attention to a variety of successful leaders and management styles.

5 **"Can you recommend a good [Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, sushi, etc.] restaurant?"**
Don't ask for dining recommendations out of context or assume an Asian has this information on hand.

6 **"Where are you from?" "No, where are you really from?"**
Aside from the fact that the question already implies that an Asian is an outsider, repeating it is even more offensive. Akutagawa says, "I get the question only every so often, but it's frequent enough to remind me that stereotypes are there."

"How often do you go home?" also should be avoided. Requiro says her typical response is: "I am from the Monterey Bay Area. I can drive there in about five hours," even though she knows this isn't what the person meant.

7 **"Asians are overrepresented at senior and C-suite levels."**
Despite a variety of data — including DiversityInc Top 50 data — Akutagawa heard a speaker say this at a conference. "It was so blissfully thrown out. My thought was, 'We have a few high-profile CEOs and all of a sudden we're overrepresented?' Maybe when people see the one, they feel like they're being overrun."

The actual numbers show that Asians, much like other underrepresented groups, are lacking representation in upper management: Fortune 500 CEOs are only 3 percent Asian.

> "Asians are not discriminated against. All of my doctors are Asian, and the Asian kids in school are the ones getting top honors."

5 Ways to Prevent Asian Stereotypes

1. Don't perpetuate stereotypes — even positive ones.
2. Offer opportunities outside the stereotypical career track.
3. Assign cross-cultural mentors and offer stretch assignments.
4. Elevate the mission of resource groups beyond sharing cultural practices and celebrating Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.
5. Draw attention to successful Asian leaders and role models.

MORE THINGS NOT TO SAY

- Any derogatory term
- "You don't act very Asian."
- "What's your name again?"
- "You all look alike."
- "What kind of Asian are you?"
- "Are you a bad driver?"
- "Can you speak your language?"
- "Are you a fan of Jeremy Lin?"
- "Why do you only hang out with Asians?"

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