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5 steps to help break through the 'Bamboo Ceiling'

1. Check your system for any inappropriate and unnecessary cultural biases. In particular, look at your performance management system and also at how leadership attributes are described.
2. Clarify and define any culturally-based assumptions and expectations that need to stay for good business reasons.
3. Provide development support for employees with an Asian background so that they get a fair go at building the skill set that will help them have successful careers in Australia.
4. At the same time, provide support and coaching for all managers, to help them bring their own cultural norms and biases to conscious attention. Introduce them to the practical skills that will enable them to get the best from the talents of their Asian team members. Establish relevant metrics and measures that will help to track implementation and change.
5. Start preparing your organisation for what is set to become the Asian Century. Make cultural competence your own hard-to-imitate differentiator! Include an 'Asia-literacy' component as a regular part of every management, leadership and teamwork program you run. In this way, a culturally-competent workforce will effectively future-proof your business success.

UNLOCKING THE HIDDEN TALENT OF YOUR ASIAN EMPLOYEES

A growing Asian-Australian educated elite

Government figures prove what the recruitment industry has known for some time. The number of well-qualified graduates from an Asian background is growing each year. In some sectors, such as finance, the graduate intake is now predominantly Asian. While 15% of Australians with an Anglo-Celt background currently go to university, the figure for young people with an Asian background is 30%.

Two other factors will intensify this effect still further. First, new Australians from an Asian background are the fastest growing immigrant group in the country. The second is the country's skill shortage – highlighted in the recent budget documents and Treasury forecasts. Australia will need to access skilled workers from our region in order to keep pace with growth projections.

Taken together, all this paints a picture of an Australian workforce where well-educated Asian employees will be a significant economic resource, working side by side with their Anglo colleagues.

The 'bamboo ceiling'

Yet already some problems are emerging. Employees with an Asian background are under-represented in more senior roles, despite their qualifications. This pattern of strong representation in entry level positions but relatively few advancing to senior management ranks is also being repeated in other English speaking countries, such as the USA, Canada and the UK. What's going wrong?

The problem has been captured by the term 'bamboo ceiling': all those invisible barriers that combine to prevent the advancement of employees with an Asian background. UGM has been involved in several research projects examining what's going wrong and, even more importantly, how to put it right.

The source of the problem

Inevitably, an organisation's culture reflects the cultural values and priorities of the nation itself. Where English-speaking countries are concerned, this means a strong emphasis on individualism, equality and how these two are expressed in an assertive communication style, underpinned by a very linear approach to what is logical. The trouble is these Western preferences are at odds with those that dominate across the Asian region.

In Confucian societies, in particular, traditional values of self-effacement, respect for authority and dislike of conflict accompany distinctive, culturally-based ways of thinking and communicating. All these differences lead to an East-West culture clash. In the workplace, this translates into different assumptions about what is appropriate.

Two perspectives on the issue

"Our Asian employees are well-qualified and hard working. But as they move up the ranks, we expect a lot more. We need initiative and innovative thinking, managers who can argue a case, influence, and lead. I'd promote more Asian staff if I could but they just don't tick enough boxes."

"I managed my first couple of years OK but recently I missed out on a promotion, so I asked for some feedback. I was told I needed to show more enthusiasm, be more assertive and push my point more in meetings. I felt I was being told to be someone I'm not."

Is 'Unconscious Bias Training' the solution?

The argument is that we all carry biases, even unconsciously; Asian employees are not advancing in proportion to their numbers; the cause must be bias, both in the system and on the part of their managers. So let's make our managers aware of their biases and then we'll have a level playing field.

But many organisations find that such approaches are overly simplistic. When the dust settles after the anti-bias training program, there is no significant difference in the numbers of Asian employees moving up the ranks. In fact, things can get worse. The same performance problems persist but now managers feel they can't ask for help without the risk of being labelled 'biased' – or worse. A veil of political correctness sweeps the problem out of sight.

A more effective solution

While bringing inevitable biases to conscious attention is a vital early step (indeed all organisations need to remain vigilant lest bias creeps back into the system), it's not in itself enough to solve the problem. UGM research shows cultural insight and skills (for all parties) deliver sustainable results. Managers need a suite of very down-to-earth and practical skills that enable them to bring out the best in their increasingly diverse teams.

For their part, Asian employees welcome having Australian workplace culture 'decoded' in ways that make sense. This means learning how to effectively manage the impression of ourselves we convey to others. Is it what we intended? Does it serve our best interests? How can we come across as we'd like, while remaining true to our own identity?

'Bamboo': an eloquent symbol

Across Asia, bamboo is seen as a symbol of strength, resilience and grace. It is used to build houses and bridges, to construct pipes and scaffolding, to create musical instruments and to inspire artists and poets. Maybe it can also inspire Australian organisations to put in place those measures that will unlock the hidden talent of their Asian employees!