

Developing minority leaders: Key success factors of Asian Americans

## Abstract

Traditional leadership programs may not address the unique developmental needs of ethnic minorities. Whereas traditional leadership development is based on the assumptions, values, and behaviors of the Western mainstream ideals, our research employs a culture-specific approach to understand the unique needs of ethnic minority leaders, namely, Asian Americans. We focus on Asian Americans because they are least represented in U.S. management ranks, despite having the most education, training, and work experience. Our central research question is “What are the key success factors of Asian American leaders?” Qualitative interviews with 39 key informants (of East Asian descent, and two non-Asian Americans), ranging from middle managers to CEOs, at Fortune 500 companies, representing a variety of industries (accounting, aerospace, banking, digital imaging, energy, entertainment, food service, healthcare, medical, retail, technology, and telecommunication) identified eight key success factors (i.e., qualities that promote upward mobility in the management hierarchy): *Cultural Acumen, Rules of Success, Leadership Branding, Communication, Social Decorum, Leadership Aspiration, Career Determinism, and Cultural Inclusion*. Each success factor was defined, along with identification of its key issues, causes, consequences, and actions taken for cultivating the success factors. Results offer guidance for individual leadership development and for organizations to develop culture-specific leadership interventions that complement current mainstream training approaches.

*Keywords:* Asian Americans, culture, minorities, leader development, leadership

### Developing minority leaders: Key success factors of Asian Americans

Despite the best of intentions for diversity and inclusiveness, organizations have been less than successful in developing ethnic minority leaders (Shore et al., 2011). For example, Asian Americans comprise 1.5% of corporate officer positions (Catalyst, 2009, Committee of 100, 2007), despite being the most educated and qualified workforce (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a). One key reason may be the scant availability of insights and guidance for developing minority leaders (Leong, Cooper, Huang, 2008; Sy et al., 2010; Thatchenkary & Sugiyama, 2011). Traditional leadership development approaches focus on key success factors that improve individual leadership performance (Day, 2000), and typically target the development of Acumen (knowledge), Aptitude (skills), and Attitudes (mindset) (Banathy, 1968; Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). A key criticism of these traditional approaches is the one-size-fits-all presumption of leadership development (Riggio, 2008). There are universal skills that all leaders must learn to be effective (e.g., reasoning, critical thinking, decision making, etc.), but this one-size-fits-all approach addresses mostly general leadership skills, and ignores unique developmental needs of ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities may have unique career experiences (Chin, 2013; Kawahara, Pal, & Chin, 2013; Leong & Huang, 2008), and others have different leader schemas and expectations for minorities (Burriss, Ayman, Che, & Min, 2013). For example, occupational and leadership stereotyping may steer minorities to technical (vs. management) careers that may cap their ability to rise within the leadership hierarchy and managers may evaluate the leadership abilities of minorities solely on the basis of their ethnicity (Sy et al., 2010). Consequently, ethnic minority leaders may be judged by different criteria relative to their mainstream counterparts (Festekjian, Tram, Murray, Sy, & Huynh, 2014). Given their unique experiences, minorities may have corresponding unique

leadership development needs. Indeed, an important missing link in leadership development is cultural-specific training (Day, 2000).

Developing ethnic minority leaders requires organizations to consider the cultural context and tailor training to meet their unique needs (Shore et al., 2011). As such, the aim of this research is to identify the key success factors (i.e., qualities that promote upward mobility in the management hierarchy) of ethnic minority leaders, specifically focusing on Asian Americans. We approach our research from a *person-cultural fit* perspective (Leong & Huang, 2008) by focusing on the developmental needs of ethnic minorities situated within the context of the Western mainstream culture. This approach does not imply that the dominant mainstream perspective of leadership is more desirable or superior to ethnic minority perspectives. To the extent that organizations have yet to achieve a state of culturally inclusive leadership, our approach recognizes current organizational practices whereby navigating the leadership pathway is contingent on satisfying the expectations of the dominant mainstream culture (Sy et al., 2010). Moreover, a person-cultural fit approach does not imply that Asian Americans should shed their ethnic qualities and assimilate to the dominant mainstream culture. Rather, the identification of the success factors of ethnic minorities affords awareness and insights about the qualities that facilitate upward mobility. Consequently, ethnic minorities may focus their training and development efforts on cultivating these qualities such that it enhances abilities to be culturally ambidextrous and inclusive leaders (Benet-Martínez, Lee, & Leu, 2006; Sy et al. 2010). In sum, this study contributes to our understanding of the unique developmental needs of ethnic minority leaders, which has been largely missing in the leadership literature despite calls for such research for decades (Bass, 2008; Kawahara et al., 2013; Shore et al., 2011). In addition, this research may provide organizations with a framework as a starting point to develop ethnic minority

leaders that complements current mainstream approaches.

### **Developing ethnic minority leaders: The case of Asian Americans**

Asian Americans are a suitable minority group to study because of the sharp contrast between their high leadership potential and underrepresentation in organizational leadership. This large disparity is emblematic of the key challenges of developing ethnic minority leaders (Bass, 2008). Asian Americans are well educated (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a) and highly represented in professional and related occupations (PRC, 2012) that are traditional pathways to the leadership ranks (Gee, Hom, & Anand, 2014). Yet, Asian Americans are the least represented minority group in U.S. management ranks (Catalyst, 2009; Committee of 100, 2007; PRC, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a). Asian Americans comprise approximately 5% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b) but only represent 1.5% of Fortune 500 corporate officer positions in the United States (Catalyst, 2009, Committee of 100, 2007). Paradoxically, Asian Americans are overrepresented in certain industries and professions such as engineering, law, and computer science (PRC, 2012), yet, are scarcely found occupying upper management positions in these fields (Gee et al., 2014). In short, Asian Americans are the least likely to advance to leadership positions among all ethnic minority groups (Thatchenkery & Sugiyama, 2011). Thus, examining the unrealized leadership potential in Asian Americans may illuminate the unique developmental needs of ethnic minority leaders.

For clarity, “Asian American,” refers to Americans of Asian descent living in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b), whereas, “Asian,” is a broad, global reference, encompassing Asian Nationals living in the U.S. and in other countries. We recognize that diversity exists among Asian Americans. Nevertheless, Asian Americans collectively hold a *pan-ethnic* identity due to: 1) shared and common experiences, 2) lack of perceived ethnic

distinctions by non-Asians that treat them as a single group (Sy et al., 2010; Wu & Zia, 2009), 3) and historical categorizations (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a). Research found the majority of Asians living in the United States (77%) accepts and identifies themselves as Asian Americans (Park, 2008). Moreover, Asian Americans, regardless of ethnic identity, share similar career experiences and challenges (Catalyst, 2009). Thus, we acknowledge the diversity within the Asian American community; however, the goal of this paper is to focus on the common challenges facing Asian Americans as a whole.

### **Influence of Culture in Leadership Development**

Individuals have schemas about leaders (e.g., conceptions of effective leadership styles) (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Sy et al., 2010), which vary and are influenced by culture (House et al., 2004). For example, Western societies (e.g., United States, Canada, Australia, England, etc.) and Asian societies (e.g., China, Japan, India, Malaysia, etc.) differed on their endorsement of effective leadership styles. The prospect for leadership advancement for minorities may be impeded when judgments about them do not match the expected norms of mainstream leadership prototypes (Burriss et al., 2013; Festekjian et al., 2014; Sy et al., 2010). In comparison to Western mainstream norms, Asian Americans may endorse more Asian views of leadership (e.g., place higher value on communal behaviors) because the majority are foreign born and thus likely to retain many of the values of their country of origin. Moreover, the culture of origin is likely to exert its influence on later generations as well (Schonpflug, 2009). In the United States, the standards for evaluating effective leadership are Western values and norms, which can affect how Asian Americans are perceived as leaders when they do not fit culturally endorsed U.S. leadership prototypes (Sy et al., 2010). Asian Americans are judged to be less leader-like because they are perceived to lack agentic qualities associated with prototypical leaders such as

assertiveness, dynamism, enthusiasm, etc. (Festekjian et al., 2014). Consequently, these judgments form biases such that Asian Americans may be less likely to be selected for leadership development programs and overlooked for leadership promotions (Chin, 2013).

Similarly, culture influences how Asian Americans behave, which may hinder opportunities for leadership advancement. For example, parental influence plays a major role in Asian Americans' occupational choice because of their strong sense of filial piety (PRC, 2012). Moreover, Asian Americans may have a preference for highly technical professions (e.g., engineering and math) due to cultural norms for intolerance of ambiguity (PRC, 2012) and pursue career strategies that emphasize technical expertise (versus management) that may limit their ability to rise into higher leadership ranks (Sy et al., 2010). Due to cultural endorsement for harmony and humility, Asian Americans may also behave in ways that are perceived as less leader-like, such as being socially introverted, submissive, and conforming, (Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005; Woo, 2000). Consequently, others may be less willing to provide them with the discretion to lead (e.g., authority and power), which may result in less effective leadership performance. Thus, culture shapes our schemas of effective leadership (House et al., 2004; Sy et al., 2010). In turn, schemas of effective leadership influence our judgments and behaviors, which has implications for leadership development because they may affect talent management (e.g., whether minorities are selected for leadership development) and promotions (e.g., whether minorities are judged as effective leaders deserving of promotion to higher leadership ranks).

### **Present Study**

Whereas traditional leadership development is based on the assumptions, values, and behaviors of Western ideals, our research takes a culture specific (emic) approach (Leong & Huang, 2008) to understand the unique developmental needs of ethnic minority leaders, namely,

Asian Americans. Past research has examined the structural or organizational barriers (e.g., value systems, discrimination, stereotypes, socioeconomic status, etc.) that have impeded the ability of minorities to attain leadership advancement (e.g., Catalyst, 2009; Committee of 100, 2007). For example, the Model Minority stereotype has been hypothesized as a mean for the mainstream group to maintain their dominant status by marginalizing minorities (Zane & Song, 2007). By characterizing Asian Americans as smart, hardworking, and successful, it implies Asian Americans have achieved success on par with the dominant mainstream group, and therefore, discrimination against minorities is nonexistent. Consequently, the model minority stereotype justifies the lack of effort, resources, and commitment for developing Asian American leaders. This Model Minority stereotype is a myth as evidenced by the above discussion on the paucity of Asian Americans in high level leadership positions (Catalyst, 2009, Committee of 100, 2007), despite being the most educated and qualified workforce (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a). Departing from the extant literature, we take a competency-based approach to explore the key success factors (i.e., Acumen, Aptitude, Attitude) of minority leaders that have been an important missing link in traditional leadership development. As discussed above, results should be interpreted within the context of broader structural barriers that may impede leadership advancement for ethnic minority leaders. We also take a qualitative approach because it is highly applicable for investigating unexplored areas (Kvale, 1996), particularly those that are multidimensional in nature, such as the case here. Hence, we adopted an inductive approach to investigate how Asian Americans can develop and become effective leaders in Western workplaces. Our central question is “What are the key success factors of Asian American leaders?” Insights from this question provide guidance for individual professional development and for organizations to develop leadership interventions programs that

complement current mainstream training approaches.

## **Method**

### **Study Design**

Given the goal of identifying key success factors of Asian American leaders, we utilized a key informant interview (Gilchrest, 1992) approach with seasoned Asian American leaders, as well as non-Asian American leaders. Key informant interview is an ethnographic approach used across various fields, including education, sociology, anthropology, medicine, and psychology to study a wide range of topics including leadership (e.g., Trevino, Brown, & Hartman, 2003). The goal of key informant interviews is to learn from well-informed experts to discover a sense of shared reality and to understand informants' interpretation of phenomena, in contrast to researchers forming their own interpretations based on the study others (Spradley, 1979). This approach has the advantages of allowing for the discovery of phenomena that have not received much consideration, in addition to fostering new and culturally diverse perspectives. These advantages are particularly relevant to our research question given that the extant literature on Asian Americans in the workplace is sparse and fragmented (Sy et al, 2010; Leong et al., 2008) with no study having delineated the key success factors for developing Asian American leaders.

Key informants are unique from other informants in the nature of their relationship to the researcher. Oftentimes, the relationship may be more intimate or familiar, and span across settings and time. Thus, although key informants are not selected randomly, the advantage is that researchers may gain access to sensitive information (e.g., the inner workings of organizational norms that govern the promotion of minorities) that otherwise would not be shared unless trust and rapport have been established with the researcher. This study is based on the authors' work with the Asian American Professional Association (AAPA) whose goal is to develop Asian

Americans to achieve maximum career and leadership potential. AAPA consists of senior-level Asian American executives (as well as a few non-Asian Americans, e.g., Caucasian and African American executives) from Fortune 500 organizations who volunteer their time to provide leadership training and mentoring to Asian Americans in the workplace. These senior-level Asian American executives undergo a rigorous selection process. First, current members of AAPA must elect potential nominees. Often times, nominations are based on executives' standing and reputation among the Asian American executive community. The executives are typically the highest ranking Asian Americans in their respective company or have been designated as "High Potentials" for the executive ranks. The nominated executives are then required to submit an application describing their work history, motivation for joining AAPA, and how they can contribute to AAPA's mission. Finally, AAPA Board Members review, discuss, and select the applicants on the basis of their qualifications (e.g., knowledge, skills and abilities), commitment and anticipated contribution to AAPA's mission, experience with diversity and leadership development, as well as considering diversity representation of members (e.g., a broad representation of different industries). The authors have worked with AAPA in an advisory capacity for more than a decade, which facilitated access to these senior executives and their willingness to share potentially sensitive information (e.g., as will be described, an executive discussed how lawsuits shaped diversity practices at his company). We make no assumption that the knowledge or perspective shared in this research (key success factors of Asian American leaders) is represented equally across all Asian Americans (a key assumption of random sampling). Our goal was to understand as much as possible about the factors described most often as contribution to the success of Asian American leaders. With these considerations

in mind, our aim was to interview a set of informants with unique insights on the development of Asian American leaders.

### **Participants and Interview Procedure**

We were purposeful and strategic in our sampling approach, with the goal of identifying key informants who possessed special knowledge and were willing to share such knowledge; and have access to perspectives, experiences, and observations that are directly unavailable to the researcher (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The sample size was determined by examining previous qualitative studies, ranging from 15 plus or minus 10 participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Kvale, 1996). In naturalistic inquiries, the sample size is determined by informational considerations (Kvale, 1996;) and when saturation is reached (Bowen, 2008). Saturation is when data becomes redundant and little to no new information emerges.

The research consisted of interviews with 37 Asian American (of East Asian descent, with the majority being first generation status) and two non-Asian American executives (middle managers to CEOs) at Fortune 500 companies, representing a variety of industries: Accounting, aerospace, banking, digital imaging, energy, entertainment, food service, healthcare, medical, retail, technology, and telecommunication. The two non-Asian American executives (a senior vice president for Diversity and Inclusion, and the CEO of a large energy company) were included because they were repeatedly identified as knowledgeable advocates for developing minority leaders. We targeted mid-level Managers (18%), Directors (31%), and senior executives and above (e.g., Vice Presidents to Chief Executives; 51%) because pilot interviews with human resources executives indicated that insights for developing minority leaders were most needed at these levels. Participants were selected based on four criteria: 1) knowledge of diversity and inclusion issues regarding Asian Americans, 2) previous (e.g., recent retirees) or current

employment in U.S. corporations, 3) role as organizational leaders, 4) experience with leadership development and promotions across organizational levels (e.g., designed and led leadership programs and/or key decision makers in promotion of personnel). Four participants were female and the average age was 47 years old ( $SD = 8.6$ ). All participants were permanent residents or citizens of the United States.

We employed an inductive approach and used a structured interview method with open-ended questions in order to minimize influencing participants' responses. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at the informant's workplace or at a convenient location nearby. A single interviewer (the first author, an Asian American) conducted the interviews to maintain consistency in the study protocol. Each interview averaged 1.5 hours in length. Each interview began with broad questions that allowed informants to set the direction for the rest of the interview (Gilchrest, 1992). Sample questions included: 1) What are the personal characteristics of successful/unsuccessful Asian American leaders in the workplace? 2) What knowledge, skills, or attitudes do Asian Americans need to develop to be leaders in your company? 3) What cultural values do Asian Americans have that help/hinder their success? We also asked some probing questions guided by previous literature. For example, we asked questions regarding communication and social interactions, given that past research has identified these as salient issues for Asian Americans (e.g., Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005; Lin et al., 2005). These questions focused the discussion on the specific contexts, factors, and issues that key informants found as most important for Asian American leaders. Key informants were asked to describe each identified topic in detail such as the issues (e.g., reticence to speak up), contexts (e.g., in departmental meetings), causes (e.g., collectivistic values that shun behaviors that bring attention to oneself), consequences (e.g., perceived as lacking assertiveness and leadership potential) and

actions taken to address the issue (e.g., commit to speaking up at least once at every meeting). Once discussion of a given issue has been exhausted, we moved on to the next issue, repeating this procedure until the informants could recall no additional issues. The interviewer took notes throughout the interview. Upon completion of the interview, the interviewer transcribed the discussion, creating a detailed set of interview notes. The notes consisted of the informants' career history, their description of the issues, including the context in which the issues occurred, its causes, its consequences, actions taken, and lessons learned. When relevant, we recorded direct quotes to represent informants' experiences in their own words.

### **Analyses**

We used the constant comparative method, which is the most commonly used. The constant comparative method is a process of constant comparison of newly gathered data against previously collected data (Bowen, 2008). To begin the constant comparative analysis, we read through the interview data carefully to identify distinct "thought units" or concepts (Lee 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). A thought unit or concept can consist of a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph, but each thought unit represented a distinct and separate thought. In many cases, these distinct thought units were explicitly articulated by the informants (e.g., "We need to develop Public speaking skills" and "My grammar is not perfect"). Each distinct thought was given a code (e.g., "presentation skills" and "language proficiency"). New data was constantly compared against existing codes so that similar sets were given the same codes. If new information did not fit an existing code, a new code was created. The research team discussed the findings after each interview and regularly consulted research associates and professional colleagues throughout the study to validate the coding process. Moreover, we validated the codes by asking participants to verify that their statements reflected the code assigned by the

researchers. This iterative process allowed us to explore and identify new thought units that emerged in subsequent interviews. Once all the data were coded, the codes were organized into emergent categories based on their conceptual similarities to each other, and their differences to other thought units. Each emergent category was labeled with a theme (e.g., the “presentation skills” and “language proficiency” codes were categorized under the “communication” theme). Inter-rater reliability for classifying the codes under the themes were assessed by comparing the results between the first author and another faculty member unrelated to this study who has extensive research and industry experience in the development of Asian American leaders. Kappa value of .78 indicates high inter-rater reliability. Lastly, we relabeled themes as “success factors” to reflect our research focus on factors that contribute to the success of Asian American leaders, and to reflect its more common terminology in organizational settings.

In addition, we developed a framework for categorizing the success factors. Leadership development of ethnic minorities is in need of an organizing framework of factors that contribute to success (Bass, 2008; Leong & Huang, 2008; Shore et al., 2011). Our framework integrates universal dimensions that are central to the perceptions and evaluations of others. Specifically, we adopt the social perception model from the social psychology field (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Lin et al., 2005), which decades of research have shown that judgments of ethnic minorities are based on two key competency domains: Social (e.g., expertise in interpersonal relations) and technical (e.g., occupational proficiency, savviness regarding the inner-workings of the organization, etc.). For example, leadership perceptions of Asian Americans are based on judgments of social and technical competence (Sy et al., 2010). We further extend the social perception model by integrating the competency-based model from the human resources management field (McGregor, 1991), which has identified key criteria for assessing competence,

namely, Acumen (knowledge), Aptitude (skills), and Attitude (mindset) (Banathy, 1968; Gagne, 1972; McGregor, 1991; Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). These criteria are widely used in industry and government as evaluation factors for determining key competencies for any given occupation or work role, with Acumen reflecting a body of information, Aptitude reflecting proficiencies acquired through training and experience, and Attitude reflecting beliefs and feelings. Together, our framework (see Figure 1) suggests that the success factors of Asian American leaders may be organized along the competency domains of Social and Technical, each of which can be further assessed by the competency criteria of Acumen, Aptitude, and Attitude.

### **Results**

As shown in Figure 1 of our organizing framework, our research identified 8 success factors and related subfactors that Asian Americans need to cultivate to be effective leaders within Western organizations. Within the Social domain, the key success factors included Cultural Acumen, Communication and Social Decorum (both reflecting the Aptitude criteria), and Cultural Inclusion (Attitude criteria). Within the Technical domain, the key success factors included Rules of Success (Acumen criteria), Leadership Branding (Aptitude criteria), and Career Determinism and Leadership Aspiration (both reflecting the Attitude criteria). Below, we define all of the key success factors. We also describe common challenges and actions taken to cultivate each key success factor. Our goal was not to be exhaustive. Rather, these success factors capture key or representative content that were considered the most common and critical. Factors that may be important, but not critical for leadership success were excluded. For example, although technical proficiency is critical for performance in general, it was excluded because it does not seem to be an obstacle for Asian Americans' success as leaders. In fact,

Asian Americans are typically viewed as high on technical proficiency (Sy et al., 2010). Finally, we provide frequency data in Table 1 to determine how frequently the success factors apply to the whole sample. This frequency data offers one way of assessing the representativeness of the success factors, as well as describing their variations within the sample. Following established recommendations (Fouad et al., 2008), we consider a success factor as 1) *general* if it applies to all of the cases in the sample (i.e., all informants identified the success factor), 2) *typical* if it applies to half or more of the cases, and 3) *variant* if it applies to less than half of the cases. With the exception of Cultural Acumen that received a *general* classification, all of the success factors received a *typical* classification, with a frequency of occurrence ranging from 54 to 87 percent. These classifications indicate significant agreement among the informants and suggest the findings are representative of the sample.

### **Cultural Acumen**

*Cultural Acumen* reflects knowledge and awareness of the similarities and differences between Ethnic and Western mainstream cultures that influence leadership behaviors. Two subfactors were identified. First, Asian Americans must understand the Western mainstream culture, and the behaviors that are culturally endorsed and expected. Second, Asian Americans must understand their own Asian cultural heritage and how it shapes their thoughts and behaviors. First generation Asian Americans may experience difficulty understanding the norms and expectations of the Western mainstream culture, which may impact leadership success when Asian Americans' ethnic cultural values manifest behaviors that clash with Western mainstream norms. For example, one senior manager in the food service industry described difficulties he had early in his career managing Caucasian employees because his culture emphasized indirect communication, which clashed with the Western mainstream culture that emphasized direct

communication. Because direct confrontation (which may cause someone to “lose face”) is considered inappropriate in Chinese culture, this manager would express his disapproval of employee behavior indirectly by giving them the “silent treatment.” He said, “Not only did they [employees] not get the message, but they complained that I was a bad leader because I didn’t provide enough [direct] supervision.” Another common experience was the misalignment of Asian American’s expectations for their Caucasian followers and followers’ expectations for themselves. Consistent with high-power distance cultures (Daniels & Greguras, 2014) where followers are expected to show more deference to leaders, some Asian American managers had difficulty with followers with more proactive styles (e.g., making suggestions for new procedures) and viewed their followers’ proactivity as insubordination (e.g., questioning managers’ authority).

For later generation Asian Americans (e.g., 2nd generation and later), an understanding of their ethnic cultural heritage is perhaps the most challenging because they implicitly retain the values of their cultural heritage, but may have little conscious awareness of its impact in shaping their current behavior. Ethnic cultural values are transmitted to later generations via familial and communal ties (e.g., family values, rituals, and practices). One manifestation of this cultural transmission is the internalization of certain schemas about leadership and followership, formed by one’s cultural practices and norms in early childhood (Sy, 2010). As such, later generation Asian Americans may have internalized certain ways of leading and following that are more consistent with their ethnic cultural heritage than with Western-mainstream culture. For example, a second generation Asian American manager shared her frustration with her reticence to lead discussions at meetings:

I had this internal battle in my head where I would tell myself that I needed to speak up and contribute at meetings. Ultimately, I would just remain quiet. Afterwards, I would kick myself and try to analyze myself but did not understand why I did what I did.

Through coaching, she became aware that her Chinese cultural values emphasize collectivism, and collectivistic individuals tend to shun behaviors that bring attention upon them, such as speaking up at a meeting. At the same time, this second-generation Asian American manager possessed cultural values consistent with the Western culture (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002); the pressure to speak up experienced by this manager demonstrates her knowledge of the Western culture that places higher value on individualism. In individualistic societies, it is acceptable and expected that employees speak up and contribute at meetings. As a second generation Asian American, this manager possessed both Asian and Western cultural values that caused conflict and confusion. Gaining *Cultural Acumen* of Asian and Western cultures via coaching, along with awareness of how culture shapes thoughts and behaviors, helped this manager reconcile her dissonance, and perhaps more importantly, the ability to switch between cultural norms and lead in ways that is most appropriate for the context (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002).

### **Rules of Success**

*Rules of Success* reflects knowledge of unwritten norms and rules for advancement in the workplace. Two subfactors were identified: 1) awareness of the existence of unwritten rules of success, and 2) access to unwritten rules of success. Executives reported that some Asian Americans were unaware of the existence and significance of unwritten rules of success that operated in parallel to official promotion criteria. In every organization, there are unwritten *Rules of Success* that are not explicated in any human resource manual. For example, at a digital

imaging company, an executive stated employees must demonstrate the ability to take a product from concept to market before they are considered “executive material.” Another executive at a utility company highlighted the importance of social relationships as the key determinant of promotions. He asserted, “Our employees think expertise and work experience is what is important. We promote people because of their relationships, not (based on) expertise. Expertise is important, but you must have relationships with the decision makers.” Another technology executive shared that the key to senior management (e.g., Vice President and above) is to “serve a tour of duty at company headquarters.” His “tour of duty” was a test of his commitment to the organization, as well as an opportunity to engage with top executives to assess his fit within the senior management team.

Even when Asian Americans are aware of the existence of unwritten *Rules of Success*, they may not have access to this information. Oftentimes, the *Rules of Success* is passed on to members in the “inner circle,” which is typically comprised of culturally similar individuals (Shore et al., 2011). Asian Americans who share less cultural similarity with Western mainstream executives may be less likely to be part of the inner circle and thus, less likely to gain access to the *Rules of Success* for their organizations. Interestingly, the majority of the study participants indicated that their access and understanding of the *Rules of Success* came from non-Asians peers and senior-ranking leaders because there were few Asian American leaders in their organizations. As such, it seems critical for aspiring Asian Americans to find both Asian and non-Asian mentors who can provide access and unique perspectives on the *Rules of Success*.

### **Leadership Branding**

*Leadership Branding* reflects the cultivation and projection of a positive leadership image. Three subfactors were identified: 1) branding oneself as a leader (vs. technical expert), 2)

promoting oneself, and 3) asserting oneself. Asian Americans tend to gravitate towards highly technical careers (PRC, 2012) and tend to brand themselves as technical experts, rather than as organizational leaders. Consequently, Asian Americans are perceived more as technical experts and less as organizational leaders relative to their Caucasian counterparts (Sy et al., 2010). A (non-Asian) CEO explained, “I think some of our [Asian American] employees can do a better job of building their reputations. Many don’t [manage their brand].” This CEO further noted that Asian Americans who managed their brand may “have a hard time distinguishing between technical and leadership competence...Being known as a great accountant will not get you to CEO.”

A primary reason Asian Americans may not actively cultivate their leadership brand is due to reluctance to engage in self-promotion. Many Asian Americans have a pervasive belief in the inherent rewards of hard work (Kawahara et al., 2013; PRC, 2012), which contribute to the belief that self-promotion is unnecessary. This notion is coupled with a belief in the benevolence of management that may be derived from Confucian values. A CIO in the transportation industry explained, “We believe that our work speaks for itself and management will know and tap us for promotion when the time is right.” A female aerospace executive shared her experience that was common among participants. This executive did not realize the importance of promoting her accomplishments and brand until she lost a coveted promotion. Subsequently, she volunteered for interdepartmental work that gave her exposure to key executives across her company, sought out mentors, and started to carpool with some of her executives. The hours of interactions cultivated key relationships and offered opportunities for executives to see her special talents and achievements. Her self-branding paid off as she was promoted into the executive ranks.

The third subfactor of asserting oneself regards an orientation towards collectivism and social harmony that may shape the behaviors of Asian Americans (e.g., avoiding direct confrontation) and gives the appearance of lacking assertiveness. In addition, Asian Americans may be viewed as less assertive because of cultural endorsement for high power distance that dictates deference to authority (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). This perception has negative implications for leadership branding because effective leaders in Western mainstream organizations are valued for being bold and strong (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Sy et al., 2010). Several participants noted a gender effect that the perception is more adversely for Asian American men, which counters previous reports suggesting more deleterious effects for Asian American women who face the double disadvantage of being female and a minority (e.g., Catalyst, 2003). An Asian American executive from the entertainment industry noted, “The perception is that Asian guys are wimps. Look at the movies and how the media portrays Asian men.” This executive’s statement regarding the emasculation of Asian American males is well documented (Iwamoto & Liu, 2009). The wider incongruous gap between perceived unassertiveness in Asian American males and the cultural endorsement for masculine leadership (i.e., male leaders are expected to be more assertive) (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004) may have more adverse implications for leadership opportunities for Asian American males than Asian American females.

### **Communication**

*Communication* reflects the effective expression of oneself and comprehension of others’ communication. Three subfactors were identified. The first subfactor deals with issues relating to command of language, such as vocabulary and grammar. Participants referenced these issues most often. Asian Americans are stereotypically perceived as less articulate and poor listeners

(Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005). About half of Asian American adults speak English very well (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b). Language proficiency seemed to be addressed with time spent living in the United States (most adult Asian Americans are foreign born; PRC, 2012) and language training, some of which was sponsored by the organization. A senior manager recalled undergoing company sponsored language proficiency training, “It helped. My grammar is not perfect, but it’s not an issue.” This manager stated that the issue is no longer about grammar, but one of how employees perceive her accent.

The second subfactor deals with perceptions of Asian accents. Research indicates that Asian Americans who speak with an accent are perceived as unsophisticated and poor communicators (Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Walter, 2007), which could negatively impact leadership advancement. For example, a senior banking executive expressed his concern with a double standard for promotions whereby Asian accents could be a cause for a failed promotions because it is perceived as an indicator of poor communication skills, whereas French or British accents are viewed positively, even denoting an elevated sense of sophistication. Supporting his point, the executive noted that the majority of his company’s executive team is foreign born with British accents, and said the company joke is that a precondition for promotion is the acquisition of a British accent. A senior Asian American executive confessed that she felt self-conscious early in her career when speaking in group settings, “Some of them [i.e., coworkers] did not always understand what I was saying because of my accent. This made me feel like a foreigner and embarrassed, and I avoided public speaking events.” The executive still prefers to communicate via written form but has reduced her accent over time and with the assistance of a speech coach paid by her organization. The executive felt conflicted about the use of a speech coach for accent reduction. She felt compelled to participate because communication was a key

component in her performance review. Although she improved her communication skills (beyond accent reduction), the perceived need for Asian Americans (but not other groups) to reduce their accents felt demeaning and contradictory with the organization's goal for diversity and inclusion.

The third subfactor deals with differences in cultural communication norms. Research reveals that Asian and Western individuals actually think differently (Nisbett, 2003). People from different cultures have different experiences, backgrounds, values, and assumptions that affect how they interpret information. A retired Asian American executive at a digital imaging company recalls witnessing countless communication exchanges whereby (foreign born) Asian Americans misinterpreted the strategic intent of management because Asian American employees were narrowly focused on translating the tactical technical requirements. The retired Asian American executive explains, "Some Asian Americans are not able to "elevate the level of abstraction" [a favorite adage for this executive] to understand executive intent. They get bogged down on translating the technical requirements...staring at the trees instead of viewing the forest landscape." To address this communication disconnect, the retired executive recalled holding post-meeting reviews for his Asian American mentees whereby he would quiz them on the main points of the meetings and the strategic intent of the key stakeholders. This process helped his Asian American mentees hone their focus on the relevant issues, interpret information, and learn the thought processes of Western mainstream executives.

### **Social Decorum**

Social Decorum reflects social interactions that result in positive relationships. Three subfactors were identified: 1) understanding social norms, 2) management of emotions, and 3) building professional networks. Although there was consensus that social skills was a challenge,

participants varied in their interpretation of the issues. Some attributed the issues to the behaviors of Asian Americans, whereas other participants attribute the issues to the perceptions or stereotypes about Asian Americans. Research seems to provide some evidence for both views. Asian Americans have been found to be more socially anxious than their Caucasian counterparts (e.g., Lee, Okazaki, & Yoo, 2006), and the perception that Asian Americans lack social skills is well documented (e.g., Burriss et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2005). Social anxiety may lead some Asian Americans to be more reticent in social situations, especially for foreign born Asian Americans who may have limited knowledge about the culture norms that dictate social interactions, which then contribute to perceptions of low social skills (Leong & Huang, 2008). Consequently, such perceptions may explain, in part, the reduced probability of Asian Americans being hired or promoted to leadership roles (Chin, 2013; Lai & Babcock, 2012).

A female executive in the energy sector argued that the notion Asian Americans lack social skills is primarily due to biased perceptions. She shared, “I have a manager who is a leader in the Japanese community. She brings everyone (Asian Americans) together and is respected by the community, but we [i.e., the organization] still say she lacks social skills.” Further discussions reveal that the perception may reflect a mismatch in cultural social norms. For example, this Asian American manager was viewed as being overly self-critical and her Western mainstream colleagues deemed her self-effacing remarks socially awkward. The manager’s self-critical attitude (a defining characteristic of some Asian cultures such as Japan) (De Vos, 1985) is culturally valued as humility and perhaps desirable within her role as a leader in the Asian American community, yet she is perceived as socially awkward within the Western mainstream culture. Regardless of how participants interpreted the issues, they agree that Asian Americans

are negatively judged on their social skills, which may hinder their ability for leadership advancement.

A second factor that may contribute to the view that some Asian Americans have low social skills may be due to differences in cultural norms for management of emotions. The ways individuals manage their emotions play an important role in social interactions. Asian Americans may have different schemas and display norms for emotions. Being emotionally expressive is an idealized trait for leaders in Western mainstream organizations (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Sy et al., 2010). In contrast, Asian values hold that maintaining composure and control (not overly expressing positive or negative emotions) is a sign of maturity and statesmanship. In the previous example, the Japanese manager's reserved and measured expressivity was viewed as a desirable leadership attribute within the Asian American community, but such reservation could be viewed as socially awkward by some in Western mainstream organizations. Participants suggested that Asian Americans could find alternative means of expressing their emotions that are more congruent with Western mainstream expectations. For example, an Asian American technology executive, who is widely viewed as a charismatic leader, shared that he expresses passion for his work in written form (e.g., articulating his vision in company communiqués, commentaries regarding technology trends in public media outlets, etc.), rather than verbal form.

A third subfactor for *Social Decorum* is building professional networks. Participants identified lack of networking as one issue. Asian Americans may be reluctant to engage in networking for the same reason they do not engage in self promotion; Asian Americans believe networking is unnecessary because of their pervasive belief in the inherent rewards of hard work (PRC, 2012) and that their work merit speaks for itself. Moreover, some Asian Americans do not network because they do not realize its value, which participants state include access to career

opportunities and information, increase in influence and power, and better job performance. Similarly, some Asian Americans see little value in the *social* function of networking because of the high value Asian Americans place on being technically competent. As such, networking may be viewed as a means for illegitimate gains (e.g., obtaining a promotion due to “kissing up”), in comparison to legitimate gains via technical competence and hard work. A utility executive recalled his initial reluctance to engage in networking, “I did not like what I called the brown-nosers...but then I saw they were also usually the top employees...and also getting all the plum jobs.” The executive explained that he forced himself to see networking as another “technical” task inherent in his job. He set a goal of meeting for lunch with one work colleague (particularly those in management) per week, which he credits for establishing important relationships that contributed to his ascension into management.

### **Leadership Aspiration**

*Leadership Aspiration* reflects motivation to ascend to leadership roles. Three subfactors were identified: 1) biased perception of Asian American leaders, 2) lower leadership aspiration of Asian Americans, and 3) failure of leadership imagination. Participants agreed that there is widespread perception that Asian Americans do not aspire to be leaders. However, they were divided on the veracity of this perception. Some argued that the issue is due to biased perception. For example, a non-Asian executive noted that Asian Americans are stereotyped as “great workers but not leaders.” Asian Americans are perceived to be great workers because of high technical competence, and poor leaders because leadership requires high sociability, which Asian Americans are perceived to lack. This tradeoff is widely documented and may reflect a defense mechanism by the mainstream group to justify and preserve status quo (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Thus, the Model Minority hypothesis that often describes Asian

Americans as highly competent, intelligent, educated, yet shy, quiet, and socially awkward (Lin et al., 2005) serves a dual purpose. The hypothesis maintains an impression of fairness and meritocracy (e.g., favorably portraying Asian American workers as having achieved the American dream) while justifying the underrepresentation of Asian American leaders (e.g., because Asian Americans lack the aspiration or prerequisite social skills for leadership).

Beyond biased perceptions, participants reluctantly shared (they were concerned with perpetuating the stereotype that Asian Americans do not aspire to be leaders) that some Asian Americans show low motivation to be leaders. Research shows that Asians, in comparison to their Caucasian counterparts, report lower aspirations for leadership (Festekjian et al., 2014). Executives reported that the reasons why Asian Americans may not view a career in management positively include: 1) Lack of comfort in dealing with people issues, particularly those with Caucasian employees (e.g., “Americans are too aggressive and cause too many problems”), 2) Management is viewed as a subjective process relative to the objectivity of technical tasks (e.g., “it’s a popularity contest”), 3) Concern with erosion of technical competence (e.g., “taking the management path leads to a loss of technical skills as you move away from your technical skill set”), 4) Concern with “saving face” (e.g., “You’re in the spotlight. If you screw up, everyone will know. You will lose face”), 5) perceptions of risk associated with leadership positions (see related discussion on *Career Determinism* below).

Participants reported that Asian Americans in some of their organizations lack the imagination to see themselves as leaders, a finding corroborated by others (Kawahara et al., 2013). This *Failure of Leadership Imagination* relegates one’s careers to the technical career track, devoid of conscious deliberations about the potential for a career in management. *Failure of Leadership Imagination* leads to the failure to aspire for leadership. A female Asian American

executive shared that she initially failed to see herself as a leader. Like many of her Asian American colleagues, she did not actively pursue management opportunities because she believed that management was overseeing her career and would tap her for leadership roles at the opportune time. She clarified that it may not be the case that Asian Americans lack leadership aspiration, rather they may be adopting a mentality of “waiting to be tapped” for leadership opportunities. Fortunately for this executive, she worked for an executive who actively cultivated her for leadership. She admitted initially feeling coerced into taking her first supervisory role, but is grateful to her former executive for forging her identity as a leader.

Another reason for the *Failure of Leadership Imagination* is due to the lack of Asian role models. Role models at the highest echelon of an organization inspire employees to see possibilities, and afford mentoring relationships that can shape future leaders. For example, managers and executives at a utility company noted a marked increase in leadership aspiration among Asian American employees after the company acquired an Asian American executive through external hiring. As one Asian American manager remarked, “I’m very excited...there’s hope for the rest of us.” Executives recommend that Asian Americans use community organizations to develop their leadership identity because they provide a safe environment to experiment and acquire leadership skills. The CEO of a technology company explained that mistakes made as a volunteer leader may be appreciated on the basis of one’s efforts and goodwill, whereas the same mistake on the job could result in termination. Moreover, community organizations such as AAPA regularly hold forums where successful executives are invited to share their personal career journeys with an emphasis on leadership development. The personal stories and implicit positive message of pursuing leadership advancement shared by these inspirational role models help participants to imagine and identify themselves as leaders.

### **Career Determinism**

*Career determinism* reflects a sense of control over one's career path. Three subfactors were identified: 1) self-directing one's career path, 2) reverence for authority, and 3) pursuing job and financial security. Contemporary perspectives often view careers as protean or boundaryless wherein individuals must determine their own career path and trajectories rather than be directed by an organization (Sullivan, 2011). Such views reflect the value of individualism found in Western mainstream cultures that stress independence and agency in determining one's career path. In contrast, Asian Americans may be more likely to subscribe to the perspective of allowing one's career to be directed by an organization. These differences can be explained by the difference between Western and Asian cultures in perceived sense of control wherein Caucasians possess more confidence than Asian Americans in their sense of control over life events (Takemura & Naka, 2012). These global beliefs are likely to extend to the domain of career determinism. Moreover, collectivistic cultures emphasize a preference for an interdependent social system in which individuals expect their organization to take care of them in exchange for their loyalty. Accordingly, it is typical for leaders in Asian cultures to be responsible for and attend to their followers' careers (House et al., 2004), thus minimizing the need for employees to proactively self-direct one's career path.

Moreover, Asian Americans may be less active in determining their career path because of their high reverence for authority (Leong & Huang, 2008). Thus, they may subordinate their desires in consideration of authoritative others. Because Asian Americans value interdependence due to their collectivistic orientation, they are more open and accepting of career guidance from authority figures. In turn, this openness to guidance can be inappropriately interpreted by others (e.g., Western supervisors) as evidence for a lack of self-direction for one's career path (Leong &

Huang, 2008). Such interpretations by Western managers may have negative implications for Asian Americans' careers because managers may further infer a lack of motivation or apathy as the underlying reason. Consequently, Asian Americans may be overlooked for career and leadership opportunities. Accordingly, Western managers should be educated in and consider cultural differences in *Career Determinism* in order to cultivate the careers and to maximize the contributions of their minority employees.

When Asian Americans do self-direct their career path, participants say that some Asian Americans tend to emphasize job and financial security above leadership pursuits, which may be viewed as a riskier career path. Corroborating this observation is data showing that the majority of Asian Americans (62%) identify a high paying career as being very important or a top priority (PRC, 2012). A foreign born Asian American executive explained that the motivation to pursue job and financial security for some Asian Americans is tied to their immigration experience and status:

We came here to make a better life for our family...not to be a leader. Leadership is a luxury...it's risky...your job is on the line...you put your family at risk"

That is, many Asian Americans emigrated from their home country because of economic or political instability, and their first priority in their host country is to pursue job and financial security. Within this view, the pursuit of leadership involves risk that could be considered individualistic and self-indulgent, and therefore, an unworthy pursuit. The same executive intimated that his pursuit to be a leader in his organization occurred only after securing financial security (via several entrepreneurial enterprises outside his organization).

### **Cultural Inclusion**

*Cultural Inclusion* reflects the integration of one's ethnic and Western mainstream identity. Three subfactors were identified: 1) cultural identity, 2) cultural esteem, and 3) role involvement. Acculturation affects Asian Americans' cultural identity (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). For example, the majority (60%) of foreign-born Asian Americans are more likely to see themselves as "very different" from the typical American, whereas the majority of native-born Asian Americans (65%) see themselves as typical Americans (PRC, 2012). The acculturation process occurs when two cultures come in contact with each other and minorities grapple with issues of 1) maintaining their traditional ethnic culture and/or 2) embracing the host mainstream culture (Berry, 1980). This process results in the formation of one of four cultural identities: assimilationist, integrationist, separationist, and marginalist. An assimilationist relinquishes the values, norms, and behaviors of the traditional culture and adopts those of the new mainstream culture. In contrast, a separationist maintains those of the traditional culture and rejects those of the mainstream culture. An integrationist achieves a balance of maintaining the traditional culture while also embracing the new mainstream culture. A marginalist lacks identification with both the traditional and mainstream cultures. Participants identified assimilationist and integrationist as those who are most successful in ascending to the upper echelons of the management ranks, an observation corroborated by another study (Leong & Huang, 2008).

Cultural identity is also related to a sense of esteem for one's culture. Cultural esteem reflects a global evaluation for one's culture. For example, integrationists may be proud of both their traditional and new mainstream culture, whereas separatists and an assimilationists may have pride for their traditional or new mainstream culture, respectively. Participants professed the importance of cultural esteem because it affects how one engages with others. A native-born Asian American executive, who self-identified as an assimilationist, confided his discomfort

(i.e., low cultural esteem) in highlighting his ethnic background. Consequently, he minimized (e.g., ignored or downplayed) cultural diversity issues. This was problematic because he was the designated diversity champion for the Asian American employee resource group. He disclosed that his reticence in championing the Asian American community was viewed negatively by both management and employees. Asian American employees reported that the executive was a poor advocate and consequently, morale was low in part because they felt their voice was not being heard. Management was perplexed by the executive's seemingly lack of leadership. They did not consider the issue of cultural esteem when assigning the executive as the diversity champion for the Asian American group. Management naturally assumed that he would be the ideal champion given his shared ethnic background.

Executives also noted that cultural esteem is particularly important in the context of diversity and inclusion because it affects employees' role involvement or the degree to which employees engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (extra role activities that are considered beyond the scope of their immediate job description, but critical for organizational success). Research suggests that Western organizations hold expectations for employees to be broadly engaged and committed citizens (Chin, 2013). Yet Asian Americans (particularly men) feel the least integrated as citizens of their organizations (Center for Work-life Policy [CWLP], 2011). A diversity and inclusion officer explained that when employees have high cultural esteem, they are more likely to broaden their role involvement and leverage their cultural background for the benefit of the organization (e.g., representing the organization in community cultural events). Integrationists who have more cultural esteem for both traditional and mainstream cultures are perhaps more likely to exhibit broader role involvement, and their

organizational citizenship behaviors create mutual benefits for them and the organization as a whole.

### **Recommendations**

Beyond the specific actions taken to cultivate the success factors discussed above, we provide some global recommendations for developing Asian American leaders in this section. Leadership development requires the involvement of key stakeholders, including individual employees and the organization. Thus, our recommendations target employee responsibility for owning their leadership development, and organizational responsibility for establishing policies and providing opportunities that maximize minority leadership development.

#### **Focus on Attitude**

To effect change, executives emphasize the importance of developing the attitude (mindset) components identified in this research (e.g., Leadership Aspiration, Career Determinism, and Cultural Inclusion). Similarly, the experience of AAPA has shown that Asian American mentees would not make use of new acquired knowledge or skills without first acquiring the right attitude. Knowledge and skills are relatively concrete concepts that can be taught. In contrast, *Attitudes* are more abstract and raise the question of whether it can be taught or trained. Although attitudes may be difficult to teach in the classic training setting, it may be possible to create contexts where certain attitudes can be experienced and internalized. For example, a primary goal in the AAPA training and coaching sessions is to foster an inspirational environment that validates participants' experiences. This is achieved through a variety of venues such as presentations with invited Asian American guest speakers who are inspirational leaders, networking and bonding events to meet industry peers, executive panels discussing Asian American topics of interest, mentor-mentee matching, culture-specific training workshops,

and among others. Of these, the mentoring component is a hallmark of AAPA and has been particularly influential in shaping mentee's attitudes because of the ongoing and long-term relationship between mentors and mentees (e.g., typically 3 years or more). Asian Americans are the least likely to find mentors in their own organizations (CWLP, 2011), which is a deficiency addressed by AAPA's external mentoring program. Mentoring is particularly effective for Asian Americans because of the high respect given to authority and the cultural tradition of learning in the form of the special relationship between master (e.g., in the form of "Sifu," "Sensei," "Lama," etc.) and pupil. Osmosis learning via exposure to the beliefs and perspectives of mentors, all of whom have successful management careers, can alter mentees' attitudes. In several instances, mentees who initially indicated they did not have any leadership aspirations, successfully pursued careers in management upon finding their passion for leadership. These mentees reported that being enveloped in AAPA's culture of leadership and mentors' steadfast encouragement ignited their desire to be leaders.

### **Integrate Cultural Identity**

An implication of this research is that the development of effective minority leaders may require the cultivation of cultural flexibility and adaptation, with the goal of developing Asian American leaders who integrate their ethnic and Western cultural heritage. To be clear, we are not suggesting that individuals abandon their ethnic heritage and completely adopt a Western orientation. Rather, Asian Americans could enhance their ability to engage in cultural frame switching, defined as the "shifting between two culturally based interpretative lenses in response to cultural cues" (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). When engaged in cultural frame switching, individuals learn to pay attention to content-specific information in the environment, become more adept at reading cultural cues and norms, and learn to behave in a manner that is consistent,

acceptable, and effective for that context. In terms of training and development, AAPA provides each participant with a diagnostic instrument to assess the degree to which they culturally frame switch, and all training topics are infused with multicultural perspectives (e.g., comparing and contrasting various cultural views on leadership). Cultural frame switching promotes active thinking about others and the development of new approaches to interacting with others. As such, Asian Americans who learn to effectively engage in cultural frame switching will increase their behavioral repertoire (Benet-Martinez, Lee, & Leu, 2006) and leadership effectiveness in various contexts.

### **Provide Culture-Specific Leadership Development**

A common approach to developing minority leaders is to provide culture-specific training and development. One problem with this approach is the lack of insights for developing leadership in Asian Americans, given that much of our knowledge in the diversity literature have focused on other minorities (Festekjian et al., 2014; Sy et al., 2010). Moreover, the core of leadership training is predicated on the developmental needs of Western mainstream employees. Such practices may not apply to minorities such as Asian Americans because they have unique career experiences and developmental needs. This problem is exacerbated by trainers who may overestimate their cultural competence (Vespia, Fitzpatrick, Fouad, Kantamneni, & Chen, 2010). Trainers and managers may need insights and training on the unique needs for developing Asian American leaders in order to develop effective leadership programs (Leong & Huang, 2008; Turner, 2007). A contribution of this research is the identification of key success factors that may inform the design of leadership programs for Asian American. For example, AAPA provides training on Asian American culture-specific topics (e.g., *Cultural Influence* and *Cultural Inclusion*) that often are neglected in traditional leadership training courses in organizations. The

program begins with a culture-specific leadership assessment (*ACE Profile*, a validated survey instrument that measures participants' strengths and weakness) of the success factors, which serves as a roadmap for individualized development and provides a framework for mentoring and coaching sessions.

A weakness of culture-specific leadership development programs (when they are offered) is that organizations tend to treat them as extraneous and unconnected to their core leadership programs (e.g., outsourced voluntary training). Consequently, even though participants may acquire and advance their leadership abilities, they still lack the visibility and sponsorship from within their own organizations that are critical for upward mobility. Even worse, the programs may be viewed as remedial training especially when conducted outside normal operating hours (e.g., AAPA's programs are offered on Saturdays at the expense of participants' personal time, which some unflatteringly refer to as "Saturday School"), which may have negative repercussions (e.g., leadership branding). For culture-specific leadership development programs to be effective, they should be sanctioned as part of the organization's core leadership development curriculum.

### **Legitimizing Asian American Leadership Development**

Perhaps the greatest challenge in developing Asian American leaders rest upon building a compelling case for a "model-minority" group that seemingly is already doing well. Relative to other minorities, Asian Americans are implicitly viewed as most similar to mainstream Caucasians (Axt, Ebersole, & Nosek, 2014). Consequently, this intuitive belief may create the fallacious perception that Asian Americans are as well off as Caucasians in the workplace, and claims for diversity initiatives targeting Asian Americans are not afforded much legitimacy. The "model-minority" stereotype has resulted in the perception that Asian Americans have "made it"

and therefore do not require attention or resources to improve their representation in management. Consequently, discussions about workplace diversity often neglect to include Asian Americans, and surveys have found 50% of Americans believe that Asian American are already adequately represented on corporate boards (Wu & Zia, 2009), whereas Asian Americans only represent 1.5% (Committee of 100, 2007), a disproportionately low figure particularly in light of Asian Americans' high qualifications and workplace experience (Thatchenkery & Sugiyama, 2011; Woo, 2000). Participants agree that few organizations have successfully articulated a compelling case for developing Asian American leaders, which makes it difficult to mobilize organizations to commit time and resources.

A senior technology executive described two approaches for establishing a compelling case for developing minority leaders. The first approach establishes a link between developing Asian American leaders and the performance of the organization. For example, the executive described his organization's success in building a strong business case by demonstrating that Asian Americans represent approximately 10% of the employee base and over 30% of the organization's Ph.D.'s, whose patents and innovations have made the company the industry leader. Moreover, Asian American employees have contributed significantly to this organization's expanding ethnic market revenue base, both domestically and in Asia. This compelling business case is communicated via company documents and executive communiqués to employees and the public. The executive contended that the second approach appeals to the virtues of inclusion (i.e., "it's the right thing to do"). Several senior executive participants suggested that linking diversity to company performance is the only viable approach and skeptically describe the latter virtues approach as "nice to have" and "just lip service." They concluded that organizations are rarely committed to diversity initiatives unless there are

compelling performance reasons. However, research suggests that a performance-focused rationale by itself is insufficient. A compelling business case also requires senior management commitment to establish a culture of inclusion in order for organizations to realize the performance benefits of their diversity initiatives (Shore et al., 2011).

A retired energy executive offered a third reason that compels organizational commitment to developing minority leaders, “lawsuits...Our company became serious about promoting minorities after being sued. Our diversity efforts came from the consent decree.” However, this executive lamented that the consent decree had little impact for Asian Americans, as his organization was focused primarily on the development and promotion of the minority group that initiated the lawsuit. After years of little progress and nearing retirement, this executive put himself at risk by raising the issue with his organization’s diversity and inclusion department. Due in part to this executive calling attention to Asian Americans, the organization hired an Asian American senior executive. This case highlights the common challenge of bringing visibility to the plight of developing and promoting Asian American leaders, who are often invisible in discussions about workplace diversity and inclusion. Although *visibility* is a challenge, the issue may be one of *legitimacy*. Participants reasoned that the scarcity of Asian Americans in management is easily visible. For example, the retired energy executive presented his management with empirical data clearly showing the low proportion of Asian American leaders to professionals, and yet his management took little action. That is, management was fully aware of the (visible) issue, but did not find it sufficiently compelling to mobilize action. The head of the diversity and inclusion department (a non-Asian Senior Vice President) shared in private that management perceived the needs of Asian Americans as less legitimate (lower in priority) than those of other minorities despite the empirical data. This executive implied that

there is a hierarchy of legitimacy such that diversity efforts targeting some minority groups are considered more compelling than for other groups (e.g., Asian Americans and Caucasian males). This sentiment is echoed by a senior banking executive, “we’re number 8 on the priority list following African Americans, women, Hispanic Americans, GLBTs, veterans, age, and religion.” Unfortunately, this perception (of less legitimacy) has caused reluctance in some Asian American executives to champion Asian American diversity and inclusion efforts because of concerns of being judged as biased for their own ethnic group. In comparison, being a diversity champion for other minority groups (e.g., women, African Americans, etc.) is not only viewed as legitimate, but builds a positive leadership reputation (given the positive bias for the virtues of inclusion) that serves as a platform leading to promotions.

Generating and communicating research insights brings visibility and legitimacy by educating organizational leaders and decision makers about their Asian American constituency. This is so critical that one organization purchased a full-page advertisement in a national newspaper (80-20 Initiative, 2006) to communicate important research findings. Other corporations have sponsored annual leadership summits to share best practices. These conferences also serve as a conduit for uniting and empowering the Asian American community. Moreover, although there are community organizations advocating for Asian Americans, they tend to be fractionalized and thus, lack size and resources to reach the tipping point to make a significant impact. On a positive note, multiple organizations (e.g., Asian American Professional Association, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, and Ascend) are increasingly engaging in collaborations, given their shared mission of developing Asian American leaders. The shared goals and collaborations are essential for establishing a community vision that brings visibility and legitimacy.

### **Conclusion**

By identifying the success factors of Asian American leaders, this study achieved two goals; it provided guidance for individual leadership development, and presented successful initiatives for organizations to develop culture-specific leadership programs that complement current mainstream training approaches. Although the focus was on Asian Americans, findings may be applicable to other minority groups because of shared experiences as members of the non-majority in-group (e.g., stereotypes, unequal power and status, etc.) (Shore et al., 2011; Festekjian et al., 2014). Furthermore, although this approach may empower Asian Americans to take responsibility for self development, the development of ethnic minority leaders also rests on the responsibility of companies and broader societal communities. Such responsibilities include offering culture-specific training and development, leadership advancement opportunities, as well as tackling organizational and structural barriers that impede the leadership advancement of ethnic minorities, such as confronting the Model Minority myth, and advocating for a more inclusive model of leadership that is accepting of ethnic minority leaders. With a growing diverse workforce, organizations that cultivate minority leadership development will attract the best talent and enhance organizational competitiveness. Indeed, organizations that cultivate the leadership development of their minority employees have more success, including more support from stakeholders, better organizational reputation, and higher financial performance (Richard, 2000; Roberson & Park, 2007). We hope the findings provide visibility, legitimacy and most of all, insight for cultivating culturally inclusive leaders.

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