Asian Americans: An Emerging Force to Break the Glass Ceiling

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ABSTRACT

Asian Americans, like many Americans in the workforce, face an artificial barrier, hindering advancement. This "glass ceiling" can be a result of discrimination, intentional or unintentional, on the part of the employer, or lack of talent by the employee. The only way to truly break this barrier is to educate not only employers and employees, but also the general population, in the history of Asian Americans. The passing of new laws alone will not eliminate discrimination, only a mutual effort by all parties involved.

Asian American employees are slowly moving up within various organizational hierarchies in the private and public sectors. Sooner or later many of them will hit a barrier which has come to be known as "the glass ceiling." The term "glass ceiling" refers to artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified minorities and women from advancing into mid- and senior-level management positions.

This artificial barrier may be a product of employment discrimination by the employer or of a lack of leadership talents on the part of the employee. Often, employment discrimination arises from ignorance in the mind of the employer about characteristics of accent, ancestry, and appearance inter-linked with the employee's national origin.

Although there are many common elements in the glass ceiling issues confronted by people of different races, sexes, religions, and national origins, it is simply too ambitious a task to try to deal with all of them in a short article such as this.

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This article will deal with some, perhaps, unique aspects of this glass ceiling encountered by Americans from Asian and Pacific Island nations. Important questions such as who are the Asian Americans? How did they get here? What do they have to offer? and What are their expectations? will be examined in this article. Answers to these questions may give some understanding of the exceptional glass ceiling issues faced by Asian Americans, a group that is, in itself, very diverse.

Asians and Pacific Islanders are not total newcomers to America. Regrettably, Asian Americans have an unfortunate history of private as well as government-sanctioned discrimination in America. However, too many policy makers and civil rights leaders today either are unaware of this part of American history, were never taught it or have forgotten it.

People of Asian/Pacific heritage in centuries past came to America as marine merchants and as indentured servants. As early as 1610, the ship San Buenaventura brought Japanese sailors to the Western Hemisphere. Immigrants from the Philippines founded Manila Village in Louisiana in 1763. In 1775, Chinese sailors landed in Baltimore, Maryland and stayed in America. Americans of Chinese descent helped build the great transcontinental railroad. Documents dated 1790 tell of a man from Madras, India, who resided in Salem, Massachusetts, and several indentured servants from India were known to be living in Maryland and Pennsylvania around the same time. These are just some examples of early arrivals of Asian/Pacific Islanders to the shores of America.

One cannot forget the rampant racial discrimination against people of Asian descent in the last two centuries—the mob violence and lynchings faced by those immigrants in the Western United States, state and local laws banning land ownership by Asian Americans, the various Asian Exclusion Acts, the Congressional enactments barring Asians from the right to be naturalized as American citizens, and, above all, the internment of loyal Japanese Americans during the Second World War.

Perhaps no other American group compares as closely to Native Americans and African Americans in the persistence and severity of discrimination experienced here. However, sadly, many Americans, perhaps blinded by the 'model-minority' myth associated with Asian Americans today, are unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge the historical discrimination and disadvantages faced by Asian Americans. Many Asian Americans were forcibly brought to this country as slaves. Thus, Asians are the only racial group that has ever been singled out in this country on the basis of race from even immigrating and has been denied the right to citizenship. Quite often, officials receive complaints from Asian Americans that some authority or another is demanding proof of past discrimination as a condition for their recognition as an eligible
minority. One can only guess that many of these government officials are still unaware of historical race discrimination against Asian Americans.

The glass ceiling faced by Asian Americans today will not be shattered if past history is ignored. All too often, people ask these questions: Why do Asian Americans complain about job discrimination? Look at them living in some of our best suburban homes; look at the successful Chinese American computer scientists and engineers, the successful Japanese and Korean Americans in business, the successful Indian, Pakistani, and Filipino American physicians, and so on. What more do Asian Americans want? Why are they not content with what they have achieved?

Most are familiar with these rhetorical questions. Those who raise them are often people in power in business and in government and are the very people who are on the upper side of the glass ceiling the Asian Americans are looking through. They see the first-generation, white-collar, highly educated, striving Asian Americans. However, they do not see that he or she too has the natural desire to reach his or her full potential in the workplace; and they do not see the vast numbers of not-so-well-off Asian Americans who still live in poverty in various parts of this country.

Because so many Asian Americans are first-generation immigrants, they seem to defy the experience of many in power who have memories of two, sometimes three, generations in their own families of struggle in America before reaching their present stage in life. However, strangely, what they do not realize is that this too is an irony of gross historical discrimination faced by Asians in America. Until the latter part of this century, U.S. borders had been virtually sealed against immigration from Asia for several decades. Many who came from Asia in the early part of this century were men who could not even bring their brides or families. Many who came to America in the early part of this century from the Indian subcontinent, settled on the West Coast, and married immigrant Mexican women because of the inability to bring Indian brides; these pioneers gave birth to a group of Indian-Mexican-Americans. When immigration from Asia reopened in the 1960s, the rules were heavily weighted in favor of the highly educated and professional. Then the fall of South Vietnam gave birth to a new type of modern-day boat people, not the huddled poor and uneducated masses that came on many a boat from Europe before, but the highly educated Asians who were fleeing because of feared or real persecution at the hands of a totalitarian or the basis of their race.

The rise of Communism in parts of Asia starting in the middle of this century and the opening of the American border around the same time to immigrants from Asia combined to produce a group of immigrants with a large pool of highly qualified first generation Americans unlike any ever before in the history of this nation. At the same time that this immigrant
drama was unfolding, America was undergoing a civil rights revolution. The stage was set for these new immigrants to truly believe in the ideal this nation had adopted at its birth that all men are created equal. An ideal they all had come to know of before leaving their homelands, as other immigrants had before them, but with one major difference. Whereas those earlier waves of immigrants found the ideal short on fulfillment once they arrived in America, the late-arriving Asians at the peak of the civil rights movement led by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., came to expect a fulfillment of the promise of that ideal, the promise that America indeed is a land of opportunity based on merit alone, where the sky is the limit for anyone with the skills and the desire to tap the opportunity.

By and large, Asian Americans have been beneficiaries of the newly enacted equal opportunity laws in this nation. However, when it comes to reaching the full limits of what they are capable of, they face the same glass ceiling that holds down other minorities and women, with the additional twist that many Americans are unwilling to accept the reality that Asian Americans, despite their reasonably good record of achievement, face a real, hard, and shatter-proof glass ceiling when it comes to moving up to managerial positions.

People seem to be falling all over each other to label Asian Americans as a model minority—a highly educated and qualified group of Americans. Why is it, then, that these highly qualified Americans are not to be found in top executive positions in companies, in universities, and in governmental hierarchy? Why are so many top Asian American scientists stuck in the federal government at GS-12 and GS-13 levels? Why are they not able to rise to the supervisory ranks despite their disproportionately large numbers among the qualified pool from which these supervisors come? Why are there highly qualified Asian Americans who have been GS-14s and GS-15s for years, who have even managed to get consistent outstanding ratings, yet cannot move into the Senior Executive Service?

Certainly, there are a number of committed corporate executives around the country and sincere officials in our government who honestly and earnestly make every effort to eliminate discrimination in the American workplace. They propose and implement appropriate affirmative action plans and programs to protect and preserve job rights of all their employees. Americans must salute their vision and leadership.

The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) collects data on private and public employment patterns to assess the current status of racial and ethnic minorities and women in the workplace. Some time ago, EEOC's Surveys Group published a report which summarized the latest published data. Virtually across the board, in private employment, in employment with state, local, and federal government agencies, in employment with public and private institutions
of higher education, Asian Americans enjoy the distinction of being represented very highly as professionals. However, for some strange reason, the same data show that when it comes to being a part of the management team, those same professionals—a category of workers from which most managers come—do a disappearing act. Here follows some of those data that show Asian American representation in disproportionately high numbers among professionals, but a strikingly low number in the ranks of managers and officials.

According to the EEOC statistics, of all professionals employed by over 38,000 private employers in the United States, 5.3% are Asian Americans, but only 2.0% of all officials and managers are Asian Americans, according to 1991 employment information reports received by the EEOC. Among the minority groups for which these data are collected, Asian Americans are the only ones that are disproportionately underrepresented in the management positions by comparison to their participation rates in professional jobs. All other minority groups are employed as managers and officials in numbers very roughly equal to their representation in the professional fields, but Asian American managers and officials make up fewer than half of their representation in professional jobs. This does not suggest that all of this is due to discrimination, nor that all managers and officials necessarily come from among the ranks of professionals. However, those numbers are like the numbers on a thermometer: they do not tell what disease the patient has, but they surely say that one had better ask the doctor.

Too many numbers and statistics can become boring, but these numbers are fairly typical. For example, EEOC observed that in public employment at all levels of government, Asian Americans are employed as officials and administrators at the rate of only one-third of their representation in professional jobs with the same employers.

In the private sector, corporate leaders who would like to break this kind of glass ceiling should encourage the selection of boards of directors of their corporations with sensitivity to issues affecting women and minorities. One way to bring such sensitivity is to appoint qualified women, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and other minorities as directors.

However, hiring directors who are minorities and women will not of itself guarantee the kind of sensitivity it takes to shatter the glass ceiling. Every director selected should have appropriate education, relevant experience, and genuine sensitivity to issues related to the so-called "glass ceiling" which obstructs the advancement of women and minorities in the American workplace. Also, senior human resources' officials should organize appropriate sensitivity training and educational programs for their supervisors and managers.
Another suggestion is that community and professional leaders carry a special responsibility to educate and sensitize people in power who can, and indeed honestly want, to do something about the glass ceiling. They have to make people aware of the reality in their own workplace. Regrettably, human resources management offices in many establishments do not, for some reason, do the job of letting the truth about glass ceilings be made known to the higher-ups who can and want to do something about it. One of the author's personal experiences may be relevant at this point.

The author was invited to speak at a major federal agency to address a group of Asian American employees to motivate them to apply for training programs for the highest level positions. Earlier that morning, the author and his staff met with the designee for the chief executive's position in charge of personnel policy at the agency. This person is extremely well-qualified and is well versed in EEO policies. The author admired him for his candidness and willingness to ask hard questions, not many people in similar positions are even willing to ask those questions. The designee wondered aloud whether there was much substance to the glass ceiling issue for Asian Americans who are, after all, mostly a recent, in any large numbers, immigrant group.

Later that morning, when the author addressed a group of mostly Asian American employees and asked them to identify who they were and what they did at the agency. Virtually everyone in the room held mid-level management positions, had scientific and engineering backgrounds, and was eager to move into higher management, but did not know how. Many of them were first-generation immigrants who had been in the federal government for ten to fifteen years and had quickly reached the glass ceiling. Unfortunately, the about-to-be personnel policy chief was not in the audience to observe this patent relevance of the glass-ceiling issue for Asian Americans in his own agency. Later that week, he asked his staff to send the designee some specific examples of glass-ceiling cases involving Asian Americans in his own agency that had already been successfully adjudicated, preceding his arrival, and to inform him of what the author had observed during his presentation. The author was certain that this information would serve this high-level government official well. However, if he had not been serious about the glass-ceiling issues or had been reluctant to share his concerns candidly, the author would never have had the opportunity to share this valuable information with him. This is an example of the glass ceiling that is quite often the product of ignorance, not actual malicious prejudice. The only way one can fight it is through education.

Everyone is used to reading about discrimination faced by qualified Asian Americans denied admission to our prestigious institutions
of higher learning. Additionally, when it comes to employment in the ranks of executives, administrators, and managers at our private and public institutions of higher learning -- colleges and universities -- the situation seems to be worse for Asian Americans than in any other employment sector. EEOC had indicated that Asian American managers are only one-fourth of their participation in professional and faculty positions.

There is much talk these days about test scores and qualifications and affirmative action. One does not need to delve into that, but to the extent that it is relevant for talking about the glass ceiling faced by Asian Americans. However, a couple of graphic situations should be mentioned that raise a serious question about whether some of that talk is just that, merely a way of avoiding the real issues of discrimination and creating confusion about legitimate affirmative action. This is not about a handout to someone who is not qualified; this is about the need to affirmatively remove barriers in the path of objectively highly qualified Americans who are striving to reach for those plum jobs on the other side of the glass ceiling.

Perhaps it was also a glass ceiling when an Asian American GS-11 aerospace engineer, otherwise deemed highly qualified by the selecting official, could not be hired as a GS-12 engineer out of a concern that he might not receive timely security clearance because he was born in a country now under Communist control. Curiously, he was seeking an opportunity to advance by moving from one defense agency to another defense agency.

Once again, another Asian American was denied a promotion to a GS-15 position in spite of enviable academic qualifications and a distinguished career inside and outside the government on the pretexts of communication problems and cost overruns under his command. The true facts were otherwise. He had been rated outstanding in written communications six times by five different supervisors, and above average another four times. Also, the cost overruns had occurred not under him, but under others -- all of whom were white Americans -- who had been promoted ahead of him. Even more, the evidence was that he had in fact brought the costs under control during his command. Without this case and others, this article could be mischaracterized by some as simply another example of demands for undeserved promotions in the name of affirmative action.

However, many are probably silently complaining that the EEOC has not acted accordingly on all of these. There is much truth to the saying that power may seem to reside at the top, but it is the front-line soldier, as Gulf War hero General Schwarzkopf said, that makes the real difference. However, this does not mean that EEOC is ducking its
responsibility. The EEOC has and will continue to do whatever is necessary within the limits of its power to deal with this and other problems.

There are five Commissioners at the EEOC, and it takes a majority of three to adopt a policy, a regulation, a final decision in a federal employee's discrimination case, or an authorization to prosecute a violation against an employer. Investigations are not conducted by the Commissioners' offices, and it is in investigation that a case may be made or not made. It is important to know some of these realities.

At last the eight million Asian American community are gradually recognizing the root cause of their widespread failure to advance in the workplace: a lack of equal opportunities. Their leaders have begun to ask why capable Asian Americans are denied opportunities for advancement in their professional lives. Several Asian American groups are building political coalitions with other ethnic and minority groups. They are filing discrimination complaints with various law enforcement agencies and taking their cases to higher judicial bodies. State and federal elected officials are beginning to listen to their grievances.

Asian Americans have begun to raise their voices against all forms of employment discrimination through the media and through public awareness programs. Eventually they will break the glass ceiling by (1) an unchallenged capacity for hard work, (2) a growing understanding of the changing work environment, (3) cooperation and patience with supervisors and managers, (4) developing mutual respect and understanding with fellow employees, (5) taking leadership and managerial skill training programs, (6) fighting to protect their civil rights, and (7) performing their civic responsibilities.

New laws and new regulations, new proclamations and new promulgations alone will not reduce the gravity of discrimination in the American workplace, although they are helpful and powerful tools in this fight against discrimination. Society also needs people with the commitment to lead, within and without government offices, a new revolution for equality, a revolution for change in the minds of those who discriminate, a movement within the minds of people who discriminate because of prejudice or ignorance.

This invisible and invincible movement, a modern-day crusade, should spring forth from a new spirit of desire based upon natural laws of equality, good conscience, human morality, and civic responsibility. The Asian American community is one of the groups who can stand up and be counted as a part of this movement for a better and brighter day for all Americans, and the children of the future America.