

For Asian American Lawyers, Good Mentorship Is Crucial

By **Jeannie Rhee, Lawrence Wee and Jennifer Wu**

The spike in anti-Asian hate incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on the racism and violence that Asian Americans have long confronted in the U.S.[1]

Across the country, many lawyers have taken an important step by acknowledging and denouncing these incidents.

Though there is rising awareness of the struggles unique to the Asian American experience, navigating the legal world as an Asian American lawyer still comes with its own set of challenges. Over the course of our careers, each of us has faced times when people jumped to conclusions that we are not American because of the way we look.

Paradoxically, people have also assumed that we are so American that we are not considered minorities in the legal profession.

Finding a good mentor is key to professional development and career growth, and is an excellent way to begin to overcome some of these challenges.

We have observed both sides of the mentor-mentee relationship, and understand the importance of both sides growing, communicating and learning together.

We believe that treating mentorship as a two-way street will enrich the careers of both the mentor and the mentee, and ultimately lead to the greater goal of mutual understanding across cultural lines. Rarely is it useful for the mentor-mentee relationship to be one-sided, with one person doing the heavy lifting and imposing their own experiences on the other.

Whether you are in the position of a mentor or mentee, it's important to take the approach that asks, "What is it like to be you?" instead of the approach that says, "This is what it was like for me."

Your two experiences will be different and full of nuance, regardless of your race, identity or background; both the mentor and the mentee must be able to understand, support and embrace those differences, not work against them. Each professional has their own path.

From the perspective of a mentor, here is some advice for mentees:

To build a mentoring relationship, consider how you can help make your mentor's life easier.

A mentor will almost always appreciate and want to spend time with a helpful person who not only does the job well but also goes the extra mile and anticipates needs.

Don't just seek out guidance on your own work product — ask them about how they have



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learned to approach deals or cases, and be inquisitive about their journey to where they are today.

Figuratively getting in the boat and rowing with your mentor toward a shared goal will strengthen your relationship as a team.

Remember that mentor-mentee relationships can come in many different shapes and sizes.

Be willing and open to the idea that there may be a diverse set of people who can be helpful to you — you often learn more from people who are different from you rather than just the people who look like you.

We think it is key for Asian American lawyers to have a range of mentors, as there may not be one perfect fit.

As a mentee, focus on finding mentors who encourage you, support you and want you to be the best version of yourself — anyone who is critical of your journey or refuses to acknowledge your own individual challenges will not be helpful to you in the long run.

At work, be on the lookout for a mentor who takes an interest in you in the natural course of work, regardless of whether they are Asian American or not, because that mentor is most likely to understand the challenges you face in your particular practice area and may prove to be a key sponsor in the future.

Take risks.

In our own mentoring relationships, we encourage many younger lawyers, including Asian American lawyers, to take risks and not be afraid of failure.

While many lawyers confront fear of failure in a positive way to stay motivated, the fear of failure can also hold us back.

The idea of taking a less risky path can resonate especially with Asian American lawyers, whose parents may have given advice that is not always consistent with how they actually lived their own lives — some of our parents or grandparents took on great risk to come to the U.S.

It's important to dispel the narrative that Asian American lawyers are risk-averse by pursuing leadership opportunities and speaking up during challenging cases or deals.

Asian Americans are not a monolith,[2] and becoming an effective lawyer requires trial and error.

Actively seek out promotions.

Detrimental to career promotion is the model minority myth[3] that Asians are high-achieving worker bees who keep their heads down and do not complain.

Indeed, studies have shown that Asian Americans face a so-called bamboo ceiling — they are the least likely group in the U.S. to be promoted to management.[4]

Don't be afraid to self-promote to decision-makers, although you should avoid doing so to

an extreme or to the detriment of others. If you feel uncomfortable tooting your own horn, you can express how well the team did, while mentioning your role in its success.

Not only should Asian American lawyers speak up and seek out opportunities to lead, but mentors can help find those opportunities and provide guidance along the way.

Not everyone will acknowledge you are a minority.

There are many people who do not believe Asian Americans are a minority in the U.S. and in the legal profession.

While this may be frustrating for Asian American lawyers in the workplace, try to meet these issues from a place of positivity and understanding — negativity will not allow you to move forward.

Having open discussions about these issues may help foster mentoring around career challenges and race-related issues in particular.

Be yourself, even if others stereotype you.

Everyone should be aware of Asian American stereotypes, but you will certainly meet people who are not. Some stereotypes can even be well-intended, even if not universally true.

Our experience has been that instead of spending energy on pushing back against those stereotypes, it is more productive to simply be the best version of yourself.

Show kindness and understanding about where colleagues or other professionals may be coming from, and do not let your emotions cloud your judgment.

Honest and positive, open communication means you will find things in common and in difference, but don't be afraid of communication itself. You can build your own credibility by being your best, most genuine self.

For example, a particularly common stereotype is that Asian Americans are not assertive enough, so if that stereotype is being applied to you, instead of confronting the stereotype directly, take every opportunity to prove otherwise by volunteering to lead meetings, negotiations and presentations, and ask your mentor for additional opportunities.

Look for creative ways to connect.

In addition to the many formal mentorship opportunities, many law firms encourage lawyers to get to know each other in a less formal environment, often through shared experiences outside the box.

Seek out affinity networks and learn how you can be an asset, not just a member.

In addition, build your network by reaching out to the many established organizations dedicated to the Asian American community and professional development of Asian American lawyers.

Conclusion

Mentorship can be a powerful tool in continuing to move the needle, allowing for more

minorities to excel and find their way into the promotional pipeline.

While there is increasing awareness of the struggles unique to Asian American lawyers, the legal industry can and should do more to increase communication and support across cultural lines.

We encourage all lawyers to make a commitment to include people who don't look like you in your own circle.

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[1] Brockell, G. (2021, March 18). The Long, Ugly History of Anti-Asian Racism and Violence in the U.S. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/03/18/history-anti-asian-violence-racism/>.

[2] Income inequality in the U.S. is greatest among Asians. From 1970 to 2016, the gap in the standard of living between Asians near the top and the bottom of the income ladder nearly doubled, and the distribution of income among Asians transformed from being one of the most equal to being the most unequal among America's major racial and ethnic groups. See: Pew Research Center. (2018, July). Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/07/12/income-inequality-in-the-u-s-is-rising-most-rapidly-among-asians/>.

In fact, there are more Asian Americans living in poverty in New York City than any other minority group. See: Yam, K. (2017, May 8). Asian-Americans Have Highest Poverty Rate In NYC, But Stereotypes Make The Issue Invisible. The Huffington Post. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/asian-american-poverty-nyc_n_58ff7f40e4b0c46f0782a5b6.

[3] The term "model minority" was first coined in the 1960s to describe the so-called "success stories" of some Japanese American families who were able to "succeed" after being forced into internment during World War II. See: Kasinitz, P. (2008). Becoming American, Becoming Minority, Getting Ahead: The Role of Racial and Ethnic Status in the Upward Mobility of the Children of Immigrants. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 620, 253-269. [https://depts.washington.edu/sibl/Publications/Model%20Minority%20Section%20\(2011\).pdf](https://depts.washington.edu/sibl/Publications/Model%20Minority%20Section%20(2011).pdf).

[4] Chen, L. (2016, January 20). How Asian Americans Can Break Through The Bamboo Ceiling. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/liyanchen/2016/01/20/how-asian-americans-can-break-through-the-bamboo-ceiling/?sh=20a7998a1e43>.