



Jasmine in 2003 : Features

Breaking Down Barriers

How Asian-Canadian women can combat stereotypes in the workplace.
By Philbert Shih

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Illustration: Rosa Wong

Do you sometimes wonder if you're advancing in the workplace as quickly as you should be? Have you ever felt that there are certain barriers in your way? Asian-Canadian women like to think that the glass ceiling is no longer an issue, but they continue to struggle to overcome perceptions that they are quiet, passive and reserved individuals somehow unfit for positions of authority and leadership.

Sometimes the stereotypes start at home. Edna Lee, 30, grew up in Vancouver with aspirations of becoming a chemical engineer. Her parents had other ideas. "My parents said that a woman would not be able to get very far as an engineer," explained Edna. "They thought that engineering was more a 'male' job. Being in an Asian family, I was brought up to obey my parents. My ultimate decision was based on the fact that I wanted to please them, not because I believed in their women/men argument." Edna became a chartered accountant instead.

When Hannah Lee (no relation), 32, decided to pursue a law career, her father imagined she would be sitting at a desk drafting wills. In her father's eyes, she didn't fit the profile of a courtroom lawyer. "It certainly wasn't a short Asian female going to court arguing cases...it was a big tall white man," says Hannah. "I was too short, the wrong gender and the wrong race!" Hannah went for it anyway. Her father eventually accepted her career choice and became proud of her decision to become a civil litigation lawyer.

Resistance from family members is just one obstacle. Many Asian-Canadian women work their way up to senior positions, then find that acceptance and respect don't follow automatically. "In certain careers and workplaces, you have to earn it," says Irene Lee (no relation),

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27, a project engineer at FedEx. Irene's job is to optimize operational efficiencies. Things were tough at first. As a young Asian woman fresh out of school telling veteran blue collar labourers "you have to do it this way," she wasn't fully accepted. "A male engineer might not get the same resistance, but as an Asian-Canadian woman, there is more." Fortunately, overcoming that roadblock isn't impossible. Irene reached out to the workers by putting on boots, a hard hat and safety goggles and getting closer to the action. "Being able to get down and dirty with the job earns you respect," she says. Doing this also helped overcome the perception that she was a fresh grad who only knew how to handle paperwork. "It's the action and not just textbook theories." Over time, the workers came to trust Irene's authority.

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Hannah suggests that sometimes Asian-Canadian women have to work harder to earn respect from clients and peers. "The stereotype of Asian females being quiet and passive does not help. You almost have to start at a minus zero position and then earn respect." Clearly, mainstream society's perceptions of Asian-Canadian women can erect barriers in the workplace. While they're seldom fatal to one's career, they can present hurdles to success and can affect chances of promotion - not to mention make work life unhappy and frustrating. Since the stereotypes aren't likely to vanish any time soon, it's often up to each woman to combat them.

Tracy Wang (not her real name), 28, began her career as a chartered accountant with a "big five" accounting firm in Toronto. She noticed immediately that "although there was gender and racial diversity at the staff level, there was little diversity in the upper echelons of the firm." Tracy felt she had to prove herself. "In order to be noticed by the managers and partners of the firm, I felt I had to push myself to be more sociable and outgoing simply to overcompensate and eliminate the stereotype that women, especially Asians are quiet, reserved pushovers."

Edna also works for a major accounting firm. She finds that this stereotype is often grounded in reality. "Asians tend to be more reserved, which hinders their ability to network," says Edna. The higher you advance, the more that personality trait becomes an indirect hurdle, she warns.

How can Asian-Canadian women command respect in the workplace? "Asians tend to be modest and are often uncomfortable drawing attention to themselves," says Sandra Lim, founder of A Better Impression Resume & Career Counselling Services in Toronto. She believes that

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overcoming these tendencies can help Asian-Canadian women further break down misperceptions and advance their careers. Lim suggests working with a career counselor/coach to develop the skills and abilities needed to move up.

While they can't control the pre-conceived notions that co-workers and employers may have, Asian-Canadian women can work towards changing those perceptions by dispelling myths whenever possible. It may seem unfair that you must go out of your way to overcompensate for perceived weaknesses, but getting ahead often requires playing the game rather than watching it from the sidelines.

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