# The Push and Pull of Leadership

LEAP

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To all of the leaders who participated in this research study, we express our sincere gratitude. Your openness and kindness while sharing your stories served as great inspiration. Your reassuring voices and compelling stories will propel the current and next generation of leaders forward as we navigate a new landscape created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the movement for Black lives and racial justice. During this time of unprecedented change in society, your confident and empathetic spirits will provide leadership and guidance to all.

Our appreciation and thanks to LEAP Research Sponsors

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# INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

LEAP (Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics) conducted two studies to fill the gap in Asian American leadership research. An in-depth data collection and analysis resulted in the publication of the first study entitled *The Asian American Executive Leadership Report 2020*. The original study focused on understanding the unique leadership journeys of Asian American executives who navigated the challenging and, at times, subjective pathways into C-Suite or senior executive roles.

In the current and second study, our goal was to identify specific mechanisms that enabled the career trajectories of Asian American VPs and Directors (the next level down from the leaders in our first study).

For Phase One of this study, we collected in-depth interview data from Asian American leaders who have found success in multiple sectors and organizations with significant revenue, budgets, and assets in relation to their sector.

We aimed to avoid making broad generalizations or testing a predetermined hypothesis about this group of leaders. Therefore, we chose a qualitative research design for the first phase of this study to present the leadership and life lessons of the research participants. In order to compare results from this study to a previous 2020 LEAP study of senior Asian American executives, we deliberately did not have Pacific Islander representation in this study. As such, for this report, we refer to the participants as Asian American. Occasional references to Asian and Pacific Islander populations or communities are intentional.

For Phase Two of this study, we will conduct an online survey to further understand the specific mechanisms that support Asian Americans' advancement into leadership roles. We will also delve into what it means to be an Asian American leader.

Numerous research articles and business publications continue to focus on the barriers faced by Asian American professionals. For example, much has been written about Asian Americans being severely underrepresented at all leadership levels across multiple industries and sectors. Data by McKinsey show that Asian American employees drop in representation and promotions at senior levels.[1] These statistics show a significant problem in organizational systems. The report suggests that talent management systems and processes for identifying and cultivating leaders are inadequate for underrepresented groups.

According to McKinsey, the share of Asian Americans represented in leadership ranks decreases with greater seniority, as does their share of promotions. In their report, they point to barriers such as the stereotype of Asian Americans as the "perpetual foreigner" (as described by scholar Frank H. Wu). This, combined with the perception of being a doer and not a leader, are key challenges in an Asian American professional's career advancement.

Other research, such as a survey conducted by the Association of Asian American Investment Managers (AAAIM)[2], echoes the same findings that Asian American and Pacific Islanders are typecast as "quantitative or technical" experts or "deemed too quiet" and not confident enough to lead. Another study by Jackson G. Lu, Richard E. Nisbett, and Michael W. Morris highlighted the interethnic differences between East Asian and South Asian populations and their ability to attain leadership roles. The authors found that compared to South Asians, East Asians experience a barrier to leadership due to the perception of appearing "less assertive."

1. Asian American workers: Diverse outcomes and hidden challenges. https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/asian-american-workers-diverse-outcomes-and-hidden-challenges

2. Good Workers – Not Leaders: Unconscious Biases That Stall AAPI Advancement. https://aaaim.org/goodworkers-notleaders/

While these studies show examples of significant biases and barriers that exist for Asian Americans and their ability to advance into higher positions, our research focused on those who moved around the barriers and elevated themselves in their careers. Our mission was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed by effective leaders across multiple sectors. To accomplish this, our rigorous qualitative methodology that enabled an inclusive design approach. This methodology helps to unearth the diverse perspectives and nuanced experiences of an underrepresented population in organizational leadership, such as Asian American leaders.

By developing insights from diverse experiences, demographic backgrounds, and mechanisms that supported the leadership development of Asian American professionals, we offer recommendations for two key audiences: organizational decision-makers and individuals who aspire to be in leadership roles.

## FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION MAKERS

We provide recommendations for organizations to improve the overall representation and advancement of diverse leaders. Our findings show that organizations where diverse leaders succeed establish an optimal environment, implement clear processes, and adopt inclusive systems. We share these insights to encourage organizations to carry out structures and processes supporting the development of diverse leaders with unique lived experiences, oft-unrecognized or underappreciated potential, and ambitious career aspirations. By designing and implementing an individual approach to leadership development, the inclusion of different leadership styles will be maximized. As a result, organizations can create space for greater diversity at the highest levels in organizational settings.

From a workforce perspective, as worker demographics continue to evolve over the next decade due to Baby Boomer retirements and the influx of new generations entering the workforce, attaining cultures of inclusivity and diversity in leadership will be critical. More than ever, organizational decision-makers must consider an expanding array of diversity dimensions of the next generation of workers as they look to design inclusive systems and programs. The lack of diversity of race, ethnicity, and other homogenous dimensions that exist in most U.S.-based organizations can be demotivating to younger populations entering the workforce. For example, in a 2020 survey by Glassdoor, 3 out of 4 employees and job seekers (76%) reported that a diverse workforce is an essential factor when seeking out new job opportunities.[3]

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3. Glassdoor's Diversity and Inclusion Workplace Survey https://www.glassdoor.com/blog/glassdoors-diversity-and-inclusion-workplace-survey/

FOR INDIVIDUALS

For individuals of Asian descent, the results from this study will inform those who aspire to be in leadership positions. Many U.S.-based organizations struggle with the inclusion of diverse leaders and their unique leadership styles. As previously mentioned, when diverse leaders are not reflected at the top, young professionals may not feel their organization is welcoming of various leadership styles and backgrounds and feel less likely to 1) join the organization or 2) stay with the organization.

Emerging leaders from diverse backgrounds need and expect to see aspects of racial, cultural, gender, and/or other intersectional identities reflected among the leadership ranks. But they also want specific guidance on which levers to pull to support their leadership and career advancement.

Through this study, we seek to illuminate the strategies employed by successful Asian American leaders and, in doing so, provide guidance to Asian American professionals who aspire to be in organizational leadership. Our findings show that to advance into a leadership role, a crystal clear understanding of who you are, what you need, and who you need it from are the critical components of the leadership journey.

"I am very grateful for the strategy I learned to be aware of the filter I am wearing and how that filter could impact how I react to a situation, but also how others could react to a situation. And how being intentional could make a difference between me feeling terrible about a situation or me using that situation as a learning opportunity."

– FEMALE LEADER, AGE 32

# SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

What emerged from the data is that for Asian Americans to attain a leadership role and succeed as a leader, it is critical to have a blend of elements that combine internal factors and external factors.

The study results indicate that leveraging **internal factors**, which include one's personal characteristics, one's ability to overcome obstacles and navigate through change, and building and maintaining relationships are a key to success for Asian American leaders.

Another notable finding is that the leaders in this study also benefited from **external factors**, such as an ideal organizational culture and environment, along with HR systems and talent management programs that supported their leadership trajectories.

Career trajectories of Asian American leaders can be accelerated when internal and external factors are in place.

# Asian American Leaders: High Level Findings

## INTERNAL FACTORS

**vs**

## EXTERNAL FACTORS

**Personal Characteristics**

**Overcoming Obstacles & Navigating Change**

**Building & Maintaining Relationships**

**Environment & Culture**

**HR Systems & Programs**

# INTERNAL FACTORS

INTERNAL FACTOR

## Personal Characteristics

Across all interviews with leaders, the theme of personal characteristics emerged. The characteristics include ==confidence, being intentional about career choices, openness to opportunities, being proactive and action-oriented, ambition and a willingness to learn key skills.==

When describing personal characteristics, we do not classify these characteristics as separate and distinct from one another. In fact, the characteristics overlap and influence one another and likely impact other characteristics. For example, **confidence** can help individuals be intentional and proactive about their career choices, leading to **opportunities** that open doors into a more significant role and eventually into a leadership position. (See Figure 1)

> "My journey, I feel like it's a mix of luck and hard work. Timing is everything. And I do know there were moments when I created my own opportunities. I started out in one sector, then moved to another sector, then went to graduate school. During graduate school [to move into where I am now], I created my own internship."

-FEMALE LEADER, AGE 40



Confidence

Proactive & Taking Action

Ambition & Willingness to Learn

Being Intentional about Career Choices

Openness to Professional Opportunities

FIGURE 1. PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

# Personal Characteristic: Ambition and a Willingness to Learn Key Skills

Throughout their careers, the leaders demonstrated ambition and a willingness to learn key skills that have aided their leadership journeys. They cultivated the skills of <mark>self and organizational awareness, use of voice, and seeking help as needed</mark>.

The most critical key skills are described below:

## Self and Organizational Awareness

The leaders are acutely aware of their strengths and developmental areas. They engaged in self-reflection that required them to understand themselves in relation to others. The leaders were aware of how others perceived them while being aware of negative and positive perspectives. Because of this understanding, they addressed developmental areas quickly. The leaders had ambition and a willingness to learn. They did not view failures as an obstacle but an opportunity to learn from setbacks.

> "People look back on their careers or their lives, and they cite failures, but sometimes it's not really a failure. It's like a bump in the road."
>
> -MALE LEADER, AGE 46

Organizational awareness involves being in tune with their environment and the context in which they operate. For example, when a leader was new to a role, they realized the importance of identifying the political "landmines" by finding a mentor to help them effectively maneuver. As the leaders grew in their positions and began leading teams, they adapted their leadership style to either step in to help the team or step back so the team felt empowered to figure out the work on their own.

## Using Voice

When we refer to "voice," we mean it in the literal and figurative sense through <mark>self-advocacy</mark> and <mark>speaking up on behalf of others</mark>.

### Self-Advocacy
In the context of this study, self-advocacy means having the capacity to advocate for one's work through the use of voice. For some, there were moments in their careers when a colleague or a boss left, which created an opportunity to position themselves for the role. Deliberate efforts were sometimes required when the leaders had to make a case about their achievements before receiving the new role or promotion. Some leaders "fought" their way to each rung of the career ladder and got them to where they are today.

> "I've had to fight for everything. Promotions I had to fight for, getting hired for certain jobs I've had to fight for."
>
> -MALE LEADER, AGE 42

**Speaking Up on Behalf of Others**

During times of heightened violence toward people of Asian descent, the leaders felt a need to speak up on behalf of the Asian community and their Asian colleagues. Some did so by taking action to support the Asian communities that have been targeted by bringing the conversation into the workplace to identify ways to support the community. Others leaned on their Asian Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to establish ways to enhance the visibility and struggles of both Asian and Pacific Islander (API) colleagues. The ability to speak up on behalf of others in need likely influenced their ability to seek help as necessary in their careers.

> "It's my purpose to give back to my community. And I know this sounds very far-fetched, but I want to, when I retire or when I'm about to die, look back and say, 'Because I was there, I made a difference.' And that's one of the reasons why I entered the workforce… because I felt I would be able to effect change on a national scale and really amplify the struggles that Asian Americans have or provide a platform for folks who are like me because where I am, there are very limited Asian Americans."
>
> -FEMALE LEADER, AGE 32

## Seeking Help As Needed

Self-awareness and the practice of advocating for self and others help to create an understanding of when one needs assistance. Rather than solving problems exclusively on their own, the leaders spoke about requesting help from various support systems.

> "I think the big thing is recognizing when you need help. This is where I feel, as an Asian, you don't ever get to that point of always understanding when you need help and understanding that it's okay to ask for help."
>
> -FEMALE LEADER, AGE 54

They asked for help from various sources, including API communities, their mentors, and others they trust. One leader spoke about the strength derived from being connected to a community of women who provided a safe and relatable space to talk through issues.

> "I eventually did end up finding a really close group of AAPI women who, honestly, once I met them, they were friends, colleagues. We were all in different sectors, but we all were connected to education and nonprofits in some way. I think meeting them, I started to have words for things that I experienced that I didn't know how to talk about."
>
> -FEMALE LEADER, AGE 34

INTERNAL FACTOR

# Obstacles & Change

This theme captures the leaders' ability to manage and overcome obstacles and change. Throughout their careers, the leaders developed the capacity to self-manage their reactions to circumstances outside their control by building the emotional and cognitive capabilities to overcome career challenges and manage negative perceptions.

> "I was on a trajectory to try for a promotion. They [the decision makers] hit me down, and then I went back up. But then the [decision makers] said, 'Well, you need to sustain that. We need to know it's not just a blip.' And so I sustained it."
>
> -FEMALE LEADER, AGE 38

Not surprisingly, Asian American leaders interviewed have, at one time or another, experienced feelings of exclusion and not belonging in organizations. However, the leaders emphasized their experiences overcoming barriers at work. One leader spoke about instances when he faced a challenge at work, such as being stereotyped for being "analytical," but he used that stereotype to his advantage to build credibility.

The leaders learned to self-manage their reactions to events outside of their control. When faced with stereotypes at the workplace, such as not being viewed by others as a leader, they actively spoke up and advocated for themselves and their work. By taking these actions, they continued to advocate for themselves and others like them.

> "The reason why I force myself to say something is that I know that if I don't say anything, people are going to make assumptions about A, my ability to speak English. B, my ability to comprehend the conversation. And so when I open my mouth and say something, I dispel any myth, stereotype, or negative vibes that they have about me not speaking in English or me not understanding the conversation. So there's a burden to that. And I have to say something."
>
> -MALE LEADER, AGE 56

Knowing the politics, the stereotypes, and other hidden barriers in the workplace did not prevent the leaders from moving forward in their career journeys. Obstacles were reframed as problems to solve. Seeking help from trusted mentors, their communities, family, and friends gave them fuel to continue on the leadership path. Many talked about proactively initiating a change in role, job, or career when the situation was no longer productive. In these pivotal moments, they sought support from the people they trusted.

> "Navigating things like power and privilege, and race and identity –[it was] really critical to have others who also identified in similar ways, either around gender, race – to have as sounding boards, or to hear their own experiences."
>
> -FEMALE LEADER, AGE 40

INTERNAL FACTOR

# Building and Maintaining Key Relationships

Genuine and supportive relationships make a significant difference in one's career. The leaders expressed gratitude and respect for people who provided career support in various ways. Their confidants provided much-needed guidance during pivotal moments, were sounding boards to help them check reality, or provided emotional grounding.

In some situations, mentors were matched based on a specific need, such as a peer mentor who helped a manager with their onboarding process. In other situations, mentors were their managers' managers.. Across the board, their support networks consisted of mentors, role models, and executive sponsors.

> "We [my mentor and I] go out and have dinner together on a regular basis. So she stayed constant in my life, not just at that pivotal time but even at another pivotal time."
>
> -FEMALE LEADER, AGE 54

At times, the mentor relationships spanned over decades. In some instances, the mentor-mentee relationship can feel like being part of a family. One leader expressed his deep gratitude for his mentors who not only guided his career but also attended his destination wedding.

For the leaders, their mentors, who were diverse in their racial and ethnic backgrounds, offered help by clarifying career decisions and showed them the "ropes" early in their careers. The mentors encouraged them to pursue new opportunities, provided exposure to critical areas in the organization, and helped them navigate project roadblocks.

> "She was an African American woman who took me under her wing. And when I ran into roadblocks, she was very good at just helping me process."
>
> – FEMALE LEADER, AGE 49

Knowing they were viewed as having high potential or knowing their managers had confidence in their abilities helped the leaders to stretch outside of their roles because they felt a safety net was in place in the event they fell. The push from their mentors helped the leaders to shift their mindsets that they were capable of leading, which was not always apparent due to their cultural upbringing.

"The CFO, I don't know if she's told this to everyone - all five of us - but I distinctly remember her and I having a conversation. And this was when I literally started, and it was within the first six months of us starting. She said something like, 'You can be the next CFO or something like that,' which didn't make sense because I'm still figuring out what I want to do with my life. I wouldn't call myself, at that time, overly ambitious, anything like that. So for somebody high up in the organization to say, 'Hey, you have the potential to do this.' Having that belief system from this person who I admired greatly– that was really impactful."

MALE LEADER, AGE 39

In addition, some mentors also worked "behind the scenes" as executive sponsors and served as advocates for the leaders. As sponsors, they helped to secure projects that created opportunities for learning new skills and meeting new stakeholders throughout the organization. Other key relationships were with team members, external networks such as members from professional associations, and connections within Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

# EXTERNAL FACTORS

As presented in the previous section, internal factors such as personal characteristics lead to actions required for the career advancement of Asian American leaders. However, for this group of leaders, internal factors were supported by external factors: 1) environment and 2) systems and programs.

EXTERNAL FACTOR

## Environment

An optimal environment is one where leaders from diverse backgrounds feel included and supported by career development structures. This means a culture that encourages a collegial environment where individuals feel like they can be themselves and have opportunities to grow.

Another environmental factor is the alignment of the leader's purpose and values with the organizational vision and mission. The environment, mission alignment, and the systems in place to get the work done help leaders ensure they can lead their teams effectively.

"So I'm a super believer in the environment, and I find that in the wrong environment you could have all the great relationships and all the great vision, but if your environment isn't conducive to those things happening, it still gets stifled. So when it all clicks for me, you have the people who want to do it, and you have an environment that's ready to do it, and I'm here to provide whatever else they're needing."

-FEMALE LEADER, AGE 49

An organizational culture that supports diverse leaders has a ripple effect on how each leader can support the team to achieve its goals. For some, the motivation to stay engaged as a leader long-term comes as a result of helping the team members connect to the broader mission of the organization.

"I think that's kind of important too, that you might be assigned a task or a team where folks don't really see the value of what they're doing, but they're putting in the time and the effort. But I think you have to, as a team or as a leader, you have to instill that in folks and then make them understand what this task does to contribute to the broader mission."

- MALE LEADER, AGE 54

EXTERNAL FACTOR

# Systems and Programs

The leaders in this study spoke about benefiting from the organizational systems and processes in place to support their career development, including a culture that promotes regular feedback. For some of the leaders, as previously mentioned, their early career experiences included a mentor or advocate guiding and encouraging them to take on stretch opportunities. For others, an HR-sponsored job rotation program or job shadowing program prepared them to build their skills and expand their abilities.

> "The way she structured it was we had our entry-level duties, but at the same time, we shadowed a lot of managers. We go into these meetings, and at the time, it was like, 'Why? We're not doing anything.' But in hindsight, obviously, it was for us to get exposure and to learn."
>
> -MALE LEADER, AGE 39

A culture and a system that promotes feedback are beneficial for an individual looking to advance in the organization. Feedback was a critical developmental tool for the leaders in this study. The source of feedback was varied and was both positive and negative. On the supportive side, direct input from mentors or a manager helped to bridge the gap between what's expected of a professional in the U.S. culture and how an Asian American professional thinks about their role in an organization.

> "So, the very first leader who was my sponsor, it wasn't until I started reporting directly to him, and he gave me feedback for the annual performance review. He did it in a very kind way. It was really to say, 'You're pretty quiet in some of these team discussions. People want to hear from you. They want to know what your thinking is, even if it's not something that's in your area.'
>
> Then, as I reflected more and was involved in things like AAPA and LEAP and got more educated around it, it was clearer to me that it was a combination of how I was brought up - my own comfort zone and what the expectations in corporate America are. That was, I think, the most enlightening piece, like, 'This isn't just how I'm feeling. It's not just about me and my comfort zone, but it is what other people expect of any leader within the context of the organization.'"
>
> - FEMALE LEADER, AGE 53

Another example is actively seeking critical feedback. One leader discussed applying for a new position within the organization provided an opportunity to not only receive feedback but also land the position.

"I jumped into construction management, which is still an individual contributor track. And I did that for about four years. And then, at the end of my construction management route, I interviewed for a leadership position to get some critical feedback about what I was lacking as a leader, but I ended up getting the position and getting the job."

– MALE LEADER, AGE 36

Through this study, we sought to identify specific mechanisms that supported Asian Americans' advancement into leadership roles and enabled the career trajectories of Asian American VPs and Directors. By gaining this comprehensive understanding of the strategies, such as the blend of internal and external factors employed by effective leaders and facilitated by inclusive organizations across corporate, nonprofit, higher education, and government sectors, we also seek to provide inspiration, encouragement, and affirmation of potential paths to leadership roles and success as an Asian American leader.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

In the next section, we present recommendations for our two key audiences based on the findings from this study.

The recommendations for organizational decision-makers first consist of gathering and analyzing critical workforce demographic data. As a result of these efforts, customized development solutions based on the needs of Asian American populations can be created. By establishing an optimal environment, implementing clear processes, and adopting inclusive systems, enterprises, institutions, and organizations can mitigate current leadership gaps and prepare for the inclusion of a diverse workforce. For individuals who aspire to be in leadership roles, we offer practical knowledge and wisdom collected through the vast leadership experiences of the Asian American leaders in this study.

SUGGESTIONS FOR

# Organizational Decision Makers

Creating an Optimal work environment through the use of workforce data

Create access to structured professional development programs

# Individuals

Leverage Personal Characteristics

Navigate Obstacles & Change Effectively

Build and Maintain Key Relationships

FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION MAKERS

# Creating an Optimal Work Environment Through the Use of Workforce Data

**Recommendations**

Assess internal talent management systems to remove implicit bias that may be limiting access to leadership roles of underrepresented groups such as Asian Americans.

- Disaggregate demographic data by race and ethnicity to allow for a critical understanding of inter-ethnic differences and disparities in organizational systems. In Asian and Pacific Islander populations, aggregation of 50+ ethnicities masks significant differences in job category/role presence and promotion to management and executive positions.

- Assess which demographics, including gender and racial groups, are in individual contributor roles versus those in management and executive positions.

- Conduct a promotion analysis to understand which groups are promoted, the pace of promotion, and why (e.g., zero

in on whether a specific style is being perpetuated as the "right" leadership style in an organization.)

- When assessing talent for high-potential or business-critical positions, analyze the top performers in those categories to assess if specific demographics are overly represented or underrepresented.

- Conduct a retention and turnover analysis categorized by demographics to understand which groups are stuck at a particular rung of the career ladder.

- If a coaching or mentoring program exists, identify which demographics typically participate as coachees/mentees and if a gap exists between Asian Americans and other culturally diverse groups and White employees. Encourage and advocate for underrepresented groups to participate in these programs.

FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION MAKERS

# Create Access to Structured Professional Development Programs

**Recommendations**

Develop or provide access to programs intended to help Asian Americans and other underrepresented groups by enabling their participation:

- Creating a job rotation program to provide experience to early career professionals with the goal of helping individuals broaden their career interests.

- Establishing a job expansion program that focuses on leveraging the transferable skills of the emerging leader. Such a program will also add value to the function, team, and overall organization due to the diversity of skills and experiences.

- Matching Asian American professionals to influential mentors in the organization to encourage the acceleration of leadership skills development and gain much-needed visibility and access to senior leaders.

- Supporting participation in identity-based cohort programs focused on career and leadership development to encourage authenticity when leading while engaging in a community of supportive Asian American colleagues.

- Providing opportunities for Asian American professionals to engage with coaches from culturally similar backgrounds to address barriers associated with intersectionality and create action plans to encourage the development of authentic leaders who integrate all aspects of their identities.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

# Leverage Personal Characteristics

**Recommendations**

Build confidence by volunteering or applying for stretch assignments. Apply a learner's mindset and know that each setback is not a failure but an experience-building opportunity.

Maintain an open mind about opportunities that you had not previously thought about. Instead of staying within the confines of a strict career path, be willing to explore outside of your area of specialty to expand your skill set.

Always be intentional about the choices you are making in your career. Know who you are, identify what you need, and ask for help from others.

A few suggestions are:

- Know your strengths and developmental areas.

- Seek out and be sincerely open to both positive and developmental feedback. All feedback is valuable to your professional growth.

- Volunteer for stretch opportunities and/or an HR-sponsored job rotation program or job shadowing program to build your skills and expand your abilities.

- When looking for new opportunities, find organizational cultures that encourage you to feel like you can be yourself, provide you with opportunities to grow, and your purpose and values align with the organizational vision and mission.
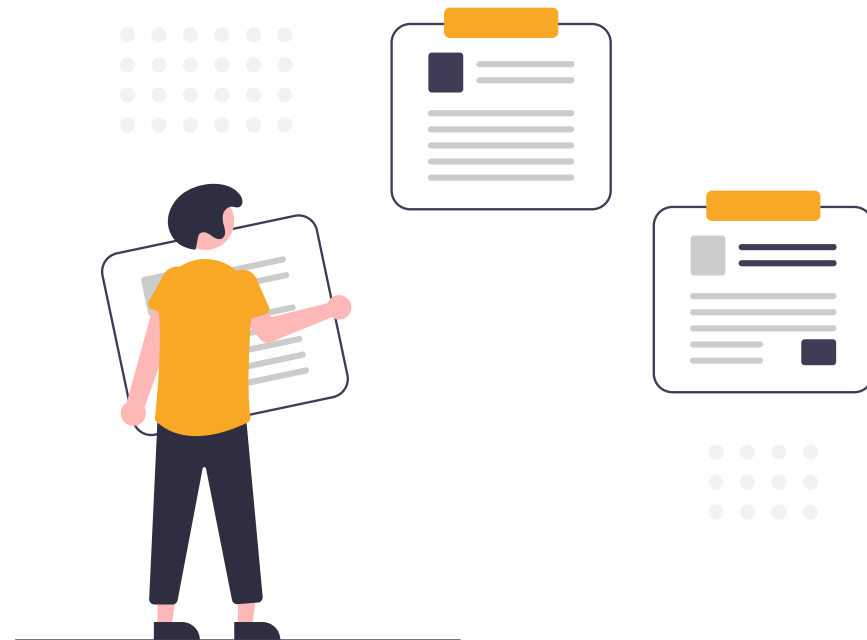
FOR INDIVIDUALS

# Navigate Obstacles & Change Effectively

**Recommendations**

Recognize what is hindering or holding you back professionally. Areas to focus on are:

- Actively overcoming stereotypes and discrimination by using your voice on behalf of yourself and other underrepresented groups. Advocating for yourself and what you need professionally.

- Minimize perfectionism by being comfortable taking professional risks and relying on your support system or community.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

# Build and Maintain Key Relationships

**Recommendations**

Determine who you need help from:

- Build key relationships inside and outside the organization.

- Create a "personal board of directors" consisting of multiple mentors based on your needs and goals, such as gaining functional or technical expertise in your field.

- Keep in mind that one mentor may not have all the answers you need to address your career. So, diversify your support system.

As we embark on Phase Two of this research study, we intend to dig deeper into the intricate workings of internal and external factors and the impact they have on Asian American leaders' careers by surveying a larger sample of Asian American leaders.

# THE NEXT PHASE

THE PUSH AND PULL OF LEADERSHIP

We will focus on what we refer to as the "push and pull" of leadership. Through the insights gained from Phase One of this study, we have learned that Asian American leaders have, at times, proactively pushed themselves into leadership positions. They attained leadership roles by leveraging their personal personal characteristics, such as confidence, ambition, and willingness to learn. At the same time, they were drawn or "pulled" to become leaders by the recognition and endorsement of mentors, sponsors, or inclusive organizational systems to support their career trajectories.

The completion of Phase One is a significant milestone of this effort, and we express our sincere gratitude to the leaders who imparted their wisdom and generosity by sharing their insights with us. Their unique perspectives allowed us to generate a critical understanding of what is required to overcome the barriers that Asian Americans continue to face in organizational settings. Their candid examples gave us a glimpse into their unique mindsets and the specific actions they took in their careers to achieve their leadership potential.

We are overwhelmed by the leaders' commitment to advancing the next generation of Asian American professionals.

# APPENDIX

## THE RESEARCH DESIGN

A common approach to leadership research on diverse groups of leaders, specifically Asian American leaders, focuses on the lack of representation and barriers to leadership that include stereotypes, prejudice, and other negative issues. However, this current research uses the science of examining a phenomenon of leadership told through the participants who have attained leadership positions despite the many barriers other studies have articulated. This study was conducted as a two-phased approach. Phase One was a qualitative study to uncover data rooted in the participants' voices. Phase Two will include a quantitative approach. The current report is the conclusion of Phase One, where insights into the supporting mechanisms, organzational barriers, and characteristics of VPs and Directors leading in multiple sectors are shared.

The overarching research objective was to understand the factors enabling VPs and Directors of Asian heritage to achieve leadership roles in large, complex organizations across multiple sectors. Additional sub-questions were explored, such as organizational systems and processes supporting the participants' leadership journeys.
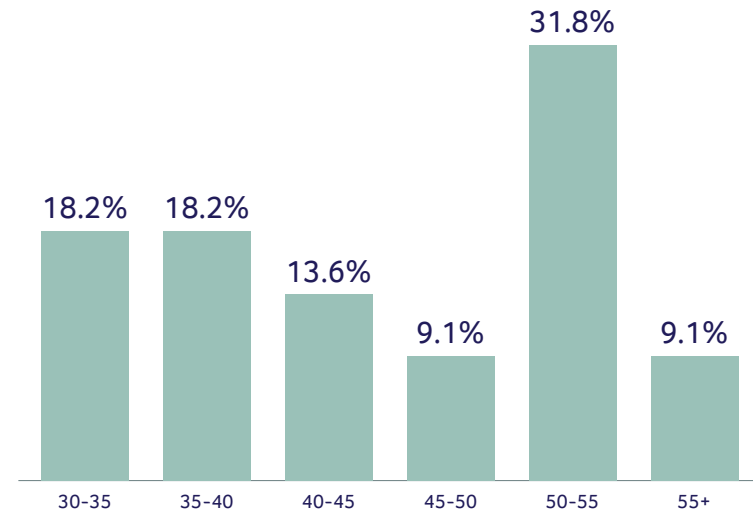
PARTICIPANT SAMPLING

All participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, starting with LEAP's network, extending to LEAP's alumni, and from Linda Akutagawa, Yon Na, and Denise Lopez's professional contacts. A total of 171 potential participants were first identified, and from there, outreach to over 30 leaders who met the criteria was conducted. A total of 21 leaders were interviewed and maximum variation sampling was achieved by including a mix of genders, tenure, age, and Asian heritage (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Indian, Lao, and Vietnamese).

The goal of qualitative research is to delve deeper into the research phenomenon by understanding the experiences of the participants told in their own words. However, in order to answer the overarching research question, organizational criteria (outlined below) were critical to the insights gathered. In qualitative research, the specificity of the research participants matters.
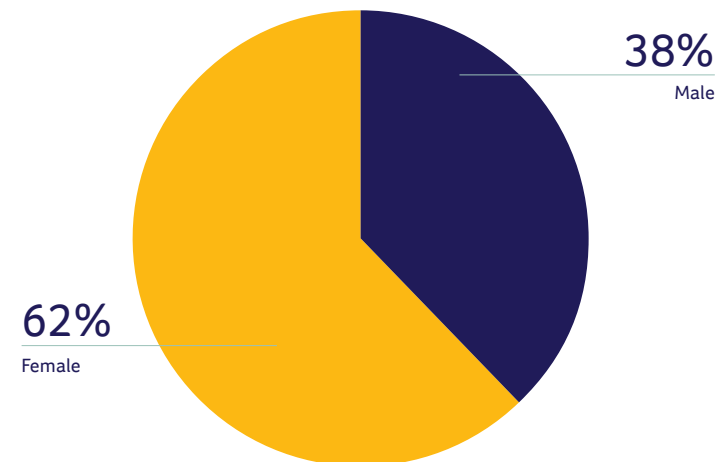
Organizational and Leadership Criteria are below:

- Leaders of Asian descent (VPs or Directors with at least three or more direct reports currently or during their tenure)
- Corporate 10K-100K employees, publicly-traded companies (NASDAQ and NYSE.)
- Higher education public institutions (2 or 4-year) State Universities and Community Colleges with a student enrollment of 4K+
- Nonprofit organizations with employees $50M budget and 100 employees
- Federal government GS14 & 15 mid-managers level

AGE GROUP

| 30-35 | 35-40 | 40-45 | 45-50 | 50-55 | 55+ |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| 18.2% | 18.2% | 13.6% | 9.1% | 31.8% | 9.1% |

GENDER

38% Male

62% Female

ETHNICITY



SECTORS



23.8%
Higher Ed

28.6%
Nonprofit

23.8%
Gov/SES

23.8%
Corp

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Pre-interview screening, demographic data collection, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher kept field notes and memos during the interview process. The lead researcher and research assistant reviewed the interview transcripts and checked for accuracy. The lead researcher and research assistant separately annotated the transcripts using NVivo software. They discussed the annotations and proceeded with coding the interview data. A total of 1064 codes were identified initially. The lead researcher conducted an analysis of the codes using thematic analysis to identify six key themes.
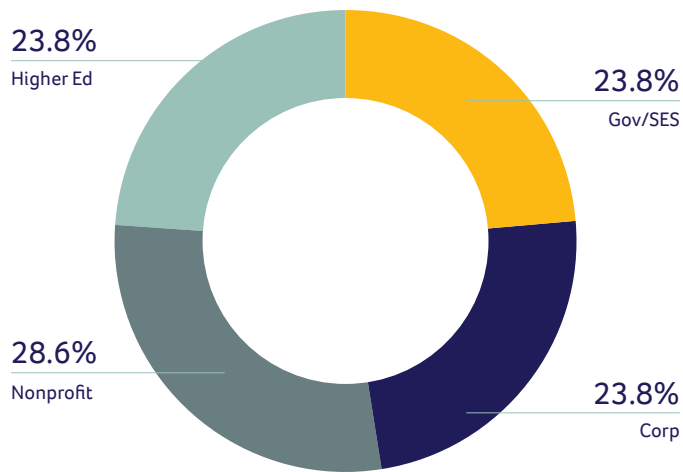
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## Yon Na, PhD

Dr. Na is an organizational psychologist who helps leaders & teams accelerate performance and create inclusive cultures by applying organizational psychology principles. Throughout her career, Yon has led Organizational Effectiveness and Leadership Development efforts in Fortune 100 and high-growth companies, including Warner Bros., The New York Times, Microsoft, Johnson & Johnson, and Nordstrom. She partners with her clients by leveraging research and assessments to design customized solutions.

Yon's research area centers on the intersection of identity, culture, and leadership. She shares her peer-reviewed research on Asian women in leadership at conferences, companies, and colleges. Yon is also the founder of Radiance HQ, an organization dedicated to advancing Asian women in the workplace. She developed the Radiance Leadership Development Program, which combines her research, organizational psychology, and her experience leading in Fortune 100 companies.

Yon holds a doctorate in Organizational Psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University. She received her Master's in Applied Psychology and a BA in Business Administration from Golden Gate University. Yon is an ICF-Credentialed and Board Certified Executive Coach.

## Patricia "Denise" Lopez, PhD

Dr. Denise Lopez is a Full Professor of Organizational Psychology at Alliant International University in California, where she teaches and conducts research in leadership, employee engagement, team effectiveness, and organizational change management. She was born and raised in the Philippines and moved to the United States to complete her PhD in Organizational Psychology from Columbia University, New York City. In addition to her academic career, Denise does leadership coaching and organizational consulting work for various organizations around the world. She currently serves on the board of directors of LEAP (Leadership Education for Asian-Pacifics). She also teaches leadership courses at the Asian Institute of Management in the Philippines.

Denise seeks to develop great leaders and build workplaces to which people can bring their best and most productive selves. Over the last 25 years, she has taught, trained, coached and consulted with diverse managers, teams and organizations in sectors such as higher education, high tech, management consulting, customer service, fast-moving consumer goods, manufacturing, government and non-profit sectors. She recently co-authored the bestseller book, "Lead, Motivate, Engage: How to INSPIRE your team to win at work" with Dr. Pearl Hilliard.

## Linda Akutagawa

Linda Akutagawa is President and CEO of LEAP (Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics). In her role, she is responsible for LEAP's strategic direction, sustainability, and collaborations and is deeply committed to LEAP's vision of diverse leaders driving change for the benefit of all.

Ms. Akutagawa is a nationally recognized speaker and facilitator on topics such as leadership and Asian and Pacific Islanders (APIs) communities. She and her co-host, Dr. Yon Na, just completed the third season of The LEAP Podcast, focusing on multi-dimensional Asian and Pacific Islander identities and leadership. Linda has also authored a journal article: "Breaking stereotypes: An Asian American's View of Leadership Development."

Active in the community, Linda is a Board Member of the AAPI Equity Alliance (a co-founding organization of #StopAAPIHate) and a Board member of Japanese American Community Services (JACS). She is also the Immediate Past Chair of the Alliance for Board Diversity, a national partnership advocating for greater diversity on public company corporate boards of directors. Civically, Linda is an appointed Commissioner on the 2020 California Citizens Redistricting Commission and an appointed member of the California Department of Insurance's Diversity Task Force. Ms. Akutagawa received her B.S. in International Business with a minor in Economics from California State University at Los Angeles. She has a Certificate in Nonprofit Board Consulting through Boardsource. She is married and a fur-mom to two well-loved rescue dogs.

ABOUT LEAP

Founded in 1982, LEAP (Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics) is a national, nonprofit organization, with a mission to achieve full participation and equality for Asian and Pacific Islanders (APIs) through leadership, empowerment, and policy. LEAP is the only organization dedicated to cultivating a robust pipeline of leaders by encouraging and empowering Asian and Pacific Islanders in all industries and sectors to lead authentically and confidently at work and in the community, and ultimately, to become role models for future leaders. For more information, please visit leap.org.

# The Push and Pull of Leadership

**PHASE ONE** UNCOVERING THE FACTORS
ADVANCING ASIAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP