Roadmap to Inclusive Leadership and Agility

FREE CHAPTER

FOSTERING CULTURALLY DIVERSE LEADERSHIP IN ORGANISATION:
Lessons from Those who Smashed the Bamboo Ceiling

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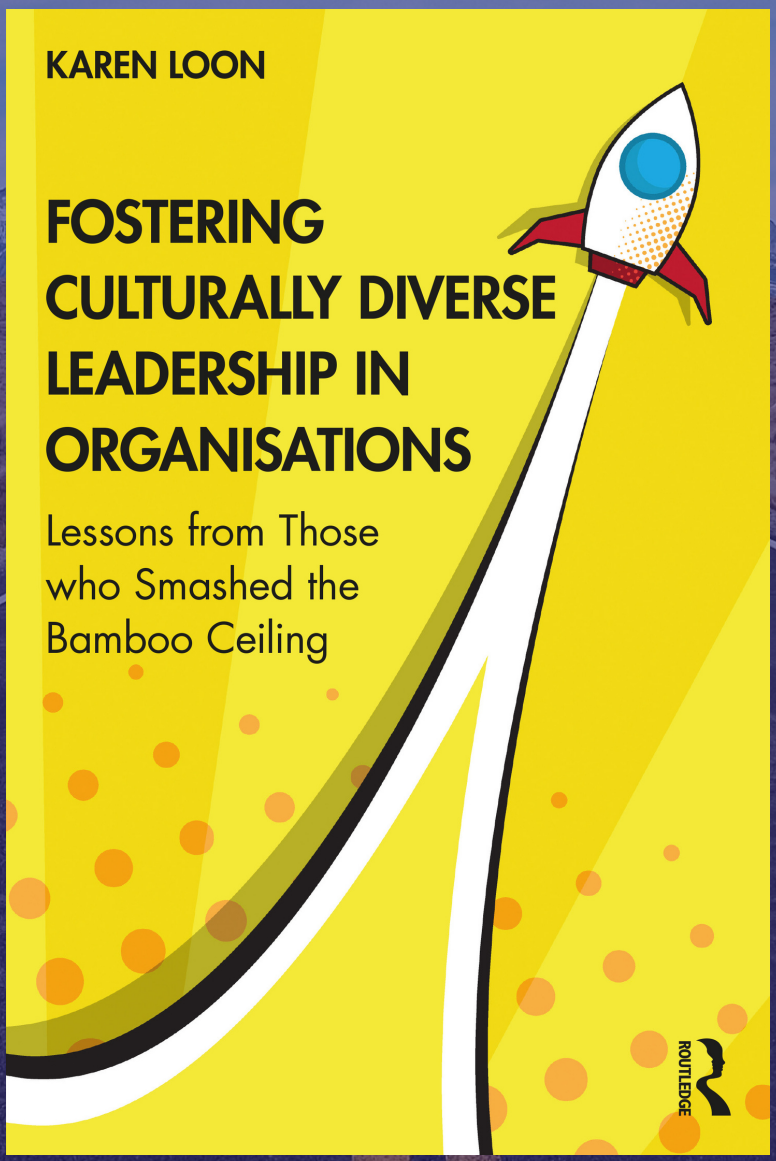

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Introduction

One

INTRODUCTION

'No, you can't get a part-time job at McDonalds – you should be spending your time at home studying'.

'Playing the piano won't make you any money'.

These are some of the things I recall my father saying to me when I turned fifteen. Like my school friends, I wanted to get a part-time job to earn some money. Instead, I reluctantly complied with my father's wishes and spent a great deal of the next two years after school studying at home. I am sure that I was not the only one.

Read any of the Higher School Certificate or Victorian Certificate of Education honours rolls each year in Australia, and you'll see that a large proportion of the top candidates have Asian backgrounds. Most studied at the state's top selective schools or private schools. Many of them are super-modest and amazingly talented. Stories abound of how many of them have spent their weekends at 'cramming' schools and have 'Tiger' mums. Moreover, the university lecture halls for degree programmes such as medicine, law, and accounting are crowded with students from Asian backgrounds. Asian-Australians are the 'model minority' – conscientious, self-reliant, compliant, and ambitious. This story is repeated in other migrant-receiving countries like the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Canada.

Yet, while people of Asian ethnicity are often superstars at school, their success is rarely replicated to the same extent in their nations' most prominent corporations. Well-represented in junior ranks, they remain seriously under-represented in senior levels of leadership.

What is leading to this? Is there a 'bamboo ceiling'[1] that is holding them back? Or are there leadership traits that they don't have? Are leaders in these corporations biased towards those who demonstrate more 'Western' values? Or is there something else at play?

These questions have intrigued me for many years. Ethnically Chinese but a fourth-generation Australian, I am a 'banana' – white on the inside,

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yellow on the outside. I identify as an Asian-Australian of Chinese ethnicity who grew up in Australia's country music capital, Tamworth, five hours by car from Sydney. I'm an anomaly in my own country.

After spending my early years in Australia, at the age of twenty-five, I relocated to Singapore for work and have, for the most part, lived there ever since. Many years later, I realised that one of the main reasons for staying in Singapore was that not only were there no female role model partners[2] in my Big 4 firm in Australia at the time; there were also no Asian-Australian partners.

In 2011, I was seconded back to my firm in Sydney as a partner for nineteen months, where I experienced a mini-culture shock. I was unique – female, Asian, and I even worked full-time! While there were many staff with Asian backgrounds at junior levels, I was one of only two Asian female partners at the time. Aspiring Asian female leaders who had no other role models to look up to or speak to in their business units approached me for coffee and career advice. Yet, when I talked to younger Asian staff, many could not see a career for themselves in the firm and were contemplating leaving. While there were no data to measure this, I knew that our Asian-Australian staff were leaving the firm faster than those of other backgrounds. Further, this issue wasn't just one which my firm faced – it existed in almost all organisations. To me, something felt amiss.

Leadership is a lonely experience at the best of times; however, it can be even more difficult when you don't feel like you belong. And while on paper, I had 'made it', having made partnership at the age of thirty-three, I felt like an 'alien' and alone as an Asian female partner in Australia.

I looked younger than many of my staff. I felt uncomfortable 'selling' my experience to older clients, to have them look uninterestedly at me and tell me that 'you look very young'. I was also not married at the time, so I was rarely invited to work-related dinner parties that revolved around couples.

I specifically recall two discussions that really struck me. The first was in my first week back in Australia. I vividly remember sharing a cab with an experienced businessperson. After telling him that I had come back from Singapore, he responded, 'Your English is very good'.

The second was when I thought there was a pipeline issue, as it seemed that proportionately fewer homegrown graduates were being promoted to partner than those educated in the UK. After mentioning

this to a colleague of Asian ethnicity, she told me I was mistaken. In her view, Australia had access to the world's best talent, and I had been in Singapore for too long.

I now knew how those from overseas working in Australia felt – I felt like a second-class citizen in my own country. I sensed I didn't belong and was uncomfortable. This brought up memories of being a child at primary school in Tamworth. Not realising that I was any different from the other kids in my class, I came home crying after being called a 'Ching Chong Chinaman'. In high school, I was told by my English teacher that my written English was like that of a foreign student, even though I only spoke English. To be accepted, I became even more 'Aussie'. I became determined to prove that I was better than the other kids in my class.

I was extremely fortunate that I faced relatively few situations of overt racism in Australia. However, I can't imagine what the experiences of my great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents ahead of me would have been like. Australia is my country – where my ancestors had lived for over 140 years. Yet, something didn't feel right.

I wasn't the only one thinking the same way – some of my fellow Asian-Australian partners had similar thoughts. Their stories were different; most had moved to Australia as young kids or had parents who had migrated to Australia. It was lonely for many of us at the top. Some felt even more alone after making it to partner, which we thought would be the pinnacle of our careers. Other Asian-Australians I spoke to felt that there was nothing they could do to change things and felt misunderstood as they lived between two worlds. A small minority were motivated to act.

Around this time, the Australian government released its White Paper on *Australia in the Asian Century*, which set out a strategic framework to guide Australia's navigation of the Asian Century. My firm was exploring how to best support its clients. I proposed suggestions to the firm on how it could leverage its Asian-Australians' cultural diversity to support its broader Asia business objectives. It was the start of my journey as a diversity leader.

After moving back to Singapore, I've observed the progress made by corporate Australia in increasing the cultural diversity of its leadership. There has been much more discussion of the importance of cultural diversity in mainstream media in the past five years. Companies also began to announce targets to increase the cultural diversity of their leadership. Further, organisations such as the Diversity Council of Australia

(DCA) and the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) have published reports that tackle cultural diversity and inclusive leadership. Finally, in the past few years, Asian-Australians started to take action. One example was the inaugural Asian-Australian Leadership Summit (AALS) held in September 2019, which boosted many Asian-Australians' vision, visibility, and voices.

Unfortunately, there has been an increase in racist incidents involving Asian-Australians since the COVID-19 pandemic. This has led to many Asian-Australians becoming more anxious than the rest of the population (Biddle et al., 2020). Furthermore, some Australian companies have been pivoting their business focus away from China.

While these efforts are encouraging, not all mainstream companies have joined the trend. While some celebrate their cultural diversity, many others still do not focus on how to help aspiring culturally diverse leaders reach their full potential.

One reason is that some corporate leaders believe their organisations are still struggling to increase the proportion of women in leadership positions. While some progress has been made in boardrooms, women still remain underrepresented at leadership and management levels in Australian workplaces.

Like in the US, the UK, and Canada, corporate Australia is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of diversity. Improvements have occurred, and, over time, we have seen advancements in its leadership profile in the right direction. The clubbiness of senior male leaders in leadership slowly is reducing.

However, I sometimes wonder if corporate cultures have really changed, or whether the efforts made to date by some organisations are 'diversity washing?' At times, I've been surprised to see cases where very senior leaders dispute hard facts about gender pay gaps – denying there are issues. Pockets of male chauvinism still exist.

Are we making actual progress? What more can we do? And if it has been so hard to sort our gender issues out, what can we do to move the dial on cultural diversity? Is it appropriate to take what has worked to date for gender and apply it to cultural diversity? Or do we need to do things differently?

WHAT IS CULTURAL DIVERSITY? AND WHY IS IT ESSENTIAL?

Before continuing, it is worth taking a step back. What is diversity, what is cultural diversity, and why are they essential?

What is diversity?

Diversity is what makes each of us unique. It includes our backgrounds, personality, life experiences, and beliefs – all the things that make us who we are. These differences shape our views of the world, our perspectives, and our approaches. In other words, it is who we are as individuals.

When we speak about diversity, our focus tends to be on what we can see and hear – our gender, race, nationality, and languages spoken. However, this is just one lens; there are often other aspects about individuals that are not visible.

What is cultural diversity?

Cultural diversity, a term commonly used in Australia, refers to having diverse ethnic backgrounds and ancestries.

There are no official statistics on Australia's ethnic or cultural population, unlike in other countries such as the UK, which uses the term 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' (BAME).

However, in the context of senior leadership, it usually refers to having an appropriate representation of people with non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds (in other words, European, non-European, and Indigenous backgrounds). The non-European population includes people of Asian, Middle Eastern and North African, and other non-European backgrounds.

The difficulty of having a more diverse workplace is that the more diverse we all are, the more difficult it can be to work collaboratively. This is where the role of inclusion becomes vital.

What is inclusion?

Inclusion is where the thoughts, ideas, and perspectives of all individuals matter. It is the practice of ensuring that people feel a sense of belonging and support from an organisation.

Often, the words diversity and inclusion are used together.[3] However, some argue that there is also a paradoxical relationship between having a diverse workforce and workplace inclusion. In more recent years, discussions have broadened to include the importance of 'belonging'.

A common way to remember these concepts is: Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance. Belonging is dancing like no one's watching.

What is the difference between meritocracy, equity, and equality?

When we speak about diversity and inclusion, we often use the terms 'meritocracy', 'equity', and 'equality' without fully understanding what they mean.

Many workplaces claim that they are meritocratic and adopt merit-based processes whereby people progress based solely on their capabilities. However, numerous academics believe that such organisations may show more significant bias favouring the majority (such as men over equally performing women).

There is frequently confusion about the difference between equality and equity. While both promote fairness, equality achieves this through treating everyone equally regardless of their needs. In contrast, equity reaches this by treating people differently depending on the circumstances.

In the workplace, having a diverse workplace means having a wide range of diverse individuals.

Today, many organisations are struggling to manage their way through the 'Great Resignation'. Further, talent mobility flows globally have been disrupted. Some countries, such as the UK, have become more open to global talent, as others have shut their borders. Other diaspora groups such as Asian-Australians in Hong Kong are repatriating home. As a result, companies need to work much harder to attract and retain the best available talent so they can thrive.

Numerous studies have shown that having multiple points of view can lead to better business outcomes for organisations and a fair and equal work environment. Further, business leaders increasingly recognise that embracing organisational diversity is critical – one never knows where

the next important idea will emerge from. Senior teams that are homogeneous may not come up with the best ideas.

Diversity is not just a 'nice to have' – it is increasingly vital.

INCREASING WORKPLACE LEADERSHIP DIVERSITY – A COMPLEX PROBLEM

Yet, why is moving the dial on workplace diversity and inclusion so tricky?

Even in the US, where diversity initiatives started decades ago, following the #blacklivesmatter campaign, there has been greater societal and workplace debate on improving diversity, equity, and inclusion. In addition, there has been significant commentary on workplace cultural diversity barriers, including discrimination and implicit biases against people with ethnic backgrounds. Regrettably, increasing diversity in the workplace is one of those complex problems we cannot answer quickly; otherwise, we would have resolved it by now.

A helpful way to analyse the challenges of increasing cultural diversity in leadership is to apply the 'Framework for Transforming Experience into Authentic Action through Role' (Long, 2016) (Figure 1.1). This looks at how people take up roles using an 'outside-in' perspective (looking to understand the group or system first, then the context). This will be referred to in subsequent chapters.

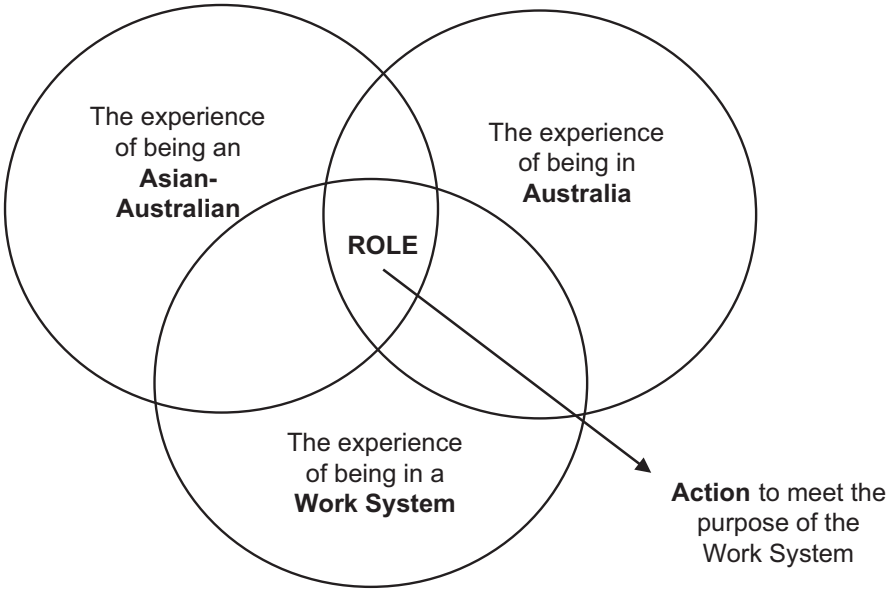

Figure 1.1 The transforming experience framework as applied to an Asian-Australian leader

Source: Adapted from Long (2016, p. 35)

A country's context, the environment in which systems (in this case, companies) operate, is influenced by physical, political, economic, social, historical, international, and emotional factors (Long, 2016). This consequently impacts a country's people, organisations, and social systems.

To illustrate, in Australia, race and ethnicity are topics that people prefer not to talk about, unlike in the US. Historically, Australians have identified themselves by their nationality. Growing up in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s, when there was an expectation that all Australians would assimilate, I defined myself as Australian as I wanted to fit it. Most of my university friends were from varied ethnic backgrounds – Anglo-Celtic, Greek, Italian, Albanian, Singaporean Chinese, and Hong Kong Chinese. Yet, we rarely spoke much about our family backgrounds – we just were who we were. This was due to our nation's history, such as the imposition of the 'White Australia' policy by the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, which shaped our identities. These policies influenced how many of us with non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds were brought up and identified ourselves, and how our organisations and social systems were founded.

The other challenge is that most organisations are established for a particular purpose, so they have their own culture and rules on how people fit into them and operate. Unfortunately, many older organisations were not initially founded to embrace diversity, making it increasingly difficult for them to pivot to embrace it.

It is not easy to change systems quickly. Doing so may require their people to modify the system's purpose, culture, or rules, which is not easy. This is because there are both rational, conscious, and unconscious dynamics within organisations, the latter of which Russ Vince at the University of Bath describes as 'institutional illogics' (Vince, 2019).

As a business leader and diversity practitioner, my discussions with other C-suite members leading diversity strategies corroborate the challenge of dealing with institutional illogics. Even with the best plans, it takes time for any change initiative to show real and meaningful progress.

Often unspoken or unconscious attitudes can prevent progress and derail change. Common challenges I faced as a diversity leader when seeking to influence change included that initially, people denied that any change was necessary. They then resisted change through rationalisation and scapegoating.

What I found most challenging was getting others to take collective and meaningful action. Some colleagues would tell me, 'Yes – I am supportive of diversity'. Others were silent. Frequently there was inertia among them and a lack of action, individually and collectively. I sensed that their true thoughts on embracing diversity had become repressed and were unsaid. Often, they also had too many other challenges and distractions that they were also trying to manage.

Shifting organisational cultures towards embracing greater diversity and inclusion is a long journey. Many companies can demonstrate that greater diversity in their organisations is beneficial for their clients, people, and organisation. They also have robust accountability frameworks and holistic measures embedded throughout the organisation. Nevertheless, my personal experience, even as a senior business leader and owner, is that increasing leadership diversity in a tangible and meaningful way is extremely challenging. So, I started to wonder if there was a better way.

Many nations have been focusing on improving their gender diversity for some time. For instance, the top Australian- and UK-listed companies now have more than 30% women on their boards. But, on the other hand, our most prominent institutions are rocked by sexual harassment scandals on occasion. So, whilst we may have changed how things appear, have we changed the hearts and minds of our people in our society and organisations?

If we can't make progress in gender, how do we then tackle cultural diversity?

WHERE DO WE START?

There is frequently a view in some countries, such as Australia, that we don't need to act on something unless we have the data to prove the extent of our issues. Sometimes, though, problems stare us in the face without any data.

Case in point – you only need to compare people in the streets of most cities in Australia to the leadership teams of its largest corporations to know that something is amiss. It may surprise many people that over 15% of the Australian population have Asian-Australian ethnicity – a higher proportion than the African-American population in the US. These statistics don't consider people of other ethnic backgrounds, such as those whose ancestors are from the Middle East or Africa. Should this not be a wake-up call?

We intuitively know that many multicultural nations have a problem concerning their cultural diversity – and yet, collectively, action is not taking place to change this. Is this because people unconsciously feel that advancing cultural diversity is a zero-sum game? That if someone else gets the leadership positions, they will lose out?

Furthermore, is it right to take what has worked to increase gender diversity and apply those learnings to cultural diversity to accelerate progress? While specific initiatives in gender, such as targets and disclosure, have moved the dial, have things really changed for good? The accountant in me says yes – we will not make progress unless we can measure change. However, I also know that numbers, if not used sensibly, can lead to inappropriate behaviours that may derail efforts.

While we may desire rapid change, we also need sustainable change, not 'diversity dressing'. Having more inclusive nations, where our business leaders represent our population, requires us to adapt. Society and its organisations must recognise the role they need to take to drive progress. Merely holding feel-good events that celebrate our cultural diversity will not lead to improvements. Improving cultural diversity needs to be part of a broader culture change management initiative and not delegated to the human resources (HR) department. Change initiatives that do not deal with people's (sometimes hidden) concerns and apprehensions will not lead to long-term change.

Unless there is greater recognition, both by our organisations and individuals, of the anxieties that arise unintentionally and unconsciously between us, our progress will remain slow.

We all need to open our minds and look at this differently, possibly unlearning and relearning how to do things. But unfortunately, that is not easy for all of us, individually and collectively.

It is time to look at cultural diversity through a different lens.

TAKING A DIFFERENT ANGLE

Surprisingly, relatively little has been written about workplace cultural diversity in leadership in Australia to date. While there has been a significant focus on gender, research outside of the US on cultural diversity has tended to ignore the treatment and experiences of culturally diverse workers. In addition, the available research has tended

to explore the experiences of migrants at work but not in leadership positions.

Significantly more studies from the US have explored race and ethnic diversity from a critical theory perspective. Critical theory focuses on reflective assessment and critique of society and culture to reveal and challenge power structures. Other research on cultural diversity has focused on identity (particularly from a social identity theory (SIT) perspective) and biculturalism.

A great deal of the existing research on cultural diversity in the workplace outside the US offers perspectives on the *barriers* to aspiring culturally diverse leaders reaching leadership roles. However, I could not find concrete answers on what should be done to increase the number of culturally diverse leaders at work.

The research was often focused on either individuals or the system – but did not always deal with both. I felt that I needed to take a step back to find the answers. I pondered – should I ask the culturally diverse leaders who have made it themselves and look at their organisations from within, through their eyes?

I decided to speak to Asian-Australians in leadership roles given their growing presence and unique challenges in reaching leadership positions, and as their voices have seldom been heard.

When looking for potential Asian-Australian business leaders to interview, I found that the pool of leaders was small. Many Asian-Australians in senior positions in their late 40s or 50s that I know, like me, live overseas. Others had chosen to set up their own businesses, like David and Vicki Teoh of TPG and Tim Fung of Airtasker. Of the top twenty companies listed on the Australian Stock Exchange, Shemara Wikramanayake, CEO of Macquarie Group; Sandeep Biswas, CEO of Newcrest; and Mike Henry, CEO of BHP (who has Japanese heritage from his mother) are some of the rare exceptions. Outside of the ASX20, Australian listed company CEOs with Indian backgrounds include Stockland's Tarun Gupta, Orica's Sanjeev Gandhi, Link's Vivek Bhatia, and Pact's Sanjay Dayal. In the past, Ming Long, former CEO of Investa Property Group who has a Malaysian Chinese background and Cleanaway's Vik Bansal, who has Indian ethnicity, have led ASX listed companies (Khadem, 2021). The situation is different in the US, where many more Asian-Americans have led large US companies.

As many Asian-Australians work in the accounting profession where there has been little industry-wide research in Australia to date, I decided to speak to current and former Asian-Australian partners in the Big 4 accounting firms in Australia. In addition, I talked to other senior Asian-Australian leaders across both the public and private sectors. My focus was to understand their experience in the systems where they worked – home, school, and work. After analysing the interviews, some interesting patterns emerged.

DISSIMILAR PATHS, DISSIMILAR EXPERIENCES, SAME DESTINATION

While the career progression of the Asian-Australian leaders overall was in line with what I had expected, what intrigued me were their divergent stories at the age of twelve. This is the age when most kids change schools and are to making new friends in a new environment.

Ben and Michael[4] – same destinations, different paths

Ben was born overseas but moved to Australia at an early age. 'I came here with my family with absolutely no money', he shared with me. 'We weren't poor, we weren't rich. I didn't have the latest Nike shoes, I didn't have the latest t-shirts or anything like that'. Ben moved schools during his childhood, at a time when there was little cultural diversity in his city. He found that his childhood was tough at this age.

Ben recalled being picked on and physically abused by three bigger boys in the playground as he was different. He believes that his experiences in the playground shaped how he operates as an adult.

'It's actually increased my resilience… I think resilience is really important in a professional sense', he told me, noting that it taught him to tolerate people and to problem solve – how could he get out of being teased or physically bashed up? During his work career, I found that he seemed to repeat similar patterns when he faced adversities – to think about how he could resolve problems largely independently.

Michael had a similar ethnic background. He spent his early years growing up in an English-speaking household in Singapore. Just before high school, he moved to Australia.

He recalls a situation at school.

> These kids came up to me and they said "Yo – do you speak English?" My immediate response in my head

as an 11-year-old was, wow, you know, look at them being discriminatory. [This was] quickly followed by a second thought, which was, well, maybe they just want to know me, right? And then the third thought was, don't they know that everyone in Singapore speaks English? Almost everyone in Singapore speaks English. So, it's kind of three very distinct thoughts, one after the other.

Michael recalls the kids were curious about him; however, he eventually became a good friend with them and had a good school experience overall. He learnt from that incident that we all have pre-conceptions about situations. His leadership style is that he builds long-term trusted relationships with his clients and peers.

Ben and Michael, who both have similar ethnic backgrounds, became successful partners in Big 4 firms. Yet, both approached similar situations in their adolescence in quite different ways. Michael's story wasn't in line with the more typically reported stories of people with culturally diverse backgrounds who are picked on at school and react negatively to the situation.

Pondering further, I realised that there might be a lot more to how Asian-Australian leaders become leaders than working hard and having sponsors within their organisations.

I wondered whether their experiences in early childhood with their parents impacted how they dealt with stressful situations in life and at work. Could their family experiences have also shaped their experiences and relationships with peers? What else aided them in succeeding?

I drilled deeper into their stories further. I concluded that there could be additional influences at play that help us understand how culturally diverse leaders succeeded in the workplace.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

This book explores how people like Ben and Michael became leaders and seeks to understand their journeys and their experiences of resolving identity conflicts on the way. It also examines their experiences in the organisations in which they work. Finally, incorporating my research findings and leveraging my experience as a business leader and diversity practitioner, the book suggests practical recommendations for aspiring culturally diverse leaders. It also provides a roadmap for fostering culturally diverse leadership in organisations.

Feel free to read the book in its entirety if you are less familiar with the topics covered. Alternatively, deep-dive into different parts of the book if you already have an awareness of specific topics.

The book is divided into three parts.

Part I, Laying the Foundations, introduces some of the concepts I will explore in this book. It examines identities in multicultural nations and efforts by companies to increase their cultural diversity at work to date.

Part II, Lessons from Culturally Diverse Leaders who Smashed the Bamboo Ceiling, delves into the career progression of successful Asian-Australian leaders. It looks at how they manage the various tensions and paradoxes they face in the organisations in which they work. It also explores how their early childhood experiences and adult attachment styles impact their career paths.

I conclude with Part III, which provides a Roadmap for Fostering Culturally Diverse Leadership in Organisations, leveraging my Career Progression Model for Culturally Diverse Leaders. I share what individuals can do to super-charge their careers at work and provide a roadmap for driving organisational change towards greater culturally diverse leadership. Finally, I propose that fostering culturally diverse leadership in organisations will require an ecosystem approach.

Chapter summary

- Culturally diverse leadership is essential for all organisations. Many companies have recognised its importance in supporting their business outcomes and have enhanced their efforts to improve the cultural diversity of their workforces. However, to date, workplace cultural diversity initiatives in many multicultural nations have not gone far enough. Few people with culturally diverse backgrounds have reached their business' highest echelons, particularly those of Asian ethnicity. Further, many of their organisations remain focused on improving gender diversity.
- Often, historical context and institutional illogics in organisations inhibit change. For instance, the unique history of Asian-Australians and race in Australia is frequently an unspoken topic that may hinder real improvement.
- Organisations need to consider using a different lens to understand the potential blockers to change and identify innovative solutions to increase the cultural diversity of their leadership.

Questions to ask yourself and your team members

Yourself

- What does diversity and inclusion mean to me personally?
- To what extent is diversity and inclusion in the workplace important to me? Why?

Your team members

- What is our view on the effort to date by our organisation to increase the diversity of our leadership? What has influenced or inhibited its progress to date?
- What elements of diversity are important in our organisation?
- What are our initial views on what more could be done to foster culturally diverse leadership in our organisation?

NOTES

1 The 'bamboo ceiling' describes the barriers some people of Asian ethnicity believe they face when seeking leadership positions in the workplace in Western organisations.
2 The term 'partner' refers to a senior position within professional services firms (PSFs). 'Partnerships' are the ownership collectives formed by PSFs to carry out work for clients. Historically, PSFs were set up as legal partnerships. The term has remained, even though many have been incorporated as corporations. Most PSFs retain features such as using the title 'partner', their profit-sharing status, and the partnership ethos of 'being there for one another'.
3 In this book, I may use the word 'diversity' without 'inclusion'. However, increasing diversity also requires a simultaneous focus on inclusion.
4 The names and other identifiers of some of the leaders I interviewed for this book have been changed and disguised to protect their anonymity. I am deeply indebted to them for their generosity and courage in telling me their stories.

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