

# The Model Minority Myth: Three Asian Leaders' Perspectives

The model minority myth stereotypes Asian, South Asian and Pacific Islander Americans as a monolithic group that is smart, good at math, hard-working and, therefore, more academically and economically successful than other underrepresented groups. But, like all stereotypes, the model minority myth masks the different experiences across this highly diverse group and can lead others to make inaccurate assumptions about Asians' interests and abilities or underplay the challenges that they face.

To further explore how Asian Americans experience the myth in their careers, the Asian, South Asian and Pacific Islander (ASAPI) Employee Resource Group at Spencer Stuart hosted a panel discussion with three prominent and highly successful Asian American business leaders. Jen Gerney, a Spencer Stuart consultant, leader of the Philadelphia office and a member of the ASAPI ERG, shared a bit of her personal story as someone who is biracial (half-Chinese and half-Caucasian) and moderated the discussion with panelists:

- » Deborah Liu, Chief Executive Officer of Ancestry
- » Vik Malhotra, Former Chairman of the Americas for McKinsey & Company
- » Bob Pragada, Chief Executive Officer of Jacobs



For a more detailed exploration of the model minority myth, read Spencer Stuart's ASAPI ERG's original piece: [Confronting the Model Minority Myth](#)

## Finding their paths

Deb Liu's parents immigrated to New York in the 1960s to attend college. A new job brought them to South Carolina, where Liu grew up. She graduated from Duke University and later headed to Stanford for her MBA and to pursue her dream to work in technology. Liu joined PayPal when it was a startup with just a few hundred people and eventually moved to eBay and then Facebook in its early days. "I've just lived out the American dream in so many different ways because of my experience. I learned so much from that experience of being really different and finding my place."

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Vik Malhotra was raised in India for the first 16 years of his life, spent a couple years in Cyprus to finish his schooling and headed to the UK for undergraduate studies at London School of Economics. After working in London for a few years, Malhotra came to the U.S. to attend business school at Wharton. He has spent his career at McKinsey, first focusing on the financial services sector and moving into practice and firm leadership roles. Since then, he has served on McKinsey's board of directors for 12 years and recently co-authored a book called *CEO Excellence*. "In the last decade in particular, I've had a really deep interest around the whole topic of leadership excellence, which has a huge development component to it."

Like Liu, Bob Pragada was the child of immigrant parents. His father came to the U.S. in the early 1960s as part of a program to attract engineers and scientists to support NASA's mission to land on the moon. Unfortunately, he died young, leaving Pragada's mom as a single parent. When Pragada was a young student, his mother encouraged him to pursue his education in a military academy. To do that, they concluded, he would have to get excellent grades and play sports. He did and became one of the first Indian American graduates from the U.S. Naval Academy, which started his career in the Corp of Engineers and Navy. "I had an unbelievable experience from there, went around the world during the first 10 years my career serving both Naval and Marine Corps installations and NATO bases as an engineer, project manager and design engineer and learned about cultures all around the world." He left service for the private sector, joining Jacobs in 2005, and was promoted to the C-suite several years later and named CEO in fall of 2022.

## An early focus on conforming and finding their place

A common theme from our panelists was their experience being the “first” or “only” in many environments, whether as the only woman executive of color in a room or the first Indian American in the Naval Academy. Early in their careers, they acknowledged being pre-cast into roles based on others’ expectations.

“When we moved to South Carolina, my dad said to me, ‘You might be the first and only Asian that a lot of people meet, and they’re going to judge a lot of people based on how you act,’” Liu recalls. “I remember thinking a lot about that when I was growing up and how do I conform? How do I look like I belong. How do I stay quiet? How do I do all the things so that people won’t judge me negatively? When you’re the other, you’re often trying to conform. The word ‘assimilate’ comes up a lot in our culture.”

For Malhotra, conformity played out in a few ways. “I showed up with a good old fashioned Indian accent, and I forced myself into trying to speak the best educated British English you could come across at Oxford University.” He also shortened and anglicized his name from Vikram to Vik. In time, he came to regret having made these changes to conform. In addition, he also confronted another element of the model minority myth: assumptions about what Asians are good at — for example, math, science and other technical disciplines — and what they are not — such as people leadership. “Even at a sophisticated place like McKinsey, when I first showed up in 1986, there was absolutely the assumption that, as an Indian, you must be great at analytics and an awesome problem solver,” Malhotra recalls. It took years to be recognized for his abilities in managing relationships and counseling CEOs and other leaders. “That was a real journey, and I had to fight my way through that barrier in many ways.”

As he looks back, Pragada also acknowledges his efforts to fit in, even if he didn’t think about it like that at the time. “Things like the model minority myth weren’t talked about in the seventies and eighties. It was more about conformity and assimilation and in wanting to be accepted. That’s human nature. It never made us any less proud of what our heritage was and what we learn from our heritage. Today I feel a bit guilty that I didn’t celebrate my heritage more when I was a kid. I didn’t even think about it. I thought about just surviving.”



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DEBORAH LIU  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF ANCESTRY

## Embracing inclusion and diversity in their own firms

Now, as top leaders of their respective companies, how do Liu, Malhotra and Pragada think about inclusion and diversity in their own organizations, and what are they doing to strengthen both?



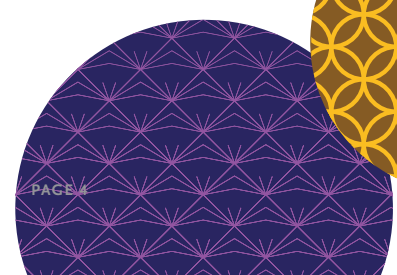
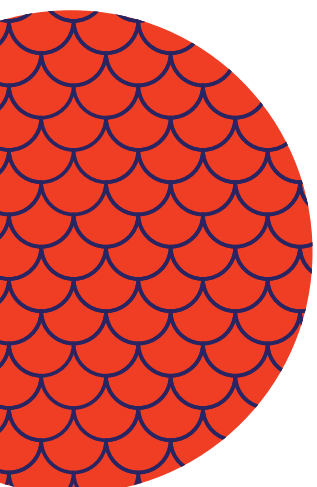
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**BOB PRAGADA**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF JACOBS

"One of the challenges is that if we don't realize how diversity can make us better, then we don't focus on it. If we don't focus on it, it doesn't happen," Liu said. "At Ancestry, we're building a product globally for people of many, many different backgrounds. And if we don't have those voices at the table, if we don't challenge each other and make each other better, we're not going to have the best product, the best teams or the best marketing." Once an organization recognizes the connection between having diverse perspectives and serving customers better, it can focus on removing barriers to greater diversity: setting goals, identifying obstacles and creating plans and programs for attracting people from different backgrounds. "It's really changed the way we look at the world — and everything from how we recruit, how we source talent, the locations we have people in — and given us an opportunity to hire people we never have approached before," said Liu.

For Pragada, the ultimate goal of having people with different backgrounds and life experiences is having cognitive diversity in the organization. "What we are as a company and what we bring to our clients is our intellectual capital. If we can't bring the best of the best from all over the world, then we're not doing the best that we can for our clients, and we're not having a positive impact in the world."

It is the lack of belief in the value of diversity that holds back progress, Pragada argues. When leaders don't truly believe that diverse perspectives make the business better and stronger, it's easy to rationalize and make excuses for why you can't hire people with different backgrounds. Arguing against the common rationalizations, Pragada recalls the words of former Merck board chair, Ken Frazier: "If we're not finding enough Black engineers or women engineers, that's our fault. We're not looking hard enough.' Part of that is belief."



Building on that comment, Liu said: “We’re still hearing things like, ‘I would hire more diverse teams, but I don’t want to lower the bar.’ That literally says that you believe that people who are diverse or bring a different point of view are worse than every other person who brings the same majority point of view. When I hear comments on panels like, ‘If they were only good diverse people, I would hire them,’ I think, ‘Are you really looking hard enough?’”

Malhotra adds, “There’s a body of research that suggests that diverse leadership teams and diverse boards lead to better performance, or at least are correlated with better performance.” But there is a lot more work to do to increase the diversity of leadership pipelines. “There is so much more to do, particularly when you think about the funnel. There is a lot of diversity coming out of college, and business schools or law schools, but by the time you get to the C-suite, and you look at the representation of people of diverse backgrounds or women in C-suites and boardrooms, we’re still very much in the early stages.”



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**VIK MALHOTRA**  
FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE AMERICAS FOR  
MCKINSEY & COMPANY

## Advice for allies and advocates seeking to best support Asian Americans, South Asians and Pacific Islanders

Allies — and better yet, advocates — can serve as mentors or sponsors, sharing advice and using their influence and connections to open doors and remove barriers to advancement. They can provide feedback about how certain behaviors might be interpreted and encourage Asians to take risks they might hesitate to otherwise — for example, trying for a new role or high-profile assignment sooner than they might feel ready. They can call out bias when they see it; if biased comments about Asians arise when they are not in the room, these allies and advocates can step up to point out the use of detrimental stereotypes or false assumptions.

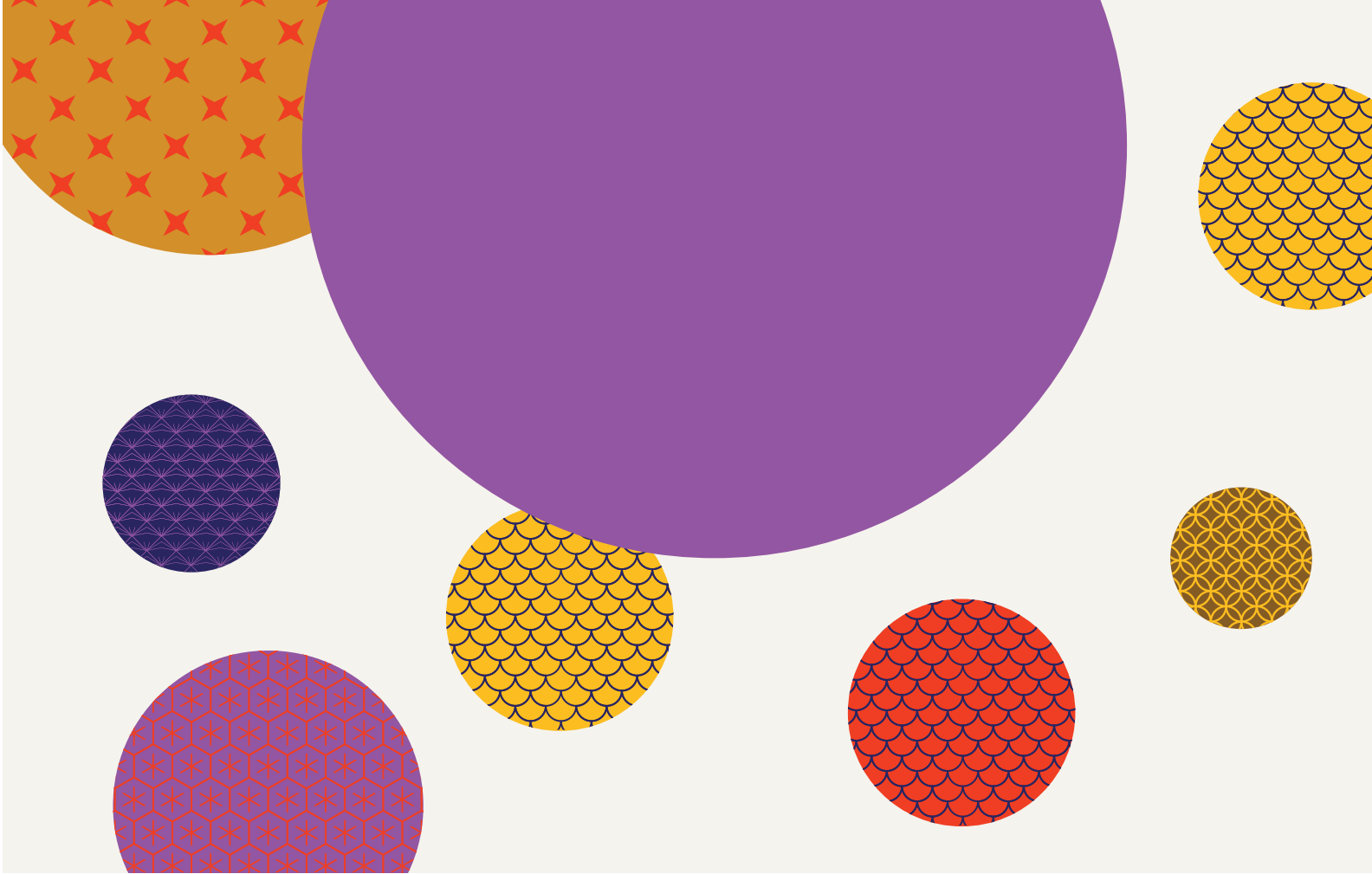
“Mentorship and sponsorship were absolutely key to enabling me to blossom and lead and be myself in many ways,” Malhotra said. “I really benefited from three or four people who believed in me and said, ‘This young man’s got some potential, and I’m going to give him that opportunity. I’m forever grateful for that.’” Liu had a similar story: “[Spencer Stuart consultant] Jim Citrin called me and asked me to interview for a public company CEO position, and I asked him, ‘Why me?’ And he said, ‘Why not you?’ I realized that it never occurred to me that I could do this, and it was because of that experience that led me to where I am today.”

Being empathetic and supportive in acknowledging the challenges an Asian colleague is facing also can be powerful, according to Liu. “I had seven managers in two-and-a-half years and never got promoted. My seventh manager said to me, ‘I just want to tell you that I see you. I see what your struggles are.’ He said his wife is Asian and his kids are likely to grow up more like me than him. He just acknowledged that it was hard,” Liu recalls. “So much of being an ally is to say, ‘I see some of the struggles you have. I acknowledge them. I educated myself, and I’m here to help and open doors for you.’ That has been so powerful for me.”

And sometimes, allies can provide the “tough love” that helps identify solutions to problems, Pragada says. “Sometimes just understanding and acknowledging the challenges without having to have the solution or the answer to what the person might be challenged with is a huge assistance.”



Members of the ASAPI ERG and Spencer Stuart more broadly deeply appreciated hearing the personal narratives of Deb Liu, Vik Malhotra and Bob Pragada. The very relatable experiences they shared struck a chord with us, and served as a reminder that even these senior leaders have had to overcome challenges to get where they are. Their inspiring stories reinforce the idea that representation matters, and we all have a role to play in creating inclusive work cultures.



## About Spencer Stuart

At Spencer Stuart, we know that leadership has never mattered more. We are trusted by organizations around the world to help them make the senior-level leadership decisions that have a lasting impact on their enterprises, on their stakeholders and the world around them. Through our executive search, board and leadership advisory services, we help build and enhance high-performing teams for select clients ranging from major multinationals to emerging companies to nonprofit institutions.

Privately held since 1956, we focus on delivering knowledge, insight and results through the collaborative efforts of a team of experts — now spanning more than 70 offices, over 30 countries and more than 50 practice specialties. Boards and leaders consistently turn to Spencer Stuart to help address their evolving leadership needs in areas such as senior-level executive search, board recruitment, board effectiveness, succession planning, in-depth senior management assessment, employee engagement and many other facets of culture and organizational effectiveness, particularly in the context of the changing stakeholder expectations of business today. For more information on Spencer Stuart, please visit [www.spencerstuart.com](http://www.spencerstuart.com).

