



UNDERSTANDING THE EAST ASIAN INTERVIEW STYLE

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Question: Why do East Asians have a difficult time getting into upper management?

Answer: East Asians, Latinos, and other folks who have been raised with strong traditional values (including white ethnics who grew up in hierarchical families) are generally reluctant to toot their own horn during job interviews. As part of their culture, they are taught that modesty is important, and that their work speaks for itself.

Moreover, they may have been instructed to “know their place” and to behave in strict accordance with their role and position.

They may even have been taught that the person in charge is the one who manages an employee’s career. This includes defining the employee’s current responsibilities and taking the lead on the employee’s career growth and development.

By contrast, however, mainstream U.S. culture places individuals in charge of their own career. This expectation is rooted in U.S. Anglo values of self-reliance and individual self-determination, and is exemplified by the saying, “God helps those who help themselves.” This means individuals are encouraged to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that their work is appropriately recognized and rewarded.

An interviewer, therefore, generally expects interviewees to play up their accomplishments and to behave in ways that display their individual strengths and leadership skills. But this expectation runs counter to a traditional East Asian person’s value system, which teaches individuals to play down their individual accomplishments and to demonstrate they can function within the group as a valuable team player.

Moreover, because East Asians often believe that work speaks for itself, they may assume the panel has studied their record and therefore knows what they have done.

Example: When a traditional East Asian woman was asked to tell about a time when she did something she was very proud of, she responded modestly, and with loyalty to her supervisor. She began by saying “Thanks to my boss, and thanks to my team, we were able to....” After she left, the mainstream Anglo panel of interviewers decided that she was a hard worker but not a self-starter and definitely not leadership material. But these characterizations misrepresented the East Asian woman’s behavior. What they saw as “lacking self-confidence” was, from the East Asian woman’s perspective, simply her way of showing modesty, respect for hierarchy and role and commitment to the group.

So what should members of each cultural group do to establish an appropriate middle ground?

It is not reasonable to expect East Asians to transform themselves suddenly into mainstream Anglos when they go on a job interview. That is especially difficult given the power differential in a structured interview. However they should talk more about their individual accomplishments,

even though they may have to overcome some of their modesty to do so.

At the same time, it is important for interview panels to be diverse racially and ethnically and aware of how different cultures behave in a structured interview. After all, if traditional East Asians are the most qualified and are repeatedly overlooked, they will begin quietly to look elsewhere.

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