



Things NOT to Say to Asian Americans

1 “You speak English well. Where did you learn it?”

“I should [speak English well] because I was born here and it’s my first language,” says Jennifer “Jae” Pi’ilani Requiró, a Filipino American and national manager of diversity and inclusion for Toyota Financial Services.

Often, as in Requiró’s case, parents who are immigrants do not teach their children their native tongue in order to ensure their children assimilate into American culture. Requiró’s parents did not teach her Tagalog, the Philippines’ native language. “I’m Filipino American, of course I speak English,” says Requiró.

2 “You need to improve your communication skills.”

“Just because a person has an accent

— and possible appearance — that’s different than the mainstream” people assume they can’t communicate, explains Dr. Rohini Anand, senior vice president and global chief diversity officer of Sodexo. But this is not in fact the case.

Linda Akutagawa, a Japanese American and CEO and president of Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP), noted that with globalization, there are increasing numbers of professionals who speak English with accents. And this can become an issue during performance reviews. However, many times, Asian employees are simply told they need to improve their communication skills but are not given any elaboration on what that means.

“No one wants to come straight out and address the accent,” Akutagawa

says. “It’s a two-way street: The manager has to think about what they’re doing to listen fully and be present in conversations.”

3 “You’re not Asian, you’re from India.”

“Asian American” is a general term for Asians and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) living in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau defines Asian as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.”

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander is defined as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of



Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.”

4 “Asians are good workers but seldom want to become leaders.”

There’s a strong stereotype that while Asians are good individual performers, they are not leadership material, according to Akutagawa. As a result, she says, there is an unconscious bias that prevents Asians from being considered for more senior-level positions.

For example, Requirio recalls an anecdote someone shared with her: “After voicing her opinion in a meeting, my colleague’s male manager said to her, ‘You’re not like my Asian wife. You

speak up.’ It is hard to forget a story like that.”

Anand says the issue lies in a lack of cultural competence. Many Asian Americans with strong non-Western cultural roots might have a more quiet leadership style than what is considered mainstream. The solution? Draw attention to a variety of successful leaders and management styles.

5 “Where are you from?” “No, where are you really from?”

Aside from the fact that the question already implies that an Asian is an outsider, repeating it is even more offensive. Akutagawa says, “I get the

question only every so often, but it’s frequent enough to remind me that stereotypes are there.”

“How often do you go home?” also should be avoided. Requirio says her typical response is: “I am from the Monterey Bay Area. I can drive there in about five hours,” even though she knows this isn’t what the person meant.

More Things NOT to Say:

- “You don’t look very Asian.”
- “You all look alike.”
- “Are you a bad driver?”