

# To get ahead, get out of your comfort zone

Visible minorities can do a lot to sidestep perceived barriers in the workplace, dean advises

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Yim Chan found comfort in discovering other Asian immigrants with whom she could identify working in her department when she moved to Canada from Malaysia in 1979 and took a computer lab job at IBM Canada Ltd.

But she resisted the temptation to confine her relationships within that narrow clique.

"I knew it was important to go beyond my own minority group, and network and get advice from a wider perspective to help me prepare to move up in my career," Ms. Chan says.

Evidently, that was the right thing to do. In the 28 years since, she has had 15 promotions, including this year being named chief privacy officer for Markham, Ont.-based IBM Canada, with a second role as global privacy executive for the Armonk, N.Y.-based parent company, International Business Machines Corp.

Ms. Chan says such networking was one strategy that helped her overcome the barriers that many visible minority managers and executives who responded to a groundbreaking survey released this week said they have encountered in their climb up the corporate ladder.

The study, *Career Advancement in Corporate Canada: A Focus on Visible Minorities*, found that many professionals from visible minorities have perceived a lack of fairness in career advancement processes, along with an absence of role models, inequality in performance standards and fewer high-visibility assignments sent their way than their white colleagues.

The results were based on the experiences of 12,000 non-minority managers and executives as well as 4,500 who identified themselves as visible minorities. The respondents had an average work experience of 20 years in Canada.

While the report recommended that employers address the issues, minority employees themselves can do a lot to sidestep or avoid the barriers, advises Wendy Cukier, associate dean and founder of Ryerson University's Diversity Institute, which did the study along

with diversity research company Catalyst Canada.

The most critical barriers that showed up in the study revolve around being excluded from office networks, and a lack of mentoring and encouragement from management.

"But these are things that can be developed informally, and there is nothing to stop you from picking up the phone and asking for advice, from approaching someone at a meeting or inviting someone out to lunch," Ms. Cukier advises.

Most people are actually happy to help if asked, she says. And such approaches will also help overcome another barrier: learning the informal processes that aren't apparent in organization charts, she says.

For instance, many decisions about staffing new projects and promotions are made before opportunities are officially announced, she says.

Cultural differences may make people reticent to ask questions or seek advice because they worry about not seeming competent or plugged in, Ms. Cukier says. "But if you don't ask, no one is likely to tell you about opportunities."

While they are asking, they should also tell.

Many members of visible minorities are reluctant to blow their own horns, which trips up those unfamiliar with the Canadian way of doing things, says Lisa Mattam, principal of The Mattam Group in Toronto, which does training for new Canadians on how to work in a Canadian environment.

"In North America, we are comfortable with self-promotion. But in Asian and even Canadian aboriginal communities, it is not commonplace to take personal credit for an accomplishment; you always give credit to the team," Ms. Mattam says.

In many other cultures, there is also an assumption that experience speaks for itself and other people know what people do by their title, Ms. Mattam says.

That's not necessarily the case in Canada, so it's important to remind superiors about contributions and accomplishments, and take deserved credit for them, she says.

Assertiveness training can help, she suggests. "In many other cultures, brevity and modesty are cardinal virtues," Ms. Mattam says. But, "in North America, we place a premium on self-confidence and assertiveness. If you don't develop an outgoing approach, you may not get the attention you need to get recognition and be the winning candidate when interviewing for new positions," she says.

Through it all, people must stay true to themselves, Ms. Cukier cautions. In fact, people have things to offer just by being from somewhere else, she says.

"As a member of a visible minority, you can work so hard to fit in that you feel nervous about talking with colleagues about the unique knowledge and different approaches you may have," Ms. Cukier says.

"But one of your unique strengths is an understanding of another culture and a different perspective," she advises.

"That's going to make you more valuable as the economy becomes increasingly diverse and global."

### **Stretch yourself**

**Cultural differences create potential barriers to career advancement for members of visible minorities. Here are tips to get around them from Ryerson University's Diversity Institute:**

#### **Set targets**

Come up with long-term career targets and a timetable for meeting them.

#### **Fill gaps**

Identify education and

experiences you are lacking

to meet your goals, and develop plans to obtain them.

#### **Understand norms**

Social rules are often unspoken but are key to getting along well in an organization. Pay attention to and emulate those standards.

#### **Get into the loop**

Visible minorities often feel

excluded from social interaction and gossip that can illuminate

opportunities. Make an effort to join in.

#### **Nurture networks**

Relationships in your own ethnic group can provide support but networking across the organization and industry is crucial for making connections that lead to career gains.

### **Find a mentor, be a mentor**

Develop a supportive relationship with someone higher in the organization who you want to emulate. Don't restrict yourself to your own ethnic group.

### **Take credit**

Don't assume your résumé or track record speak for themselves. Ensure that colleagues and supervisors know your contributions.

### **Ask**

People often feel constrained by culture or personal qualities. Make requests for information, advice and help you need.

### **Stretch yourself**

Don't be limited by fear of the unfamiliar or being embarrassed. Moving out of your comfort zone is a sign of enthusiasm.

### **See differences**

#### **as strengths**

You have unique knowledge, perspectives and insights, and communicating them makes you valuable to the team.

### **Don't rise**

#### **to perceived slights**

You cannot control how other people treat you, only how you react to them.