

How I Owned My Power As An Asian American Woman In Law

By **Debra Wong Yang** (August 22, 2022, 11:02 AM EDT)

As a female Asian American senior partner, I wanted to share some of the bumps in the road that I have had to overcome, with the hope that the lessons I've learned will help other women as they embark on and progress in their own careers.

I feel it's important now more than ever for women, including young Asian American and Pacific Islander women and other women of color, to hear from those who helped blaze the trail before them.

And while we may not stand in the same shoes, have the same roles or share the same background, I hope that some aspects of my story will help women as they move forward in their careers.

I graduated from law school in 1985 at a time when women of color were simply not widely represented in the legal profession. There were very few role models who looked like me, and I saw very few women of color in positions of power.

Despite these barriers, I rose to become the U.S. attorney for the Central District of California in May 2002. I was the first Asian American woman to hold that position in the country.

Around the time of my appointment, Asian media outlet Goldsea ran a story with the tagline, "Debra Yang overcame a traditional Chinese upbringing to prove herself as America's most powerful practicing female attorney."

While I would dispute the "most powerful" framing, what I found most interesting was that this article painted a very different — or, at least incomplete — picture compared to what I'd actually been through:

- Nowhere did it mention the many hardships I had to overcome;
- Nowhere did it talk about the obstacles in my path or address what it was like to feel like an outsider;
- Nowhere did it discuss the day-to-day decisions and sacrifices I had to make;



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- And nowhere did it address the subject of bravery — bravery to inhabit a profession, a field where most did not look like me — not by my gender, not by my race.

I'll note that part of the article's tagline was correct — I did grow up in a very traditional Chinese upbringing. In fact, I grew up in the heart of Los Angeles's Chinatown, and I was raised in a very traditional household with rules such as:

- Don't speak unless spoken to first;
- Never disagree with or talk back to an elder;
- Behave, conform and don't bring attention to yourself;
- Be responsible for others, as my actions reflected on many others beyond myself; and
- Never bring shame onto my family's name.

As a young girl, these were the rules I lived by. Only later in life would I find that these same rules would present professional challenges for me.

Throughout my early career, it was difficult for me to speak up. As a young lawyer, I found myself unable to deal with the onslaught of aggressive communication that often came with depositions, or even with legal meetings where everyone yelled out ideas, one on top of the other.

What I realized was that my inability to stand up for myself did not only hurt me — it also hurt my clients.

With time, I learned that it was easier for me to ask for things on behalf of others or to speak for others, and this helped me overcome my personal fears. Thinking about how I could help others allowed me to push aside the fear of embarrassing myself, and shifted my focus instead to how I could find solutions and get around obstacles.

I also read countless books on leadership, and today, there are so many resources available to help everyone find and embrace their own authentic style. Eventually, we all find a voice — my advice is to just make sure the one you ultimately adopt is actually yours.

Owning Your Power

In my career, I have had to overcome obstacles because I did not represent what a leader looked like at that time.

I was appointed to the bench at age 37. I felt fortunate to be appointed at such a relatively young age; the only problem was that I looked much younger than I was back then and consequently, litigants in court did not always take me seriously.

When I first took the bench, I found that the lawyers would question my rulings, challenge me with questions, and continue to argue their positions way beyond me asking them to stop.

I quickly realized that I had to get control of my courtroom. I had to figure out a way to fix it and, eventually, I did.

Through trial and error, I found that by familiarizing myself with the key facts of each case, I could push back on litigants' analysis. Once the attorneys saw my command of the facts, and heard me rule on the matters, they realized that I meant business.

They started focusing more on arguing their best case, instead of challenging my statements and rulings. Another strategy I employed was learning to better time-manage counsel: I often began hearings by outlining my thoughts, questions and areas of concern for the attorneys.

This pushed them to remain laser focused on the facts and issues in the case — rather than questioning my statements and rulings — and it had the added benefit of sharpening the opinions I later issued.

All of this taught me an important lesson: Just because you are in charge doesn't mean that others will treat you accordingly.

As a leader, you will have to find solutions to people questioning your leadership. I urge you to think through the problem and search for creative ways to solve it.

The answer may not be obvious, it may not have been tried before, or it may be very simple. But, turn the problem around and around, until you start to look at it in a different way.

Many of you have mentors that can advise you and share ideas. But the process of sitting down, thinking it through and doing what works best for you is ultimately what should guide you. It will be more genuine — and comfortable — because it is coming from you.

Bravery

Sometimes when you take a leap and ascend to the highest levels of leadership, you will encounter unimaginable bumps and challenges.

Think of it this way: The more rarefied the air, the more others are fighting to get it. And that's where bravery comes in.

By bravery, I mean taking charge of your path and using it to aim for higher goals that you — and not others — had previously set for yourself. And to know that your voice is powerful. You have the ability to influence others.

One of my acts of bravery included the decision to join Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP. In 2006, the doors to elite firms weren't widely opened to female attorneys of color at a senior level. When I looked around, I also noticed that there were few women of color at large law firms.

I realized that I had an opportunity to make it easier for others like myself if I could help push through that glass ceiling. As I often say, going through glass ceilings doesn't matter at all if no one is behind you.

Today, there are still many obstacles that remain for women, especially women of color, to advance in this profession. There are glass ceilings to be broken and there are systemic changes to be made.

I yearn to see companies push themselves to more deeply weave diversity and inclusion into all aspects of their business. Given the challenges many mothers faced during the pandemic, I would also love to

see law firms become more innovative in how they support women with young children as they climb the ranks to partnership.

Notwithstanding, what sustains me is the bravery that I see in countless women of color in the law every day.

I see it in the women of color at law firms as they blaze their own trails to success. I see it in the Asian American and Pacific Islander women who are on the front lines of combating anti-Asian hate. I see it in the changing faces of leadership at companies and government where women of color are increasingly occupying seats at the table.

There is so much more work to be done, but there is also an abundance of bravery happening in this profession.

My wish for each of you is that you will be brave when facing self-doubts, challenges and obstacles. That you will dig deep, reach out if needed, do the research, make the tough decision and not be afraid of losing.

As you travel on your path, you will find that your weaknesses may become your assets, your solutions may have to be rejiggered as you climb, and your life may take unexpected turns with joys and struggles, but you can always return to that grounding inner voice to guide you. That is what bravery is.

Ask yourself: Am I doing something that is important and meaningful to me?

You are also so very lucky. You don't have to do it on your own. You have institutions that are committed to supporting you on your journeys.

This is not easy work, but it is work that law firms in this profession need to undertake. For institutions, it's critically important to understand the experiences that all women, and especially women of color, in this profession face. That starts with proactively seeking out their experiences.

Question whether they occupy seats in leadership positions or at the partnership ranks, and how they are faring at all levels within the firm. Question whether their experiences are being lumped together.

And the same goes for the experiences of women of color within their own affinity groups. For example, with anti-Asian attacks on the rise, we had to have different conversations with our Asian American and Pacific Islander women, as their experiences are simply different than those of Asian American men.

The same goes for other minority women at the firm. It is important to recognize that experiences are not monolithic. We cannot declare success in advancing women if we do not advance all women.

Our profession solves hard problems every day, and I know that this is one issue that is complex — but it is solvable.

I encourage you all to use your voice to push your institutions to live up to the values and ideals that they have set to help you advance. And know that there are female leaders of color, like myself, who will support you every step of the way.

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