

Seeing Differently:

Celebrating Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month

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5-minute read



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In Korea, I'm a gyo-po. The term describes a Korean person who is perceived as different having lived in another country. I proudly carry that mantle. Over my life and career, I've taken on a multi-faceted cultural identity as a Korean Australian American.

At the age of ten, my family moved from the megacity of Seoul, Korea to a quiet suburb in Sydney, Australia.

During my childhood, I voraciously took in Aussie culture. At school, I learned to play rugby and was thrilled to be promoted to the 13-G team from 13-H in seventh grade. (To put that in perspective, the school fielded nine teams for that grade from 13-A to 13-I.) My glorious rugby career, though short lived, exemplified the degree to which I threw myself into the scrum of Australian life.

After university, America beckoned. It seemed more global, cosmopolitan, and just plain bigger, all qualities I was hungry for. With the support of many mentors, I was accepted into Harvard Business School and moved to Boston. After I got my MBA, I settled in Chicago and joined McKinsey & Co. I'm profoundly grateful to those who supported me in attaining these aspirations.

Even with these considerable advantages, I had concerns entering my career. As a Korean Australian starting out in corporate America in the early 2000s, I saw few Asian American leaders. Leadership profile assessments would also remind me that I am an introvert with a profile that is very different to the bold, charismatic business leaders that I observed in the



world around me. What were the opportunities for me to progress? Would people follow my leadership? I was keenly aware I lacked the shared cultural experiences that easily spark relationships. How could I build connections when many aspects of my adopted home's culture were foreign to me? In American sports banter, I particularly recognized being a fish out of water. While I became a die-hard baseball fan during the magical 2016 Chicago Cubs season, I don't feel passionate about March Madness, nor can I appreciate the intricacies of American football.

As I look back, I see that I've been incredibly fortunate that these doubts didn't deter me nor lead me to stumble. At critical stages of my career, I have had mentors and sponsors who invested their time, effort, and personal capital toward my development. My wife's support, counsel, and advice was a huge part of becoming more comfortable as a leader too. Their generosity allowed me to pursue increasingly senior leadership roles during my consulting and take on a multi-year investment to build a data and analytics capability from scratch. I have benefited tremendously from their encouragement and trust.

In time, my Australian accent slowly began to disappear, and I found a home in the U.S. at the intersection of insurance and data and analytics. Driving to Schaumburg, Illinois more than twenty years ago for the first day of a property casualty insurance company project, I had no idea that this was the start of a great journey that would take me to all parts of the world over the next two decades. (As an aside, when reviewing Korean business documents with Chinese han-ja characters, I would reach over to my Korean colleagues for help. We would chuckle that my command of Korean language stopped at fifth grade.)

Fast forward to today and I am leading the technology, data and analytics team for Vantage Risk, a specialty re/insurer that started in 2020 with a vision to empower underwriters with the tools and insights to "see risk differently." I consider myself lucky to be continuing my career journey with incredible professionals who are passionate about unlocking the potential of data, analytics, and technology in the insurance industry. The professional concerns that I had starting out have long faded, and I'm comfortable with simply being true to myself as a leader.

Identifying as Korean Australian American is a mouthful. I've now lived in the U.S. longer than anywhere else; time and family are increasingly tipping the scale toward American. Recent research (Pew Research 2021) states that there is no single "Asian American" experience. Each of our life's paths are unique and it gives me pause on whether there is anything I can offer from my own experience, given how much I have received from mentors, colleagues, team members and most importantly my family. With humility, to my fellow Asian American professionals that are navigating a multi-cultural identity in business, I offer my voice of encouragement to stay true to yourself and trust in the strength that comes from our multiple backgrounds.

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