

Things NOT to Say to Asian Americans in the Workplace



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

Often, parents who are immigrants do not teach their children their native tongue in order to ensure their children assimilate into American culture. And even if English is their second language, it is inappropriate to ask.

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.

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.

This should, however, go both ways. The person conducting the review should try to be more present and engaging in the conversation.

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. As a result, there is an unconscious bias that prevents Asians from being considered for more senior-level positions.

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 implying that an Asian is an outsider, repeating the question is even more offensive. “How often do you go home?” also should be avoided.

6 “Your people are so exotic-looking.”

This may very well be intended as a

compliment. However, it draws attention to the fact that this person somehow looks “different” from the majority of other people in the office. A good rule of thumb to follow not just for Asian co-workers but in any professional situation: leave physical appearance out of the conversation.

7 “What kind of Asian are you? It’s hard for me to tell because you all look alike.”

This connects to the “Where are you from” question in making that person feel like even more of an outsider — and the second part makes it that much more offensive. Avoid this question entirely.

More Things NOT to Say:

- “You don’t look very Asian.”
- “You all look alike.”
- “Are you a bad driver?”
- “You don’t act like any Asians I know.”
- “Why do you only hang out with Asians?”
- “What’s your *real* name?”