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LEAP Career Development Forum
Leadership, Excellence, Aspiration, Platform
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Welcome to **LEAP Insider**, the official newsletter of LEAP Career Development Forum

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Crashing the Self-Imposed Glass Ceiling At Corporate America

Recently LEAP conducted an exclusive interview with Dr. Yinuo Li (李一诺) over the phone in a late Friday evening right after she put her three kids into sleep. Huge thanks to Yinuo for taking time out of her busy schedule to speak to us and share her inspiring story and insightful thoughts to LEAP audience.

Yinuo Li, is often entitled “goddess (女神)” and “curve wrecker (学霸)” on the Internet. She is married for 14 years and a loving mother of three kids. In her spare time, she and her husband launched a WeChat publication Slavery Society (奴隶社会) in 2014 that has so far garnered over 250,000 followers. Professionally, she has been the Director of China Program in Bill& Melinda Gates Foundation since May 2015, after a 10-year stellar career in McKinsey & Co. Besides these notable accomplishments in both life and career, she has a great endeavor and strong vision while working at Corporate America as a woman and an Asian.

However, Yinuo doesn’t like labeling herself either as a woman or an Asian, especially the prejudice that comes along with these identities. Instead, she has focused on empowering herself by audaciously improving herself little by little rather than chewing on those – what she called – “meaningless self-imposed labels”.

1

Women at Workplace

Lack of confidence was one of major challenges that Yinuo was facing at the beginning of her career at McKinsey, and even remained to some level after she became a partner.

“Statistics has shown that women’s self-

assessment is often lower than the objective assessment, while men in general perceive themselves better than who they really are,” Yinuo said. For example, if comparing McKinsey female employees’ self-assessment scores to their clients’ evaluation scores, the latter is often higher than the former, while it’s the opposite to male employees. The fundamental cause of this difference is lack of self-confidence for women in general. Asian or not Asian.

To correctly posit yourself at workplace and build self-confidence often require you to step out of the “comfort zone”. This is easier said than done. Yinuo offers two pieces of advice:

1. Start with small things, such as setting a daily quota on how many times you will speak in the next meeting or push yourself to tilt towards doing/saying something rather than not. It also means “lower risk” so you have less stress doing them, yet can practice being more “out there” in the meantime.

2. Find mentors and make your intention clear to them, so there is some “external accountability” for your effort. Usually, your intention will earn you support, courage and force which will become positive enforcement.

2 Chinese at Workplace

For many Asian Americans who are non-native English speakers at Corporate America, their first challenge may always be the language and culture difference. Things like joining a conversation about American football they rarely watch seem to be a big barrier that is holding them back from fitting into the American culture.

However, with extensive working experience at McKinsey where she interfaced with many other international corporations, Yinuo has a different perspective into this issue, and that is, the employee demographics in most American companies is so diverse that so called “main stream” might be a false concept, and the “glass ceiling” can be self-imposed at times.

"Let's take 'white males' as an example," Yinuo said. "I've met many 'white males' in my life: a Russian Jew whose family fled



Yinuo and her son



Russia, a guy who grew up in poverty and became the first of his family going to college, and a gay from a catholic family who has battled for his faith and identity since he was a teenager. So if you go a step deeper, you will realize all people have their cultural and family history and their own struggles."

Thus, instead of putting walls against yourselves, you should try to learn about the people around you as individuals and connect with them at a personal level. "Getting to know them at this level helps build deep relationship and, in the professional setting, professional networks with a strong foundation," Yinuo suggested.

Yinuo also believes this is a core area where Indian Americans have a distinct strength. Lately there are many discussions about the rise of business leaders of Indian descent in Corporate America. Many of them received undergraduate education in India before coming to America like many of us. According to Yinuo, Indian people at workplace in general are more reflective, open, and with a natural inclination to connect with colleagues at a personal level. She thinks that such traits have served them well in this ethics group's rise in Corporate America.

3 Two Basic Yet Effective Solutions

To help women and Asians overcome their diffidence, crash the self-imposed glass ceiling, and achieve their professional success, Yinuo suggests that effective communication and working with a strong purpose are two key parts of the solution.

Yinuo rates communication skills in three competency levels (Refer to Tips of the Day for more details). Working with McKinsey for 10 years, she spent time on observing her colleagues and learning to improve her communication skills.

If you don't speak good English, practice it; if you don't know how to communicate, learn it. Simple as that. Don't blame your identities," she said.

Yinuo is painting at Gates Foundation event



Tips of The Day

Master effective communication in three incremental levels:

1. Have a voice - Speak up and express your point of view. Set small milestones to have a voice at workplace.

2. Speak with purposes. "Best communication is not about saying the right things or saying things right, it's about knowing what are the impact you want to have in your audience; and after your communication, you achieve that impact." So "begin with an end in mind" also applies in communication.

3. "Dance with the flow". Mastering the skill of being both "on the dance floor" as a communicator and "on the balcony" to observe the dynamic of the group is the next level in being an effective communicator. Being able to "read" the room, summarizing when needed, asking questions, offering a point of view, and taking a step back so the group does not lose the big picture, are all scenarios of applications of such a skill. This is a skill that can take a lifetime to master.

In addition, Yinuo thinks that a strong sense of purpose is what drives her success at workplace. “If you treat your job just as a job that pays the rent, there is only so far you can go.” She suggests to look for inspiration and to keep learning from your jobs and colleagues. Even if this is indeed just a job, find something that inspires you in doing this job – Is it a possibility to move to the next step? Is it a chance to learn a new area? Is it an opportunity to learn from a few great individuals? Or when you are becoming more senior, is it because something you are trying to build, or the next generation of young people you are trying to coach?

Speaking of career planning and advancement, Yinuo thinks there are 3 stages in one’s career development – “**to do**”, “**to build**”, and “**to coach**”. Along each stage there are plenty of opportunities to learn and to give back, and in this spirit Yinuo supports what **LEAP** is striving to do whole-heartedly and hope that many more professionals can be connected and also give back to younger generations of professionals in building a stronger Chinese community in the American professional scene.

About the Author

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11.07.2015

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CalTech, Pasadena

Surf Change, Sail Success

LEAP 4.0 Annual Conference



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About LEAP Career Development Forum

LEAP (Leadership, Excellence, Aspiration, Platform) Career Development Forum is a Los Angeles-based 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to building a trustworthy and sustained platform

for professional growth and career advancement of young Asian Americans and those from Asian countries currently studying or working in America in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and related fields. Launched in February 2013 as an educational program under CESASC (Chinese-American Engineers and Scientists Association of Southern California), LEAP was incorporated in June 2015 to become an independent organization with exclusive focus on establishing a resourceful and open platform to advocate outstanding leadership, encourage professional excellence, cultivate great aspiration, and provide job opportunities.



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