Bamboo ceiling: Re-evaluating the search for global Asian leaders

By Bertrand Leong

With 60 per cent of the world’s youth living in the Asia Pacific region, and 88 per cent of the next billion entrants to the middle class globally poised to come from Asia, it is almost a truism that the future of global economy lies in Asia. However, despite the sheer potential of the region, Asian representation in the top rungs of global remains in single digit percentage terms—a worrying statistic when compared to their Western counterparts.

This is a grousé commonly heard from global enterprises in human resource (HR), regional presidents, chief human resource officers (CHROs), and senior executives in the region. Despite the many leadership and mentoring programmes, and training and coaching interventions, why do efforts to yield global Asian leaders seem futile?

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), released a report titled The Global Asian Leader: From Local Star to Global CXO. It tackles tough questions about Asian underrepresentation in executive leadership, through in-depth interviews with 119 global CXOs. Asia Pacific Director of Research, Innovation, and Product Development, CCL Mr Sunil Puri identifies several takeaways from the report that help shed some light on the matter.

Biases and Lenses are Real
Biases, whether conscious or unconscious, are real. In most enterprises, the headquarter country culture tends to dominate. When you select your board of directors or look for a potential team member, you subconsciously look for a reflection of yourself in that person. “He/she should look like you, speak the same language, have grown up in a familiar city, gone to familiar schools, and so on. So it is only natural that we lean towards executives who look...”
spending two or more years outside one’s home country opens one’s mind to different possibilities. “The sooner you do it in your career, the better,” adds Mr. Puri. “There are fewer constraints on the executive side and on the personal front. There is also a lower cost of failure for the enterprise because you are going out as a manager, not as a chief executive.”

In terms of diversity, executives who had diverse experiences at the beginning of their careers could create a more conducive culture than the CXOs later in the organisation. They can empathise with different departments and cultures because they have been there and done that. Experiences do not just matter; but ‘when’ they happen in your career is almost as important as the experiences themselves.

**Culture and Power Distance**

If you have been in Asia long enough or are an Asian executive, think about the priority and values attached to harmony, religion, and relationships in this part of the world. Consider how leaders are greeted respectfully as ‘Khun’ in Thailand, ‘Po’ in the Philippines, ‘Pak’ or ‘Ibu’ in Indonesia, or ‘Shri’ in India.

Most countries in Asia have a higher power distance. This may be because of the culture, which focusses on the family as a ‘primary unit’ and therefore the role of elders. Or, religions (mainly Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism), which teach patience and respect to the father, or the ‘enlightened one’. It may also have its roots in the fact that the region has a deep colonial past. There are also social classes and structures in the society that lend to a hierarchy-driven social ‘fabric’. And, at least in a few countries in the region, monarchy played a key role in forming hierarchy-based structure.

“In a collectivist-hierarchy, ‘we’ is always more powerful than ‘I’. There is huge opinion on harmony and emphasis on relationships and networks. Who you know is almost always more important than what you know not just in Singapore but the most of Asia.”

Mr Sunil Puri expounds on the underlying reasons for the shortage of global Asian leaders. (CCL)

The takeaway here is that all of these things does not mean that an Asian executive is any less competitive. Different? Yes. Less competitive? No.

**Capabilities**

Asian leaders must refine five critical capabilities to become successful global leaders:

1. **Curiosity.** Form more diverse networks, be open to new experiences, culturally agile, and more comfortable in unfamiliar terrain. Learn new things, go to new countries, try new cuisines, and meet new people.

2. **Courage.** Be more proactive, assertive, adaptable, and resilient. Plucking up courage may mean knowing when to say ‘no’, creating and defending a business case in front of a senior audience, or dialoguing with your boss.

3. **Trust.** Establish and develop deep credibility of your authenticity and capability within and outside of the global enterprise. Be trusting of others and trustworthy yourself in order to strengthen critical relationships with your managers, directors, and teams.

4. **Strategic thinking.** Understand the organisation’s long-term strategy and come up with effective plans. Think global; think long-term.

5. **Influencing skills.** Being able to personally affect key stakeholders’ actions, decisions, and opinions in a matrixed, multi-geographical environment or complex organisational structure.

These together with other considerations from the report will help us identify the missing pieces and put the relevant structures in place to facilitate the development of global Asian leaders.