



TRUE MOSAIC RACIAL RECKONING SERIES

WHEN ALLIES NEED ALLIES:

*The Role of Care and Connection
in Creating Equity*

JULY 2021

FOREWORD

Is allyship a state of action, being, identity or a thing?

Maybe it's all of the above. Perhaps when realized, it's this most beautiful and intrinsic dimension of our relationships. Viewed through that lens, the multitude of articles written this past year wouldn't have been about how to be an ally. Rather, they would have been about how to be a friend, a colleague, a partner, a family member. They would have been about how to be a human being.

In other words, allyship is merely a word to describe a supportive relationship between humans whose experience of the world is different.

We live in a time that no longer affords us the privilege or time to mince words (talking around the truth is part of how we got here). So, I ask two questions of those who seek to be allies. The first is, "do you know how often I feel uncomfortable to maintain others' sense of comfort?" and the second is simply this, "do you know how to be in a relationship with me?"

In some cases, the answer is undoubtedly yes, and those relationships are the joy, armor and fuel that power and nourish us. This written piece by FleishmanHillard is one of the truest expressions of allyship I've had the benefit of receiving. It represents the pride and protection that comes from relationships where individuals are centered and free to be.

Thank you to the team at FleishmanHillard who created this space for Asian American Pacific Islanders to feel seen, not just when suffering required it, but always. It's an active and intentional state of humans needing humans; and a reminder that allies need allies too.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

When Allies Need Allies.....4

When “How Are You?” Is the Hardest Question.....6

When Organizations Harness Care and Connection to Create Equity.....8

Language to Support AAPI Inclusion.....10



WHEN ALLIES NEED ALLIES

The attention that resulted from the almost 3,000 incidents of anti-Asian hate and violence that were reported in 2020 was long overdue and didn't last long enough. At the height of the media storm, when we were inundated by gut-wrenching headlines – from Georgia to San Francisco – the racism targeting the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community was suddenly top of mind. Many were present, spoke out and scrambled to react and take some sort of action.

Some people did so from a place of genuine care and wanting to work toward allyship that was meaningful. Others may have acted to meet expectations and ensure they weren't that brand, leader or individual that glossed over what was happening and failed to engage when all were watching. Whatever our intentions, the result was that we collectively created a surge of conversation, much of it resurfacing decades of trauma, even as it increased awareness, understanding and empathy.

But then what?

A survey of AAPI community members conducted by FleishmanHillard's TRUE Global Intelligence demonstrates that concern for racism, discrimination and violence against the AAPI community spiked across both the general population and AAPI communities after the Georgia shooting spree in March, jumping 24 percentage points for each group.

We participated in the saturation of tweets, Instagram stories, corporate statements and internal emails to condemn hate, but in too many instances, we let that be the first and final interaction with the AAPI community. So much more was and is needed from friends, colleagues, employers and community members. Addressing hate and injustice when they are visible and plain for all to see should be the bare minimum – an act of the simplest human decency. But true allyship goes beyond this starting point to intentionally establish lifelong connections.

Our Asian American communities have consistently shown up as allies for other marginalized voices. Survey findings found that the AAPI community is more likely to address racism, discrimination and violence than the general population across the board – discrimination against marginalized communities in general (90% vs. 84%); against Asian Americans (90% vs. 81%); against the LGBTQ+ community (77% vs. 68%); against Black Americans (82% vs. 77%); and against women (91% vs. 86%).

The care and consideration inherent in that concern for others should prompt all of us to think about allyship the way many in our AAPI communities do – as less of a transaction and more of genuine relationship. Being a true ally means taking the time and investing emotional energy to create



WHEN ALLIES NEED ALLIES

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connections that allow for exploration of our different experiences precisely because they are centered in the humanity we have in common.

It's those connections and resulting relationships that enable us to show up when we're needed, not because it's the popular or expected thing to do, but because it's how we strive to treat all people.

Lack of Intent Doesn't Prevent Harm In Everyday Life

Our AAPI communities still need true allies that go beyond the basic condemnations of hate to challenge the day-to-day racially driven biases, generalizations, stereotypes and language that surround us even when we don't notice them.

When asked to select up to five words they associate with the AAPI community, both the general population and AAPI respondents selected the same top three from a list of 23 descriptors – “hard-working” (44% general population vs. 54% AAPI), “family-oriented”(35% vs. 42%) and intelligent (30% vs. 36%). Think about the fact that we're likely to associate that term with only a handful of the different cultures and experiences that comprise this richly diverse community, whose history and traditions trace back to, and span, more than 30 countries of East, Southeast, South Asia and the Pacific Islands.

Actions don't need to derive from an intention to harm in order to be harmful. Our responsibility as allies becomes a matter of practicing constant self-awareness to the best of our ability, calling ourselves out when we realize we are perpetuating harm, even in small ways. And it means getting past discomfort and fear to call others out too, respectfully but intentionally, so that harmful words or actions don't go unchecked.

True allyship is rooted in empathy and requires humility. It's listening, not so we can insert our own experiences and opinions into the conversation, but so we can seek to understand and personally connect with those we want to support. It's the one-on-one connections that serve as the best guide for determining when to speak out, when to ask questions, when to offer help or when to simply be present and listen.

If you, as an individual or a business, have not been as consistent or intentional in your engagement and allyship with the AAPI community, now is the time for action. It's an opportunity to re-commit to consistent progress, because if we're not constantly questioning ourselves and aiming to improve our actions and words, we're not doing it right.



WHEN “HOW ARE YOU?” IS THE HARDEST QUESTION

With ongoing instances of anti-Asian harassment and hate, it continues to be a difficult time for AAPI individuals. A time when a simple “how are you?” can not only become one of the hardest questions to answer, but also one of the most overwhelming for a community not used to seeing its own lived experience so visible to others.

Headlines and stories centering on AAPI experiences, faces and lives have never been so front and center as they have been during this past year. The attention and focus from concerned friends and colleagues can, in its intensity, become disorienting for AAPI individuals. How to answer a simple “how are you” when you’re not completely certain of the motivations of the person asking and when the truth is that you – like many people – are not OK?

FleishmanHillard’s TRUE Global Intelligence’s survey found that one-in-six AAPI respondents (17%) indicated the Stop Asian Hate movement has had a “severe” or “major” impact on their wellness or mental well-being. It’s important to pause here and understand that two things are true at once: racism will always be more harmful and traumatizing than any movement or effort to combat it and the fight to have others recognize your humanity – the mere notion that a fight is required to achieve that basic realization – can itself be a heavy weight to carry.

This nuance may feel counterintuitive to those who assume there are no drawbacks to any effort designed to deliver progress, but it does reflect a common experience among multiple marginalized communities who can experience additional stress or deep fatigue from the need to actively convince others of the validity or importance of their lives and experiences.

For those seeking to be allies, this realization should bring clarity to their role in advancing inclusion and equity – it is not about showing support or solidarity for the efforts the marginalized are making to attain fair and equitable treatment. Allies must be actively and consistently involved in the work and in fact, on some occasions it is they, and not the marginalized communities they seek to support, who must lead the charge. Only then can the emotional weight of creating change be shared and the reality of equity and inclusion be achieved.

Stereotypes and Stigmas Aren’t Without Consequence

It’s no surprise then that AAPI community members were twice as likely as the general population to have felt depressed (20% vs. 10%), more stressed (31% vs. 14%), or have skipped social gatherings (8% vs. 4%), and withdrawn from friends or family (6% vs. 3%) in the past year. And there is a compounding challenge in the fact that historically, the topic of mental health has been stigmatized



WHEN “HOW ARE YOU?” IS THE HARDEST QUESTION

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within the AAPI community, leading to barriers in seeking mental healthcare.

According to the [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#), AAPIs have the lowest help-seeking rate of any racial/ethnic group, with only 23.3% of AAPI adults with a mental illness receiving treatment in 2019. Factors contributing to this hesitancy include poor availability of linguistically and culturally appropriate mental health service providers, along with culturally rooted notions of stigma and shame due to a lack of understanding about mental health illnesses.

The “Model Minority Myth” has also significantly contributed to creating barriers for AAPIs to access mental healthcare and quality treatment. The Model Minority Myth depicts AAPIs as uniformly well-adjusted and more successful in attaining socioeconomic success than other minority groups, through a strong work ethic and academic excellence. The social and familial pressure created by this stereotype can prevent AAPIs from seeking mental healthcare or from speaking up altogether.

To effect greater societal change, we must dismantle these myths and harmful stereotypes that prevent us from seeing people for who they truly are and not who we imagine them to be.

WHEN ORGANIZATIONS HARNESS CARE AND CONNECTION TO CREATE EQUITY

FleishmanHillard's [New Social Contract](#) report showed that while 47% of employees believe that their employer's active commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion is very important, only 32% say that this describes their employer very well. This leaves a clear gap between what employees expect in order to feel satisfied working for a company, and what companies are delivering.

Closing that gap starts with understanding that employees' experiences intersect to shape their identities, as well as the way they experience the world, 24/7, 365 days a year. In other words, the first step is to realize that none of us are one-dimensional in our humanity. We're all multi-dimensional and complex, and there are occasions when different parts of who we are come into conflict.

When employers invest the time to understand these nuances, they are better positioned to take intentionally inclusive and equitable actions that remove barriers to opportunity and career growth. For AAPI employees, this means deliberately recognizing the diversity of heritage and experiences that exist within this community, including the range of painful stereotypes that may be impacting the experience employees are having at work and the opportunities they are being given. Are AAPI employees being directed to certain functions in the business based on assumptions about their skillsets? Are they being left out of programs designed to accelerate leadership development because of "accepted" beliefs that they'll succeed without additional care or consideration?

When human care and connection are centered in efforts to advance diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace, these are the types of questions that inform better decisions that lead to more impactful outcomes, including pay equity, representation in leadership and, above all, an environment where no one feels obligated to make themselves uncomfortable so that others don't have to be. Beyond heritage months or moments of crisis, this is how true pathways to equity can be built.

Consider implementing the following strategies to put your organization on a path to building equity and inclusion through care and connection for your employees:



Set the tone at the top.

Engage corporate leaders in modeling the mindset, behaviors and language that create and strengthen a culture of inclusion. Encourage them to connect with AAPI employees on the issues that are top of mind for them, such as diverse representation, pay equity and career pathing.

WHEN ORGANIZATIONS HARNESS CARE AND CONNECTION TO CREATE EQUITY

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Invest in meaningful engagement.

Beyond AAPI Heritage Month lies an opportunity to engage people in building stronger relationships. This opens the door to broadened understanding of this community's experiences, including the challenges they face, as well as to greater and more meaningful allyship. In action, these opportunities can come to life through educational forums hosted by a cross section of employee groups and external subject matter experts. Or through programs that facilitate one-on-one connection between employees and empower them to truly get to know and understand each other.



Inclusion is in the details.

Creating a more inclusive work environment often happens by paying attention to the little details and showing that they matter. Take time to learn how to pronounce a colleague's name or ask what their pronouns are. Remember that for many people of color, especially those of Asian and Pacific Islander descent, cultural names may have been abandoned in an effort to assimilate. Demonstrating awareness of this and taking care to respect pronunciation and heritage can positively impact a colleague's feeling of inclusion.



Resolve issue envy.

Keep in mind that systemic racism is insidious in the way it pits minorities against each other, shifting focus away from the inherent barriers needing to be dismantled in order for equity to be achieved. Avoid the trap of creating a "hierarchy" of marginalized groups and demonstrate your commitment to including everyone by giving each experience and community its proper space.

As societies continue to reckon with inequities rooted in race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status and more, organizations and their leaders are likely to feel compelled to respond to specific situations with social media posts or memos to all employees reinforcing support. It is essential for companies, leaders and the communication teams that support them to understand that a series of standalone responses are unlikely to deliver the support and inclusion that is most often intended.

Instead, the focus should be on ensuring that a thoughtful and strategic approach to diversity, equity and inclusion efforts is in place – one that is consistent with the organization's identity and its values.



LANGUAGE TO SUPPORT AAPI INCLUSION

The words we use play an essential role in the environment we create – in and out of the workplace. Many common phrases and everyday words used to describe many communities, including the AAPI community, are steeped in a history of systemic oppression, yet they find their way into daily conversations often without malicious intent.

In a similar vein, broad generalizations can show disregard for an individual's specific identity or heritage. In our True MOSAIC Inclusive Vocabulary Workshop and Inclusive Language Guide that accompanies it, we highlight the importance of specificity and precision in creating a culture of inclusion. For example, if you are referring to individuals from Japan, instead of saying "Asian," use "Japanese." We also recommend when writing about Asians who are American citizens to use Asian Pacific Islanders (API), Asian Pacific Americans (APA) or Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (AAPI).

By learning and understanding the context of the words we use, we can bring inclusive intent to our relationships and our environments.

For more information on the Inclusive Vocabulary Workshop and Inclusive Language Guide, please reach out to Jennifer Atkinson: Jennifer.Atkinson@FHhighroad.com.

True MOSAIC, FleishmanHillard's global diversity, equity and inclusion practice brings lived experience and professional expertise that spans geographies, cultures and contexts in order to counsel organizations on how to navigate an increasingly complex operating environment centered on questions of equity and inclusion. We'd love to start a conversation with you – please reach out to Adiya Mobley (adiya.mobley@fleishman.com) and Leela Stake (leela.stake@fleishman.com).

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