

Accent-u-ate the Positive

By: Dottie Li Special to The Daily Record November 27, 2015

In my last column, I wrote about my networking and how it has helped me achieve my goals. I was a bit surprised how the column spread on social media, especially via WeChat, a Chinese medium similar to Facebook. Apparently, the subject piques interest in more parts of the world than I imagined it might. Closer to home, I am still hearing from people at functions both social and professional that my story and the points I made about networking are a good model for Asian Americans getting ahead in America. Much of what I write about and teach, of course, is universal, and some is quite specific to Asian Americans. But I am always happy to hear that some people think of me as someone who makes Chinese people proud.

What most people do not know is the first step that helped propel me on my way. And it's a step I needed help to take. Long before I got to networking, or personal branding, I had a flaw, a weakness to correct. And that was how I spoke. What you might call my accent. You see, I was born and raised in China, and, of course, Chinese is my first language. Then I was taught British English by Chinese teachers, so my second language had distinctly English articulation over the remnants of Asian intonation. Then another layer of pure Southern molasses was poured on during the two-and-a-half years I lived in Mobile, Alabama after I first landed on these shores. The word "pen" was coming out of my mouth sounding like "pay-un" by the time I moved north to Washington.

When I made my first professional transition, from broadcast journalism into the corporate world, I was lucky enough to be employed by a large company which valued me enough to pay for lessons to smooth out my speech. It was good for them, as I was their spokesperson. I was understandable, but that is not good enough for a high-level communications professional. I had to sound better than that. I worked hard with a professional coach, and found "my" speaking voice, the one allowing me to sound naturally credible, and authoritative.

The extra effort was great for me. Not only did it help with my immediate work, it also opened my eyes to many of the things which are useful and even necessary for personal and professional success. It helped me take stock of my talents and attributes, and also the areas where I needed to sharpen up.

Because of that, I have to say that smoothing out my accent is the single best thing I ever did for my career.

Believe it or not, accent modification is controversial in some quarters. There are people with a strong ethno-centric viewpoint who think it is wrong, racist even, to neutralize an accent. But there is a reason we often see top-notch Asian American professionals in science, industry, academia, business and government fail to make it as far as their talents should, to become leaders and managers. And that reason is they lack proper communication skills in our American workplace, and sometimes have thick accents and incorrect grammatical structures, all of which can easily marginalize them.

A major government agency, as is often the case, wanted me to work with some of their Asian American personnel to improve their communication skills. While the individuals were quite brilliant in their fields, they were being held back by, yes, their difficulty in communicating and their poor cross-cultural skills. But managers realized the immediate need was to clear up their speech in order for them to achieve at least a proficient level of communication. But then one lawyer in the agency grew concerned. He had cited some Asian Americans who think it is racist to eliminate their accents, and who think that the mainstream culture should assimilate them the way they are.

OK. Fine. I can understand that viewpoint. But I am not about taking something away from anybody. I am looking to add to people's strengths, to give them additional tools to achieve all that they are able. I am not looking to homogenize Asian Americans or de-Asianize them. An accent, by itself, is not a problem. But if people cannot understand what the person with the accent is saying, you can't blame them for moving on. I have helped many people who manage to retain some of the lovely tones of their original Asian languages, for example, but who now express themselves clearly, effectively and with enhanced credibility and authority. And by the way, this is basic to protecting their civil rights.

But the lawyer in that agency had his way. He was more concerned about "protecting" his agency from some potential claim that the work of helping Asian Americans succeed was actually a sign of racism. So those staffers did not get the help they needed. Chalk up a victory for, well, I don't even know what to call it. Maybe reverse political correctness. Those who care more about process than people won. Believe it or not, this lawyer is Asian American himself. The issue at the heart of my work is reducing barriers. It is how I help people, particularly those in my AAPI community. Accent/speech modification is only a part of this training, a tactical aspect supporting the overall strategy of improving communication skills and increasing cross-cultural understanding. And it is a two-way street, as we also find employers and managers sometimes need help surmounting cultural misunderstanding.

This is all about being understood, plain and simple.

It can be uncomfortable, painful even, to be the "outsider." I was made fun of, or mocked, and ridiculed in the workplace when I had that multi-layered accent. And that is a reason I am so passionate about this work. I overcame the attempts to marginalize me, so I understand when foreign-born professionals express their frustration that their voices are not being heard, and that they find themselves relegated to the sidelines.

In May 2013, I was honored as the "Best Cross-Cultural Communicator of the Year" by the MD Washington Minority Companies Association. I was asked to speak about AAPI civil rights at the awards ceremony. Here is an excerpt of that speech, which I think underscores what I have been saying here:

"While first generation Asian American immigrants had fought for the right to naturalize and the right to own property—essentially, the right to BE Americans, the last generation began to fight for their rights AS Americans. Now, I think the challenge for OUR generation is the fact that so many new immigrants' civil rights are still denied. But not by racist or outdated laws. It is

because the lack of communication skills hinders the journey across the bridge over the cultural divide. And that is preventing us from achieving our full potential, in many cases.”

Empowering the AAPI community is the driving force of my founding TransPacific Communications 19 years ago. This was a decision that has kept me going and fuels my heart to serve more people who could use the lift of a lifetime.

And now my secret is out.

Dottie Li is the founder and managing director of TransPacific Communications LLC. She has extensive global expertise in public relations training. Her path has taken her from her hometown in China to the corridors of government, association and corporate power in Washington, D.C. Now sharing her expertise as a cross-cultural communications expert, Li also is the voice and voice coach of Rosetta Stone’s Mandarin products. This is the first of an occasional series that Li is writing for Path to Excellence.