

Small But Mighty Agency Podcast

Episode 56: Racial representation in mentorship matters for business growth

Speakers: Audrey Joy Kwan, Suzie Bao

Audrey Joy Kwan

What's one of the best ways to grow faster and avoid painful mistakes? That's an easy one for me, get a mentor. As a business owner, the close relationship with mentors have helped me gain experiences not shared in books found on bookshelves. I've benefited from close relationships with people who share their wins and their mistakes. But mentorship isn't just for a business owner. It's also for your team and helping them reach their highest potential. This episode was inspired by a Harvard Business Review article titled Truth About Mentoring Minorities: Race Matters. When I read the article, it took me back to when I started my agency career, and the things I wish I had back then, stay tuned.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Welcome to the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. If you're a creative, consultant, or agency owner, who wants to know what the roller coaster ride really looks like to grow your business from one to many, you're in the right place. My guest and I pulled out the curtains on the realities of growing and running agencies of different sizes, and what it takes to build a team. And if you're anything like me, you want more than the highlight reel. You want to learn from the mistakes of others so that you can stop short of making the same mistakes. I'm your host, Audrey Joy Kwan, I spend my days as a coach and consultant to multiple six and seven figure agency owners. For the last seven years. I've been behind the scenes helping people grow, lead and operate small but mighty agencies. Here at the Small But Mighty Agency podcast will uncover what works and equally as important what didn't work to get these business owners to where they are today.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hi, friends. Welcome back to a new episode of the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. Today we're talking about diversity, equity and inclusion in marketing and marketing agencies, and more specifically, ethnic and racial representation and mentorship. I'm Canadianborn Chinese. And before I started my consulting and coaching business, I worked in agencies and corporate, in my 20s back in the 2000s. Yes, that dates me. There was little to no representation of Asian female leaders and marketing agencies. A lot has changed since then. And a lot more still needs to change. But more and more I'm seeing communities created to support Asian females in leadership positions, and even more exciting niche communities focused on the marketing space. So when I was introduced to Asians in Advertising, I want

to know more about this nonprofit and I immediately connected to its mission. Asians in Advertising is a free community. Its purpose is to create opportunities, and help elevate Asians to higher leadership positions. Speaking from my experience as a business owner, and having worked in agencies and corporations for 12 years before starting my business, I know that representation matters. Seeing people who look like me and share similar cultural backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds achieve great things is empowering. That's why we have Suzie Bao on this episode today. Suzie is a mentor and advisory board member with Asians in Advertising. She's also an account director at a marketing agency in LA. She has 20 years of experience working in advertising and agencies, and other words, she knows what it's like to be an Asian female leader and an agency. Suzie, please tell us a bit about you and how you got involved with Asians in Advertising.

Suzie Bao

Hello, everyone. I'm Suzie Bao. I'm currently a group account director, in a LA based agency. It's where I am living currently. And I discovered this community called Asians in Advertising back in 2020. Of course, the we were still in the pandemic. And it was co founded by two women called Bernice Chao, based in LA and Jessalin Lam based in New York, they are both two people who are in the agency business. And also felt that there wasn't anything out there just for the API community in this particular field. And so they met each other and decided to form this community. And I happen to attend one of the very first event they had, it was a networking event, virtual of course, and I never saw all of these Asians on a zoom call in my entire career. I was absolutely blown away. And that's what we're talking about representation. It was really the first time I felt like wow, there are other people like me in this industry, and we all need to come together. And that was the beginning of it and I just wanted to be a part of it. I reached out to them and said, What can I do I want to be part of this, I want to help, what is this whole community. And so they were in the middle of putting together a board of directors and they asked me to be a part of it. And I gladly accepted

Audrey Joy Kwan

Suzie, you referenced the API community for our friends who don't know what the acronym stands for, It stands for Asian and Pacific Islanders. I know that the mission of Asians in Advertising is to serve the API community tell us more about that mission.

Suzie Bao

So the mission of the Asians in Advertising communities three things. One, is to really showcase and provide visibility to the Asian talent in this community, because so many of us are not seen or heard. Number two, is to really close the gap on that C suite level, many of us do really well entry level, mid level, and then it stops there. Because traditionally, Asians are seen as good soldiers, but not great leaders. And we want to prove that myth wrong. And lastly, is to provide the tools and resources specific to the API community to help them succeed in leadership roles. Things like you know, speaking up, because we're not traditionally taught to speak up. You know, public speaking is very hard for many of

us, but especially Asians, and just different resources and tools that were traditionally provided to us, like mentorships that look like us. You know, oftentimes, if we even are lucky enough to find a mentor, they're not of API descent.

Audrey Joy Kwan

When we say the API community, I want to clarify who we are speaking of, can you give us more details.

Suzie Bao

The Asian Pacific communities. So whether you're East Asian, so like Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, Southeast Asian, the Vietnamese, Indonesian, very importantly, also South Asian, we include Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, so all very different. We're not one monolith. And that's a really important question about representation. And we're just not trying to represent that typical East Asian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese community. We're talking about Pacific Islanders, we're talking about the South Asians who have very different wants and needs. But we have similar roots, you know, we all face the same cultural barriers.

Audrey Joy Kwan

So that's a very important distinction, while also acknowledging that we have similar roots and challenges. Let's talk about why representation is so important. Speaking from my own experience, for the first six years of my career, I didn't know any Asian females in a leadership position, especially in a marketing role. There were very few resources, if any, available to find Asian female leaders in marketing. In hindsight, I would have grown faster with mentorship from someone who shared similar experiences. Even though I was born in Canada, there were cultural and ethnic norms in my upbringing, and it would have been hard to understand how those things affected my career growth unless you shared some of those similar experiences. My parents were immigrants, and culturally, I was raised according to what they knew, which created some barriers for me. Of course, my parents did the best they could. But there were things they didn't know that they didn't know, Suzie, you've been in agencies for 20 years, what has been your experience and what has been the impact of having representation for you in agencies?

Suzie Bao

This this word representation, it means a lot more, it means that there's more of you. That means that there's more people like you, like minded, who are there for you and who are here to support you, mentor you lift you up. And that's why it's so important to see, it's like, oh, that person's doing it, I can do it. That person can do this. And you know, and it's not exclusive. It is inclusive. And that's very key to representation it's like when you see someone who looks like you, sounds like you, has your generational trauma, and know like, wow, okay, they've overcome it. They, they did it, and they're gonna help me do it, too. And that is just, you know, the most beautiful thing you can ever experience.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Let's talk about generational trauma. I'm familiar with the term, but for someone who has never heard it before, how do you define it?

Suzie Bao

Well, you know, my parents came from a war torn country, Vietnam. I mean, they literally escaped when Saigon was falling, and brought us to the US. I can only imagine, you know, now that I'm a parent. They had two children. They're literally escaping bombs. and just trying to survive leaving family, leaving their wealth, if they had any, I don't even know. They left everything behind to go to another country, they don't speak the language, they don't know a soul. That in itself is trauma. I mean, if you think about when you moved apartments or whatever, move houses, that was a traumatic experience, because it was a lot of stress. If you can imagine moving your entire family to another country that you don't know anything about, doesn't even have your the food that you normally eat. And they carry that. And you know, even though they don't talk about it, their trauma passes down, generation after generation. And even if you, I personally didn't experience that, although I was two, three years old, I don't remember it. But the experience just transcends generation after generation. And eventually, it, I hope it goes away. But that's what generation trauma is, is that the trauma from your previous generation passed down via osmosis, because even though they're out of the war torn country, it affected them, you can just see, they're still in survival mode, they're still living in fear. They're still living in scarcity. Even if they're not, right, that moment, it stays with them. And that passes down.

Audrey Joy Kwan

My parents also left behind everything they knew to come to Canada, the blessing was that they could give us kids a better future. But with it came so many unexpected uphill battles, including their fears for our future. And sometimes those fears translated into strict expectations and ways of thinking that may not have served me in finding my way. I have the power of hindsight now, I own a business that I love. And I do the work that I really believe I'm meant to do. If I had followed my parents desire for my career, I would have played it safe and follow their expected path, I would most likely be a lawyer. There's nothing wrong with being a lawyer, but I would live their expectations and fears instead of living my own life, from that perspective, I understand how generational trauma can affect decision making. From your perspective, how did it impact your career and the way you saw your career?

Suzie Bao

You know, it, it made me second guess risk a lot there in the beginning my career, I early on my career, two years in I was already burned down in advertising. And I quit and I went to fashion school. My parents did not understand why I would do that, I left a perfectly good job that was relatively stable, that I was actually getting paid to do something that I went to school for, to start all over and get into

another tuition debt, that kind of stuff. They're like, why would you do that? And those are decisions where they just didn't understand like, because they were always in fear and survival and scarcity mode. It's like, we've literally took our children from an war torn country and give them a better life. And here you are throwing your life away.

Audrey Joy Kwan

I hear what you're saying. And it resonates with me, my parents couldn't understand why their definition of happiness wasn't my definition. Their definition was pursuing a stable job, preferably a doctor or lawyer or accountant. Those are the three options I was given. But my definition was doing something different, that made a difference and sparked imagination and passion. I just found it so ironic that they took the most significant risk of all coming to a new country. Yet, when it came to pursuing my future, they were anti risk taking. They had this idea of this ideal path their kids would take and the behavior that their kids needed to get there. And anything else that scared them, it led to things I had to unlearn to succeed. Like speaking only when you're spoken to. Unlocking in that or in other words, unlearning it set me on my leadership path. Does that concept of having to unlearn things resonate with you?

Suzie Bao

Absolutely. Because, you know, my, my mother was raised to be a wife and mother, she was not raised to work outside of the house, but she had to when she came to this country, you know, we needed dual income, but she didn't know how to deal with office politics or office bullying. She just took it. And that was definitely passed down to me because it became my career. I was like that too. You know, it's like, don't rock the boat. Don't speak up. And things that happened to me. I was getting passed over by promotion, I was getting the bad projects that no one wanted or I was getting laid off when I was the one that should be saved. And I didn't speak up because I was like, well, you know, I guess I just took it like she did, you know she had it worse, of course, because English was a second language for her but the same time again, that generation cursing like you said, it was like, okay, well don't rock the boat, like work hard and they'll notice, it's only in recent years, again, with the support and backing of the Asian community that I felt like no no, I'm going to speak up now. It is time to get loud. And this is how we should moving forward, this is how it should be. And I definitely have seen results in my current agency that I work at where they are, at least attempting to listen to me and provide me with the visibility because I'm speaking up all the time. And I don't think they know of any other Suzie who didn't speak up, which is great.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Owning that it's time to get loud is freeing. I think the younger me will look at who I am today and be like, Who is this girl? I had so many great ideas that stayed hidden, I stayed hidden. What a difference it would have made if I had a community to lean on and to encourage me, more importantly, to identify with me on this concept of unlearning something culturally embedded that wasn't serving my growth.

Suzie Bao

Well, here's here's the thing. Same here, many for so many years, my performance reviews were everything's great. You're doing awesome but you should speak up more in meetings. That is just like a common thread for many of us, not just me. But here's the thing. It's like telling someone, Oh, can you go drive my car and pick up something for me and bring it back. But you never learned how to drive like you never no one taught you no one, you didn't take a test you didn't like study to drive. It's the same thing. We were never taught how to speak up. So when I took that performance review, ok I'll speak up more, I would try and speak up more. But I didn't know how I would come off defensive, I would come off too quiet. Or I would come in at the wrong time. Whatever it is, no one taught us. This is why Asians In Advertising was started. It's like providing the tools and resources for other Asians to to level up. Here's how you speak up. Here's how you insert yourself. Here's what you need to level up. And that's why it's so important. Yes, we know we all need to speak up more as Asians. But how?

Audrey Joy Kwan

That's an excellent point, the how is sometimes more nuanced than telling somebody they need to speak up because they have no idea what that even looks like. And they have a bunch of mindset stuff tied to it.

Suzie Bao

Well, we're, we're really good at hard skills. You know, we're really good at task oriented hard skills. If you tell us to, you know, to study and work on a particular hard skill, we will do it and we'll get straight A's on it. It's the soft skills that we were never taught, because it was never considered important. Soft skills like leadership, confidence, not just yes, speaking up, but engaging communication even when we speak up, how do we be more engaging and influential when we speak up, and not the opposite, where defensive and you know, ignored. So we were never taught soft skills. Nor did we were led to believe they were important. We were led to believe that tactical hard skills were more important to master and you need both. If anything, soft skills are more important as far as becoming leaders.

Audrey Joy Kwan

If you create a complex business that makes you feel trapped, you will never want to grow your business. You'll do little or big things to self sabotage growth, because nobody wants to scale overwhelm not you, not me, I've been there. I learned this lesson as a second in command of an agency. I could not turn off my brain and relax because I would worry about what was and wasn't being done. It wasn't until I looked at the business from a productized service perspective, it gave us more bandwidth to double the revenue and sell and exit the business. Since then, I've been behind the scenes of multiple six and seven figure service based businesses, helping consultants and marketers who are at capacity get out of being stuck in service delivery and growing. It all starts by looking through the lens of a productize

service. Download the free productize your service roadmap go to Audreyjoykwan.com/roadmap or click the link directly in your show notes.

Audrey Joy Kwan

If I could tell my 20 year old self one thing it would be this your opinions matter. In my upbringing, obedience mattered for a large part of my 20s, I struggled between being obedient and being heard. I believed I couldn't be a good daughter if I had opinions of set me along a different path. It played out in my career too because I didn't want to do to agree with something for fear, it would be disrespectful and, and that's the mindset stuff that I had to work through. It's ironic because I look at the work I do now my thoughts, ideas, strategies and opinions grow my business. Without finding that voice. I wouldn't be here today.

Suzie Bao

Yeah. And that's, that's a very interesting cultural barrier, because part of us being afraid to speak up, you know, we had to overcome that because we were fearful of the consequences. We were fearful if What if we're wrong? What if our idea sucks? What if they don't like our idea, we were so focused on being afraid of what we say, or impression of what we say rather than the opposite, where if you do speak up, and so let's say they didn't like it, so what they at least know you're thinking, let's say, if you never spoke up, then they don't know that you even have ideas. So it's other people that are not Asians speak up all the time. And they're wrong. Their ideas are horrible, but they don't care. They don't care. And that's, that's not something we inherited. We cared so much about that, what if we're wrong? What if they don't like it? We have to take the approach of just just be okay, with failing forward.

Audrey Joy Kwan

If someone's feeling stuck right now, how can they fall forward? What would you suggest for them?

Suzie Bao

So I, I always recommend finding these three types of people to add to your life, obviously, a mentor, a sponsor and a coach, three different roles, not necessarily same person, I actually don't even recommend that they be the same person. And it's okay to have multiples of them. Most people know what a mentor is, you know, mentor gives you advice, someone you look up to blah, blah, blah. A sponsor is someone at that executive level, or very high up in your industry, that will open doors, gives you connections, but you have to have the other two, to be ready for that sponsor. The third is a coach, similar to like a personal trainer that you hire at the gym, because you want to lose the holiday weight or pregnancy weight, wherever it is, and get that six pack back from college, whatever. Same thing, hire an executive coach, it's money well spent. Look, you paid all this money to get a college degree, so that you can get a job. Now that you have a job, you you've done nothing to invest your in yourself to further your career. This is the investment, an executive coach, that coach again, works with your specific needs

to level up. If it's how do I speak up better? How do I communicate better? How do I be more empathetic as a leader, whatever it is, they work on your soft skills to level you up, you need all three.

Audrey Joy Kwan

What is the biggest barriers to finding these resources?

Suzie Bao

Representation. It is hard to find. Mentors, sponsors, and coaches who look like us. And that's the beauty of Asians in Advertising. We created a mentorship program that are all Asians, mentors and mentees are all Asians helping each other. We also have a network of coaches, career coaches, life coaches who are of Asian descent, who understand our background, our trauma, our issues or cultural barriers, that can help that you can hire and help or be part of a group coaching, for example, and we're trying to get more sponsors, which are people in the industry that are at executive level. And there are some surprisingly, there are some, and there's more of them coming. And they will open doors because they know the need to reach back and pull forward.

Audrey Joy Kwan

I also want to touch on this as Asian representation grows in advertising and marketing, we see a breaking down of stereotypes of Asians in media, whether that's ads, TV or movies. I look at media today, and we've come a long way. But there's still so much further.

Suzie Bao

It's also important to to help brands understand the cultural differences, for example, during the month of May is Asian Pacific Heritage Month in the US. And I remember doing a communication piece for a client and they're trying to find an image to represent it and they had like a dragon dance, and like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, that's Lunar New Year. That already happened. And they're really well what image should we put in? But you know, if I wasn't there to stop that they would have ran with that image and they would have looked so tone deaf. And so I said, Look, let me explain to you during the month of Black History Month, you don't see a bunch of black people in a parade and dances. Okay? It is about recognizing the history, discovering all these historical black figures that we may or may not know about, and, you know, celebrating them and what they did for the country, for the black community. May is the same thing. It's time to reflect on the history of Asians in this country, the struggles they went through, what came out of it, what things are like now, historical figures you probably don't know about, it is time to celebrate them. It's about historical heritage, celebration, not dances, and dragon you know, dances.

Audrey Joy Kwan

What we see right now with increased representation is more Asians being proud of Asian culture. I read a thread in social media from a woman who had grown up distancing herself from identifying as Asian. It all started in school where kids would make fun of her food. Then through high school and college, she would hide being Asian by telling people that her family didn't live like that in reference to food and culture. But over the last few years, as she saw more representation in the media, she started to feel empowered, she recognized the Asian part of her that she disowned and wanted to reclaim. I think when we reclaim the things we've hidden, and bring awareness to parts of our weaknesses, and then take ownership of them, then we can see the strength and lean into the power.

Suzie Bao

Yeah, I agree. I, I think I went full circle of like trying to assimilate and not be Asian, I can't help the way I look. But I acted not Asian or I acted, I was just trying to go against my culture for so many years, when I realize how beautiful it is in how people should embrace who I am. And so it's I say this a lot, where there's a lot of great things about our culture that we need to hold on to in order to survive. But there are some things in our culture that we should let go because we won't thrive in the workplace because of it.

Audrey Joy Kwan

100%. That's so well said, Suzie, if someone listening wants to learn more about Asians in Advertising, how can they do that?

Suzie Bao

Well, we're a free community, you can just go to AsiansInAdvertising.com. We have all of our resources on there, you can access our events, all of them are free, except for our annual summit. And that's still a reasonable price. And we're, we have, you know, networking events, we have mentorship programs, we have an annual scholarship program. We also have a monthly newsletter you can sign up for. And as I mentioned before, I co host a podcast that is currently in season two. So there's lots of things just go on our website that you can find under resources.

Audrey Joy Kwan

And what about you, what is next for you, Suzie?

Suzie Bao

I am still trying to elevate to that executive role for my day job. And I'm confident I will get there hopefully sooner rather than later. But I'm also doing paid speaking gigs on the side, which I love doing. Again, it's it's funny that I grew up this quiet, shy Asian girl struggling through speaking up most of my

career to now. I'm a paid speaker, a moderator, a panelist and a podcast host. So if that's not representation of where you can overcome generational trauma, but yet build on your culture, so that's what's next for me.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Thank you for this important conversation. Suzie.

Suzie Bao

Thank you for having me, Audrey. It's been fun.

Audrey Joy Kwan

Hey there, thanks for hanging out with me at the Small But Mighty Agency Podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, it would mean the world to me if you hit the follow or subscribe button in your podcast app and share it with a friend. I'll see you in the next one.