

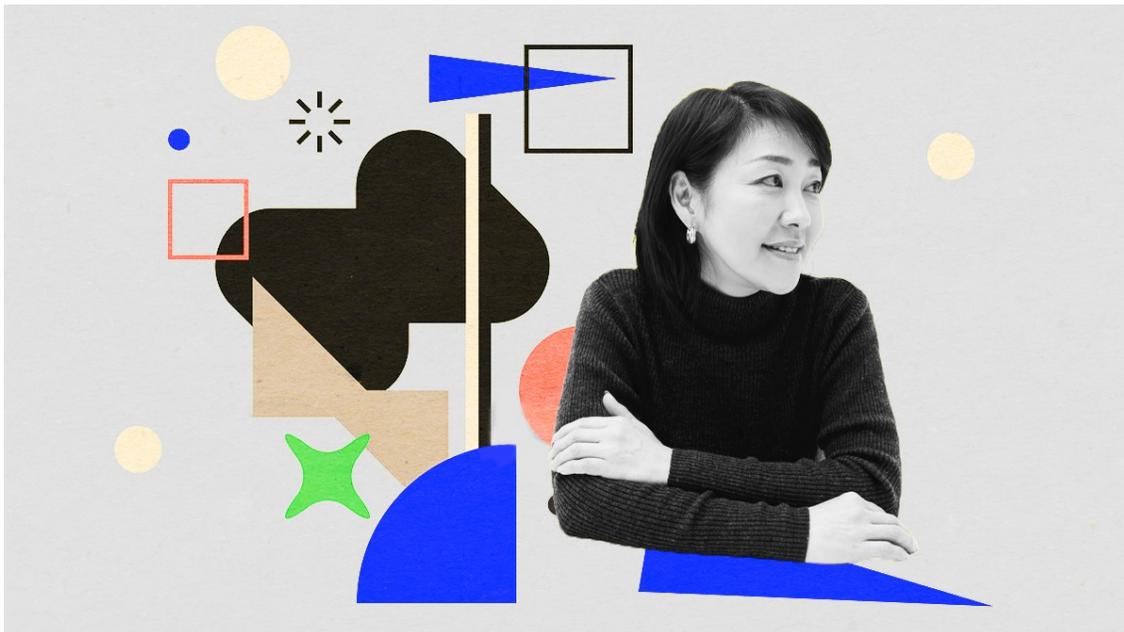
**Harvard
Business
Review**

Marginalized Groups

Do Your AAPI Employees Feel Safe Coming Back to Work?

by Mita Mallick

March 30, 2022



HBR Staff/Ryuichi Sato/Aleksei_Derin/Getty Images

Summary. Because of an increase in racism, xenophobia, and hate crimes targeted specifically against the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community, many members are scared to come to work because they don't feel safe. Supporting AAPI colleagues and employees requires more than just words. The author offers three practical steps leaders can take to enhance their AAPI employees' safety. [close](#)

After more than two years of false starts, many organizations have already returned to working from their offices, and others are

announcing their 2022 return dates. One important factor for leaders to consider as they're crafting return-to-office plans: Many members of the AAPI community are scared to come to work because they don't feel safe.

Hate crimes specifically targeting the AAPI community are growing at an alarming rate. According to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 339% in 2021. Cities like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles saw surges in hate crimes that surpassed what they experienced in 2020. In early March, a man was arrested in New York City for committing hate crimes against seven women who identified as part of the AAPI community. In the span of two hours, he violently punched, elbowed, and shoved Asian women ranging from 19 to 57 years old.

Supporting AAPI colleagues and employees requires more than just words. Here are three practical steps leaders can take to enhance their AAPI employees' safety.

1. Don't dismiss their fears.

I once shared with my white former manager that many of our AAPI colleagues were scared for their safety during the pandemic. I wanted to brainstorm ways the company could support them. His response? He thought they were exaggerating, being paranoid for no reason, and using it as an excuse to get out of working and coming into the office. He immediately dismissed their fears and shut down the conversation.

"The racial trauma Asian colleagues have been intensely experiencing during this pandemic is not exaggerated or made up; it is real," says Lan Phan, CEO and founder of community of SEVEN, a leadership development program. Phan adds:

Over and over again, we are seeing people who look like us being specifically targeted, repeatedly punched, kicked, and beaten. And shoved in front of oncoming trains and murdered. When we leave our homes, many of us are on high alert, constantly checking our surroundings, questioning what routes we are taking, and living in a perpetual state of anxiety and fear.

According to a Pew Research Center survey, one-third of Asian Americans are afraid of being threatened or physically attacked, which is more than those of other races. More than 80% of Asian Americans say violence against their community is increasing.

Jennifer,* an associate attorney at a national law firm who identifies as Asian American, works at an office next to San Francisco's Chinatown. Jennifer shared with me:

I used to love to grab lunch for my team at one of my favorite local restaurants in Chinatown. And now, I have such high anxiety to walk down the street to grab lunch. So many Chinatowns across the country are being targeted, where Asian Americans are being attacked in broad daylight. I am angry and scared. I am sure if I asked a colleague to walk with me, they would. I haven't felt comfortable bringing this up to anyone on my team at work yet. And quite frankly, no one has checked in with me to see how I am doing. The silence hurts.

Jennifer's story is an important reminder for those striving to be allies for the AAPI community. Start by educating yourself on the rise of xenophobia and anti-Asian hate crimes. Believe your colleagues, and don't dismiss their fears. Check in and ask how they're doing. Stop the rhetoric that Asian colleagues are making excuses not to work and not to come into the office. When you

hear other colleagues dismissing their fears, intervene in the moment and educate them. Be open, flexible, and supportive of AAPI colleagues about where they want to work.

2. Make personal safety a priority.

Many organizations have been revisiting their benefits and policies since the beginning of the pandemic, including daily commuter benefits or travel and expense policies. This is the time to proactively address the concerns of your AAPI employees and to make personal safety a top priority for your company.

There are a variety of options to consider. Look at offering shuttles that pick up employees at certain locations, minimizing the time they have to spend on public transportation to get to work. Consider increasing security in your buildings or on your campus. And offer security escorts to walk employees to their cars in the parking lot, both in the daytime and evening hours.

Consider providing a reimbursement benefit for a safety kit, or items such as personal alarms and portable phone chargers. You may also consider offering self-defense classes in person and virtually, working with instructors who specialize in personal safety and teach the fastest ways to protect yourself. And when employees feel unsafe commuting to work on public transit, leaders should encourage them to take a rideshare and offer reimbursement. Remind employees to look out for each other, including having a commuting buddy to and from work, carpooling, and ensuring you start and end the night together when attending offsite events or traveling together for work.

Finally, if you have an AAPI employee resource group, don't place the burden on them to come up with your company's plans to support the AAPI community. Do share what options you're considering with them and get feedback along the way. If they're comfortable and interested in being involved, give them a seat at the table and ensure their voices are included and heard.

3. Offer bystander intervention training.

“In many situations, there may be a bystander present, watching a problematic situation arise, which can escalate into harassment and assault,” shares Monica Marcel, co-founder and partner of Language & Culture Worldwide, LLC. “We want to empower bystanders to take on personal responsibility to take an action to intervene when they see AAPI colleagues and friends being verbally and physically attacked.”

Marcel recommends that her clients offer bystander intervention training as one way to help educate and empower allies to help so that the burden doesn’t fall on the AAPI community. The training shows bystanders how they can insert themselves indirectly and directly into violent and nonviolent situations without being frozen in the moment, unsure of what to do. Right To Be, a New York nonprofit, offers free bystander trainings online using their “5Ds” method: distract, delay, delegate, direct, and document.

“For the distract method, try suddenly walking up to the person being harassed to ask them for directions or have them look at your phone. Also, suddenly singing as loud as you can, or doing improvisational acting, can be a good way to diffuse the situation you are witnessing,” shares Marcel. “Remember that you don’t always have to fly in as superwoman to save the day. The context of the situation matters. There are many ways to intervene safely and successfully when it comes to ensuring the safety of our AAPI colleagues and friends.”

Craig,* who identifies as a white man, works at a media agency in New York City. He shared with me how he put the “distract” method into practice after attending a free Right To Be training online. He was riding the subway one evening when a man boarded, saying obscenities and verbally harassing Asian passengers specifically. Craig shared:

He was muttering some pretty horrible things, and then he began getting louder. I looked around, and people were making eye contact with each other. It was jarring and scary. I unplugged my headphones and put my volume up as high as I could on my iPhone blasting what I was listening to, a Jay Z song. Someone at the other end of the subway car did the same thing. The music was loud and overwhelming. And it worked. The man then seemed disoriented and got distracted. He looked around and stopped, and got off at the next stop.

Craig said if he hadn't done the bystander training, he wouldn't have known how to react in the moment or what to do. "Sure, we helped and intervened in the moment. And I can't help but wonder what happened after he got off the subway stop and who else he might have considered hurting verbally or physically."

Craig's story is an important reminder that we can each make a difference and intervene when we see members of the AAPI community being targeted. It starts by educating yourself on the concerns and fears your AAPI colleagues have and building empathy for experiences that aren't your own. Support AAPI employees when it comes to their personal safety, and make upskilling all employees on bystander intervention a top priority.

...

During the Great Resignation, what you do next matters the most. It will determine whether AAPI colleagues walk out the door or stay because of how you showed up for them in a time of great need.

Mina Mallick is the head of inclusion, equity, and impact at Carta. She is a LinkedIn Top Voice, co-host of *The Brown Table Talk* podcast, and her writing has been published in *Fast Company*, *The New York Post*, and *Business Insider*.
*Real names have been changed.