

Advance

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Expatriates and Thais at Work: "Same-Same" or "So Different" and Why?

13 months is how long expatriates need on average to become fully effective in the Thai workplace. 1-2-WIN Executive Coaching and chambers of commerce polled 300 executives from 120 companies and interviewed 28 Thai and foreign business leaders to gather insights and provide foreign managers and Thais with practical insight and advice to work most effectively together.

In this article, Jean clarifies critical differences between Thai & Western leadership models and core-value systems, shares tips for the first 100 days of here and proposes a fun "to-do list" for expatriates.

By Jean-Francois Cousin

Did you hear stories like Martin's, who arrived in Thailand two years ago, came with the best of intentions, and yet had a horrendous first year at work here? By the end of it, half of his team had resigned and the performance of his department had gone dramatically down... yet, Martin had been working really hard and leveraged those managerial skills which had served him well in his previous assignments: results-focused, participative, politely straightforward and active problem solving... Is that a recipe for failure in Thailand?... Obviously not, but key-ingredients are missing for success...

The good news is that when expatriates add them in, rewards can surpass their expectations. Alan Miu and Hanno Kroemer, respectively Country General

Manager and former Finance Director for TNT in Thailand commented: "Thai employees in general are very hard-working, willing to contribute and do the best they can. When you have them on board, basically everything is possible; you can make tremendous speed and achieve results a lot faster than what you would expect". Other expatriates added "Thais can be incredibly loyal, are eager to learn, good fun to work with, have a can-do attitude and don't hesitate for occasional sacrifice (such as holidays or over-time)."

For sure, expatriates and Thais share the same desire to succeed, learn and have a good time in the workplace. However, their preferred ways are dissimilar. Foreigners should acknowledge that at work, what matters most for them is quite different from what matters most for their Thai colleagues. In the

survey Thais and foreigners ranked 49 managerial and interpersonal skills by importance. Only four skills appear in both Thais' and foreigners' top-10 'most important skills'. In other words, six of the most important skills for Thais are not so valued by foreigners, and vice-versa. Being assertive, saying what you think, managing priorities effectively, taking initiative are much more important to foreigners than to Thais, whereas recognition of achievements, being appreciated, emotional stability and ability to motivate, carry more weight for Thais than for foreigners.

Clearly, expatriates and Thais are on a different time-frame. Foreign managers expect to stay for three to five years only and are under intense pressure to deliver solid results quickly. But this asymmetry in time-horizon does not explain it all. Our interviews have



exposed the major differences between Thai and Western core-value systems and leadership models and the impact they have on expectations from hierarchy, engagement, communication and conflict-management at work.

The profound differences between core-value systems are a complex and intricate subject. To summarise, one may say that achievement is probably the most important value at work for expatriates in Thailand, whereas nurturing good relationships is what Thais care for the most, in and out of the office.

In our survey, it was made clear that foreigners tend to be goal-oriented and accountable, analytical, critical, creative, straightforward, assertive, occasionally aggressive, take initiative and strive for effectiveness and efficiency. On their side, Thais – while also striving to get things done – will usually lay the utmost importance on caring for each other, saving face, avoiding conflict, staying humble and composed, showing respect (especially to hierarchy and senior people) and shall be content if work offers them the feeling of an "extended family".

To go into more depth, we recommend reading an overview of eminent Thai professor Komin's authoritative study identifying the "9 fundamental traits of the Thai National character" <http://lox1.loxinfo.co.th/%7Esniphon/>. The first four traits are (1) ego/face, (2) gratitude (3) smooth interpersonal relationships and (4) flexibility and adjustment.

How about differences between Thai and Western leadership models? In yet another simplification, one could describe the prevailing Western leader as mostly participative, regarded for vision, knowledge and results, and exercising authority on the basis of rules and regulations. In comparison, the 'traditional Thai boss' is usually depicted as rather directive and truly caring, exercising a mix of 'Phradet' (authority and decision-making) and 'Prakhun' (rewarding and ensuring the well-being of employees' families), with an authority based on relationships and seniority.

Where a good Western-style leader gets respect, a good Thai leader gets loyalty

for his power and care. Khun Patara Yongvanich, the Managing Director of SAP for Thailand and the Philippines shared this great insight: "In Thailand, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care".

Whilst the Western boss is usually not perceived as that much higher above other employees, the Thai boss normally will be.

Communication-wise, most Westerners come out as assertive in business meetings while Thais often appear more reserved. Our survey gathered several barriers – some of them specific for a Thai person to communicate his or her ideas to a foreigner:

- Clarity of thoughts (have I clarified my ideas enough yet to communicate them?);
- English fluency (can I translate properly what I want to say?);
- Self-confidence (am I sure my input is that worthwhile for the others?);
- Respect for seniority (am I in a high-enough position here to express myself?);
- Humility (shall others perceive me as arrogant or too over self-assured?);
- Perception of urgency (can I wait for a more comfortable moment?);
- Fear of rejection; and
- Risk to intrude or embarrass.

Hence, "to speak out or not to speak" is quite an important question for a Thai professional!

Other differences between Western countries and Thailand have a significant impact in the workplace, for example: number of job-openings, education systems focus, information about the 'outside World', conflict management styles, etc.

In 'Amazing Thailand', the first 100 days can be quite a maze for expatriates. The 'high-achiever, self-reliant' profile is most at risk. As Rajesh Sethi, President and CEO of ING Life, confirms: "A lot of high-flyers who have achieved a lot elsewhere in the West come here with a different attitude 'let's-get-things-done-fast' and then they find they hit a wall".

How can a foreign manager make a good start then?

Khun Prakorn Makjumroen, Chairman and CEO of Philips suggests that "when you start your new job here, have one-on-one sessions with your direct reports, not so much on work, but rather to understand each person, what is their background, what they like, what they don't like, what they find interesting in their job, what they think the company should do; after a week, you will understand much more about your team and your priorities for the first 100 days".

Khun Patara Yongvanich, Managing Director of SAP in Thailand and the Philippines, advises: "Understand the true core-value system of Thais, how they are motivated, raised as individuals, how they are taught to behave as adults", and concurs that "to manage effectively in a Thai business environment, you have to understand that most of your team members have a strong concept of family, which means that you really have to emphasise relationships, getting to know each of your team-members on a one-to-one basis, how they are doing, how their family is doing, what pets they have, what their hobbies are; those are the things that will help you bridge the cultural gap from being a foreign manager to working very effectively in a Thai company".

For a bit of fun, we would like to suggest that expatriates try this 'to-do' list:

1. Ask your Thai colleagues and friends to explain 'Sam Ruam', 'Nam Jai', 'Kreng Jai', 'Hai Kiat' and 'Bun Khun' to you;
2. Ask them to teach you the different 'Wais' and when to use them;
3. Ask your Thai colleagues to rate you of scale from one (poor) to five (excellent) on 'Phra Det' and 'Pra Khun'... Should you get a four, request ideas to hit the five next month;
4. Invest at least one-hour a month in one-on-one with your key-subordinates, focusing on skills development, and learn as much as you teach them; and
5. Plan at least one really good time per month with your team! ☺

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