

## Expatriates' Trail Towards Success in Thailand: Ten Pitfalls, Ten Important Skills and Ten Pieces of Advice

What are the most common mistakes made by (new) foreigners at work in Thailand? What are the skills and behaviours Thais demand from expats? Which advice do successful business leaders provide to newcomers in Thailand?

1-2-WIN Executive Coaching and Chambers of Commerce have conducted a large survey and gathered answers to help expatriates quickly excel at cross-cultural work in the 'Land of Smiles', and enjoy it. In this article, Executive Coach Jean-Francois Cousin summarises the findings.

Thais extend a sincere and warm welcome to expatriates in general. They expect new foreign managers to contribute know-how, best practices, creativity, quality analysis and decision-making and enhance their exposure to the 'outside world'. Yet, while both Thais and expatriates normally nurture the best intentions to work effectively together, the road to success for foreigners is usually not a straight and smooth ride, and most of them make serious mistakes before they get it right.

What are the ten most common mistakes? According to our survey:

1. Rush to change things before understanding the situation
2. Ignore Thai cultural values
3. Misinterpret a "Yes" or a 'smile'
4. Be impolitely too direct / lose self-control
5. Publicly blame or express disagreement with a Thai colleague
6. Compare Thailand with other countries
7. Rely on monetary motivation alone
8. Arrogance / underestimate Thais' capability
9. Use inappropriate body-language
10. Lack flexibility



Although Thais, who are aware of cultural differences, will usually forgive a foreigner of faux-pas for a while, an accumulation of mistakes will likely discourage them from fully supporting him/her over time.

Prominent business leaders I discussed with concur with those findings. Bruno Charvet, Deputy Managing Director of Mazda in Thailand remarks: "The first mistake expats make is probably impatience and a lack of courtesy, wanting to go too fast or losing their temper in public". Khun Vongthip Chumpani, Advisor at Bangkok Bank adds: "Foreigners should not criticise or scold employees in front of their subordinates or peers" while Khun Panya Pongtanya, General Manager of Thai Asia-Pacific Brewery (Heineken) advises further: "Foreigners should not say 'this is being done in other countries', because Thai people will feel very offended".

Jorge Pinedo, General Manager of Mead Johnson Nutrition Thailand, shares: "Foreigners come to Thailand and sometimes try to 'change the world'; it is a critical mistake we make as foreigners to be inflexible and not make enough efforts to adapt". Henk Kiks, CEO of B-Quik, warns further: "Some multinational companies say 'if anybody wants to work with us, they've got to follow our company culture, and we don't care about the national culture'; I can tell you one thing: it doesn't work here".

Clearly, the flexible strength of the bamboo is more advisable to foreigners than the rigid strength of an oak and shall avoid being burned-out.

How then can an expatriate adapt at best to the Thai workplace without hindering his/her potential for contribution and positive change?

We asked Thai managers to share the most important skills and behaviours they wish an expatriate to display; here are the top-ten:

1. Be open-minded
2. Express your ideas clearly
3. Listen well
4. Make good decisions
5. Control emotion well (don't get angry easily)
6. Be respectful of Thai culture
7. Be easy to talk with ('make me feel comfortable about talking with you')
8. Motivate your colleagues
9. Have good analytical skills
10. Be good at solving problems

That seems a fairly standard wish-list from a manager. doesn't it?

Yet, when asked to rate expats' performance on those ten skills / behaviours, Thais gave rather low scores to:

- ability to motivate
- emotion control
- decision-making
- problem-solving
- listening

A drill-down into our survey-results identified that "showing appreciation", "recognising achievements" and "being polite" are motivational drivers that some expats do not leverage enough.

As for expats' weaknesses in "decision-making" and "problem-solving" (in a Thais' perception); they may well be rooted in insufficient consultation, poor listening and ineffective communication.

Let's wrap-up with ten pieces of advice supported by insightful remarks from inspiring and successful business leaders in Bangkok.

### **1 Trust and respect your Thai colleagues first; then build trust and respect**

Hein Swinkels, Unilever Vice-President for Finance, shares: "pay a lot of attention to building confidence and trust in you as a leader; Thais will accept you as a boss and try to please you from the beginning, but to get real trust, it will take at least six months. (...) If you think you can leapfrog that period, it will cause a lot of trouble later on."

### **2 Care (and show it) and invest in personal relationships (build-up your 'extended family' at work)**

Khun Patara Yongvanich, SAP Managing Director, explains that Thais seek an "extended family" environment at work and Jorge Pinedo concurs: "it is very important in places like Thailand to truly, genuinely invest in personal relationships; Thai people will know if it's genuine, so it has to come from the heart. It does make a big difference."

### **3 Don't rush! Open your mind, listen, learn, adapt, then act**

Khun Suchada Ithjarukul, President of Siam Makro, notes: "Some people try to copy and implement some of their experience in other countries without adapting into the local environment", and it just doesn't work.

### **4 Share your values, clarify priorities and your expectations upfront**

Khun Arunee Jittanon, Corporate Sales Director at Wall Street Institute, advises: "Clearly communicate your values; values are very sensitive; misunderstandings can create very critical situations; some Thai people might not consider some values as important, like punctuality or truthfulness - a little lie might be OK-, but if those are your values, you have to tell them."

### **5 Create a safe and friendly atmosphere at work**

Khun Maris Tarab, ING Funds Managing Director, announces part of the reward: "When you deal with Thai people, you have to work like a friend; if you can buy their heart, they will work for you for a lifetime". In contrast, if an expat doesn't create a friendly / motivating enough environment at work and/or makes too many mistakes for too long, several Thai colleagues will likely resign, possibly simultaneously.

### **6 Never lose self-control**

Thai subordinates shall not trust a foreign boss to control the business effectively, if he/she can not self-control in the first place. Expats working in Thailand are offered a sound opportunity to enhance several facets of their emotional intelligence.

### **7 Ensure clarity of understanding, yours and your Thai colleagues' and probe beyond a 'yes' or a 'smile'**

Rajesh Sethi, President and CEO of ING Life, remarks: "One of the most common mistakes foreigners make is to assume that if there are no questions, then everybody understands what they are saying". Dr. Pisit Leeatham, former Deputy Finance Minister, warns: "Sometimes, when Thais say yes, it will not be exactly the 'yes' that you (foreigner) understand, so you need to pay more attention to whether what you mean is really understood or not". Jorge Pinedo reinforces: "Be very clear with communication, it's not always what is said, but it's what is heard, it's very important to verify clarity of understanding".

### **8 Develop/coach your team-members**

Phillips' CEO's offers great advice: "Let's take the example of creativity-development. Many foreigners are unimpressed with their Thai colleagues' ability to think out-of-the-box. However, Thais demonstrate remarkable creativity in many fields, design and the arts for instance. And successful foreigners here will testify that their Thai colleagues

can interact in a very open, straightforward manner in meetings and think out-of-the-box. All it takes is the confidence to 'go for it'. Encouragement and recognition will nurture it effectively."

### **9 Involve your team as much as possible**

Winfried Kiesbueye, Managing Director of CEVA Logistics advises: "Always involve your management team and share your success with your staff, you can do small things; recognition, awards, team-building sessions."

### **10 Deliver results visibly and with humility**

"The most important is that (expats) deliver results; it's not a holiday, they have to contribute to make it happen" shares Khun Panya Pongtanya. Doing it with humility is the most admired way.

Beyond remembering this advice, we invite you to download another... "888 tips" gathered along our survey (from [www.1-2-win.net](http://www.1-2-win.net) "free download page") and reflect further.

In conclusion, should there be only one insight for new expats to remember and act upon first, it could well be Rajesh Sethi's remark: "Personal relationships make perfect professional relationships in Thailand".

In our coaching-experience too, getting personal with Thai colleagues enables expats to adjust more quickly, support required change effectively and contribute at best, while enjoying the whole experience. ■

Note: A 49-page survey-summary can be freely downloaded from [www.1-2-win.net/download.htm](http://www.1-2-win.net/download.htm)

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For details of Jean Francois' luncheon on 29 July 2010, see page 28.

## Risk Management Luncheon at The Landmark Hotel on 6 July, 2010

*Khun Sorachon Boonsong, Principle of Baker and McKenzie and Robin Armstrong, Chief Executive Officer of Marsh PB Co., Ltd, did a joint presentation on protecting your business and getting it back on its feet following a crisis. Held at the Landmark Hotel, attendees were informed of current issues regarding insurance and protecting a company's bottom line.*



## Joint Luncheon: Tools and Tips to Succeed as a Leader Through the Next Crisis on 29 July 2010

*Executive Coach, Jean Francois Cousin gave an engaging talk to over 30 attendees on leadership and management techniques to succeed through difficult times. During his talk at the Plaza Anthanee he used the styles of famous conductors to demonstrate team leadership and start conversations on how to maintain a company and its team through 'stormy weather'.*

