

EXPATS IN THAILAND

10 pitfalls skills tips



Jean Francois Cousin

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

1-2-WIN Executive Coaching and the Dutch and French Chambers of Commerce surveyed business leaders to find out what can help expatriates quickly excel at cross-cultural work in the 'Land of Smiles', and enjoy it.

In this second article of a series, executive coach Jean-Francois Cousin summarises the findings.

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



Where It Goes Wrong?

What are the 10 most common mistakes? According to our survey:

- rushing to change things before understanding the situation
- ignoring Thai cultural values
- misinterpreting a 'yes' or a 'smile'
- being impolitely too direct/losing self-control
- publicly blaming or expressing disagreement with a Thai colleague
- comparing Thailand with other countries
- relying on monetary motivation alone
- arrogance/underestimating Thais' capability
- using inappropriate body language
- lacking flexibility

Thais aware of cultural differences will usually forgive a foreigner such faux-pas for a while, however an accumulation of mistakes will likely discourage them to fully support him/her over time.

Prominent business leaders I talked to concurred with the findings. Bruno Charvet, deputy managing director of Mazda in Thailand, remarks: "The first mistake expats make is probably impatience and lack of courtesy, wanting to go too fast, losing their temper in public." Vongthip Chumpani, advisor at Bangkok Bank, adds: "Foreigners should not criticise or scold employees in front of their subordinates or peers", while Panya Pongtanya, general manager of Thai Asia-Pacific Brewery (Heineken beer) 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 his thoughts: "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 effort 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.



Expectations Of Expats

How, then, can an expat best adapt 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 10:

- be open-minded
- express your ideas clearly
- listen well
- make good decisions
- control your emotions (don't get angry easily)
- be respectful of Thai culture (see our previous article)
- be easy to talk with ('make me comfortable to talk with you')
- motivate your colleagues
- have good analytical skills
- 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 10 skills/behaviours, Thais gave rather low scores to:

- 'ability to motivate'
- 'emotional 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 Thais' perception, they may well be rooted in insufficient consultation, poor listening and ineffective communication.

Making The Right Moves

Let's wrap-up with 10 tips supported by insightful remarks from inspiring and successful business leaders in Bangkok.

- **Trust and respect your Thai colleagues first; then build trust and respect**
Hein Swinkels, Unilever vice president for finance, comments: "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."

- **Invest in personal relationships (build-up your 'extended family' at work)**
Patarat 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."
- **Don't rush! Open your mind, listen, learn, adapt, then act**
Suchada Ithijarukul, 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.
- **Share your values, clarify priorities and expectations upfront**
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."
- **Create a safe and friendly atmosphere at work**
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.
- **Never lose self-control**
Thai subordinates will not trust a foreign boss to control the business effectively if he/she has no self-control in the first place. Expats working in Thailand are offered a sound opportunity to enhance several facets of their emotional intelligence.
- **Ensure clarity of understanding- 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 Leehtam, former Deputy Finance Minister, warns: "Sometimes, when Thais say yes, it will not be exactly the 'yes'

that you understand, so you need to pay more attention to whether what you mean is really understood or not." And 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."

- **Develop/coach your team members**
Philips' CEO offered great advice in our previous article. 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.
- **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: give recognition, awards, hold team-building sessions..."
- **Deliver results visibly and with humility**
"The most important thing is that (expats) deliver results. It's not a holiday - they have to contribute to make it happen," shares Panya Pongtanya. Doing it with humility is the most admired way.

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 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.

Beyond remembering these tips, Director and 1-2-Win invite you to download another '888 tips' gathered from our survey and reflect further. (Available from www.1-2-win.net at 'free download page')