Executive Coaching

EXPERTS IN THAILAND
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?

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

In this second article of a series, executive coach Jean-François 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 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 ‘no’
- being impatient or too direct/disingenuous self-control
- publicity harming or expressing disagreement with a Thai colleague
- comparing Thailand with other countries
- being unprofessional in monetary causes
- arrogance/unrealism
- ‘social’ pressure
- 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 discard them to fully support him/her over time.

Prominent business leaders I talked to concurred with the findings. Bruno Chansri, deputy managing director of Maota in Thailand, remarked: “Thais make mistakes that are probably impractical and lack of courtesy, wanting to go too fast, losing their temper in public.” Young Thamm, adviser at Bangkok Bank, adds: “Foreigners should not criticise or mock employees in front of their subordinates or peers,” while Panya Pongpanya, general manager of the Asia-Pacific Breweries (Heineken) beer advises further: “Foreigners should not say ‘this is being done in other countries’, because Thai people will feel very offended.”

Jorge Pineda, general manager of Moe 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 irritable and not make enough effort to adapt.” Henk Kiks, CEO of B-Zik, warns further: “Some multi-national 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 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 hiding his/her cultural contribution and positive change?

We asked Thais to manage 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 each performer 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 being economical with your achievements’ and ‘being polite’ are motivational drivers that some expats do not leverage enough.

For expats’ weaknesses in ‘decision making’ and ‘problem solving’, in Thais’ perception, they may be well enough 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
- Lori Nairn, 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 only to please you from the beginning, but to gain 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 your ‘extended family’ at work
- Patara Yingyancanh, SAP managing director, explains that Thais see 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. Thais 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 Thippraksa, president of Siam Makro, notes: “Some people try to copy and implement some of their experience in other countries without adapting to the local environment”, and it just doesn’t work.

- Share your values, clarify priorities and expectations upfront
- Anirudh Ahlawat, corporate s 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 bit may be OK - but these are your values, you have to tell them.”

- Create a safe and friendly atmosphere at work
- Maris Tare, 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 a lifetime.” In contrast, if an expat doesn’t create a friendly/motivating enough environment at work and make 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 low to control the business effectively if halve 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 ‘no’
- Dr Priti Lestham, former Deputy Finance Minister, urges: “Sometimes, when Thais say yes, it will not be exactly the yes that you understand, so you need to pay more attention to what whether you mean is really understood or not.” And Jorge Pinedo reinforces: “Be very clear with communication. It’s not always what is said, but what is heard. It’s very important to verify clarity of understanding.”

- Develop a coach team members
- Phillips’ 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
- Withrid Kasreow, managing director of CEVA Logistics, adds: “Always involve your management team and share your success with your staff - you can do small things that give recognition, awards, hold team-building sessions...”

- Deliver results visibly and with humility
- “The most important thing is that (expats) deliver results, it’s a holiday - they have to contribute to make it happen,” shares Panya Pongpanya. “Belief with humility is the most admired way.”

In conclusion, should there be only one piece of advice to remember and act upon first. It could well be Rajesh Sethi’s remark: ‘Personal relationships are the perfect professional relationships in Thailand.’

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

Beyond remembering these tips, Effect and 1-2-1 offer 360° and E48° (E48™) 360° feedback on our senior and other levels. (Available from www.1-2-1.com and at Tree download page)