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HOW TO SAY 'NO'



And Other Guides For Thais Working With Foreigners



Jean Francois Cousin

Which professional skills do western companies expect from Thais? How can Thais work their way through cultural barriers towards great effectiveness at work with foreigners?

1-2-WIN Executive Coaching and the Dutch and French Chambers of Commerce surveyed 110 companies and interviewed 28 successful business leaders to gather insights and advice.

In this third article of a series, executive coach Jean-Francois Cousin shares some of the findings and presents 10 tips for Thai managers to excel at work with expats and enjoy the experience.

Wanida is a great professional and does everything she can to satisfy her bosses. Her last western manager was most impressed when they started working together. He delegated an increasing number of tasks to her to broaden her experience and responsibilities. A few months later, Wanida had become overwhelmed with the extra workload, yet would not say 'no' to additional requests. Her expat boss noticed she had started to deliver after deadlines, and no longer seemed 'on top of her job'. Still, he was surprised when Wanida resigned, claiming she needed to 'take time for herself and her family'. There was no way she would reconsider her decision.

Who is to blame for this lose-lose situation? The insensitive, unreasonable boss? Wanida for keeping her difficulties to herself? Both for lacking common sense? No one, as they both had 'good intentions'?

A year after she had resigned, I asked Wanida what lessons she had learned from her experience. The most critical one was miscommunication between her and her boss, and in particular her resistance to saying 'no'.

When we asked 120 Foreigners working in Thailand to choose the 10 most important skills at work, seven were communication skills.

Saying 'no' to a western boss is one of the most stretching challenges many Thai professionals face, even though they know that most foreigners tend to be open-minded and manage in a participative way. "We [westerners] are more used to hearing 'no' than 'yes', therefore saying 'no' is not a crime," remarks Hanno Kroemer, CFO at TNT.

Top 10 most important skills at work for foreigners



* percentage of Foreigners polled rating the skill as important

Executive Coaching

Saying 'no' to an assignment you can't reasonably deliver within the deadline proposed might get the boss frustrated, but not as much as if he/she discovers that the task promised has not been done on time. Then the trust in the relationship will be damaged.

Are there comfortable ways to say 'no'? You may like to try:

- "I wish I could say 'yes' but I am sorry, I can't do it right now"
- "You know I'd love to help, but I have to stay focused on my priorities at this time. Who else could do it?"

Another approach can be to remind your superior - when he/she gives a new 'urgent task' - that you are working on other projects already identified as top priorities. Then request help in deciding where the new task should fall within the list of priorities. You may also point out that you might be able to do everything, but not up to the usual quality standards.

Before you say 'no', make sure that doing so is in the company's interest and convince yourself that 'you will do less good to others if you haven't done what's right for you first'.

In previous articles, we offered advice to foreigners working in Thailand so they can adjust effectively to the Thai workplace. Let's now hear 10 practical tips for Thais to work effectively with foreigners from successful and inspiring business leaders. The first ones come as no surprise:

1. "Dare to be straightforward with foreigners,"

says Winfried Kiesbuye, managing director of CEVA Logistics, adding "don't be afraid!" Suchada Ithijarukul, president of Makro, concurs: "Do what you say, say what you do."

"Always speak up when you don't agree," offers Vongthip Chumpani, advisor at Bangkok Bank, while Jorge Pinedo, general manager of Mead Johnson Nutrition Thailand, encourages you to "Raise issues quickly." Limited risks, unlimited upsides!

2. Don't commit before you are sure to deliver on time.

Arunee Jittanon, corporate sales director with Wall Street Institute, advises: "Think before you make a commitment, especially when you are not sure you can deliver." Punctuality is highly valued by foreigners - and traffic jams are no worthy excuse - so making efforts to arrive at work and deliver on time will score high in their esteem.

3. Don't compromise your beliefs.

"Be more outspoken, don't be too compromising, defend your opinion," suggests Panya Pongtanya, general manager of TAPB (Heineken beer). If your beliefs - such as respect, integrity - seem confronted, share them and 'negotiate' a way-ahead that makes everyone comfortable.

4. "Be bold to admit your mistakes and come up with a solution,"

elaborates Panya. "Admit to making mistakes and communicate bad/less good news; find solutions rather than excuses."

"When something has gone wrong, gather all related information, clarify the causes of the damage and - most importantly - come up with preventive actions," adds Arunee. After all, it is widely accepted that successful people have made many more mistakes than others because they have tried harder and longer. Jack Welsh often shares that he believes he has made more mistakes than anyone else!

5. Question foreigners when their explanations are not clear enough

"Make sure both speak the same language," contributes Kroemer with a touch of humour, while Arunee says: "Do not hesitate to ask questions to confirm your understanding." By the way, you should notice that foreigners never hesitate to do so!

6. "Prepare yourself for negative/tough feedback from foreigners,"

advises Thipayasuda Suvanajata, general manager, human resources at Shell. "Be less sensitive and less personal about

negative comments from foreigners," concurs Vongthip. Foreigners often appear prompt to criticise situations and people when their intention is to improve things. Take the criticism as 'food for thought'. Otherwise, just move on.

7. Teach foreigners and learn from them

As we have seen in previous articles, understanding Thai culture takes time for westerners, and you can help them accelerate their learning. In parallel, "Try to learn from foreigners because they have more experience from their travels and think globally," suggests Maris, managing director of ING Funds.

8. Be creative, dare to think out-of-the-box

Most foreigners are often amazed at Thais' creativity, in the Arts for example, and how street-smart they are at solving daily problems quickly. While teaching to 'think-out-of-the-box' may not yet be a strength of the Thai education system, dare to unleash your creative mind and think differently! Diversity brings so much value to business.

9. Focus and deliver on priorities

Everyday brings in new tasks at work and it is easy to lose your 'effectiveness' ('doing the right things') and efficiency ('doing things right'). Several of the leaders I interviewed insisted that prioritisation and consistent focus on what matters most are critical to success. Regularly reviewing progress on priorities with the boss shall help you deliver at a higher level.

10. Think longer-term

A dangerous temptation in business life is to be very short-term minded. Yet international companies need decisions to be made in full awareness of their long-term implications. It is therefore a healthy discipline to 'take five' before striking a decision and assess its future consequences. It is a sure trust-builder with western bosses in particular.

In conclusion, imagine Thais and westerners combining their strengths and leveraging all the advice provided by the business leaders we interviewed. What an edge for their business! How much 'sanuk' at work! What a worthwhile journey to embark on. Lao Tzu said "Every journey starts with one single step". Which one will you take first?

