

## Going Global – Lessons Learned in Asia

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### Abstract

*Globalisation is commonplace. Management talent, increasingly, can shift geographically in accordance with rising demand for people who have the necessary skills to fill roles in other countries. Of course, there are many benefits from working internationally. There is exposure to new cultures of countries that have ethnic, religious and social foundations in stark contrast to that of one's home country. In a work context, there are different corporate or organisational cultures, too, especially when many of these are coloured by the aforementioned socio-foundations of the prevailing population. Furthermore, there is the unique experience, and considerable challenge, gained from dealing with people in such settings, especially when working in an entity that is the product of a paternal society.*

Key words: Asia, employee effectiveness, employee reliability, international management, paternal culture, Thailand.

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## **1. Introduction**

For any manager, it is the proverbial blessing and a curse to be efficient and to see what must be done to improve any given situation. Having vision and the experience to achieve outcomes is one thing but, usually, it brings with it the challenge of encouraging the dedication and participation of others. That, I might suggest, is the art of excellent management.

How all of this applies to any international setting depends upon a manager having the necessary skill set, as well as the ability to apply these in an environment that may be very different to anything experienced beforehand. Also, there is the matter of a suitable opportunity arising that can exercise and prove the capabilities of a manager who works beyond the borders of the home country. In summary, these are fundamental themes to what follows herein.

After a small introduction, this article has three major parts, specifically: lessons learned from the early years of my life, with this being a brief synopsis of factors that influenced my foray into international business; lessons learned in business, which have provided me with a clear view as to the need for management styles to suit the circumstances, especially when employee reliability can vary; and, lessons learned from Asia, where I have worked in differing roles, with the related experience being instructive as to cultural influences on employee behaviour and workplace effectiveness. A concluding section completes the paper.

## **2. Lessons Learned in the Early Years**

There were many factors that influenced my entry into international management, with serendipity being foremost. Yet, without an adequate background, I would not have grasped the chance to work abroad. For instance, I had:

- An open-minded, migrant family;
- A willingness to connect with people;
- A business-related education;
- An accounting background;
- A solid work history;
- A keenness to learn.

I could say that any and all of these factors have had a positive impact upon my career path, with education and experience being particularly important. Yet, there must be more, because I know of others who have had similar, and better, backgrounds without that leading to anything beyond the borders of their homeland. Could it be that there was no appropriate opportunity? Is it a lower tolerance to risk taking? Must someone understand personal drive and business success? Perhaps this is so, although I do not know this with any certainty. However, I am very much aware that an aspiring manager must have a particular mindset that allows for interaction with all that international business entails, which can be good, as well as not so good.

In my case, I have visited extraordinary places, such as Samarkand on the legendary Silk Road in Uzbekistan, the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, temples in Thailand, cathedrals of Europe, and so on. I have marvelled at the greatness of Tokyo and New York, and followed the successes and failures of multinational corporations in the daily news reports. I have seen the foolishness of business, too, and have shaken my head in disbelief at the laxness and dishonesty of people in positions of influence.

Plus, I have enjoyed and collated experiences of meeting people with different backgrounds, which has provided the chance to advance my

own understanding of human endeavour. Also, I have met important people, and people who thought that they were important. In addition, I have met with people who were not at all significant. Still, I figured that seeing people as equals is a key component to doing well in business, whether domestic or international in nature. To be accepted as someone of equal standing, regardless of their position in life, has led to memorable encounters, such as meals in the simple homes of common people, and more elaborate events with the rich and powerful. Yet, all of that could be garnered by way of an enquiring mind and tourism alone.

From the perspective of my internationalisation, memorable occasions include little things that reinforced my interest in the world at large. By chance, I met a colleague who had lived in China for a while when IBM had first set up operations there. He was an Asian Studies graduate from whom I could learn about cultural differences, particularly Asian etiquette, such as not pointing at someone with my index finger. Not long after, while working on a trade-related consulting assignment, I spent time in Malaysia with two Westerners. From the outset, I sat with the driver and began to ask about local language and culture and that way, I learned a great deal. The others did not: I found that to be remarkable.

Increasingly, in a direct business capacity, I conducted PESTLE analysis (looking at **P**olitical, **E**conomic, **S**ociological, **T**echnological, **L**egal and **E**nvironmental factors) within a specific territory. That has given me a very clear idea about companies and countries, as well as places to be, and those to avoid unless the return on investment rises and the risk profile falls.

In relation to assessing countries, see:

- Corruption Perceptions Index ([www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org));
- Rule of Law Index ([www.worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index](http://www.worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index));

- CIA World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>);
- Global Competitiveness Index ([gcr.weforum.org/gcr2011](http://gcr.weforum.org/gcr2011));
- Cross-cultural differences ([geert-hofstede.com/countries.html](http://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html)).

### **3. Lessons Learned in Business**

Obviously, international travel involves the observation of and meetings with people. That, of course, can be put aside when it comes to the fundamentals of business management. After all, a business should have a primary purpose, as per vision and mission statements. In turn, these are expressed in strategic plans that lead to objectives upon which operational plans and activities are based. Managers and other employees are expected to pursue the successful achievement of those business objectives. Also, managers should make the best use of human resources to accomplish expected outcomes, doing so in the most economic and timely manner.

In this regard, consider the following four-sector diagram in Figure 1 (below), which shows the likely and perhaps probable, management style that is appropriate to circumstances related to an interaction between the urgency of a business situation and the reliability of employees to deal with the same. As might be expected, low urgency requires little in the way of management when employees are reliable, as in the lower right-hand quadrant of the diagram. More management is required if employees are otherwise. When urgency increases, management attention rises, even when employees are reliable. This is especially true when employees are unreliable, as is depicted in the upper left-hand quadrant when management is shown to be hard, focussed and forceful.

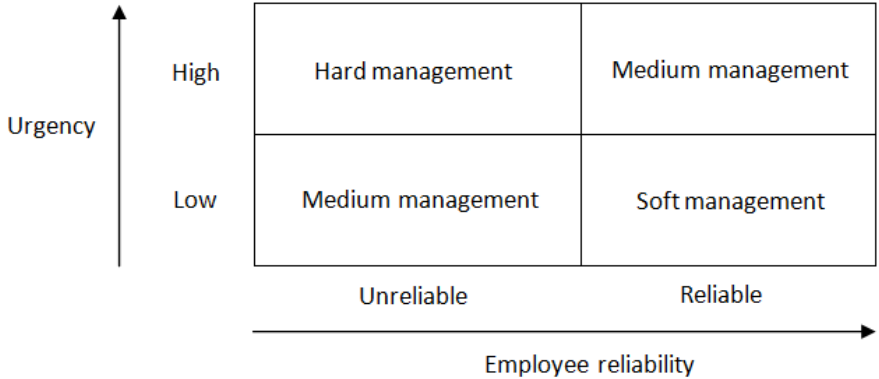


Figure 1: Management style as determined by urgency and employee reliability; Source: Author’s own composition

In the case of start-up and turnaround work, with which I am very familiar, the urgency is palpable and constant. For instance, in the case of any turnaround situation, especially when the business is at risk of collapse, all the mission-critical issues must be addressed. Anything less than full commitment to addressing those issues is a dereliction of duty, regardless of whether that applies directly to an employee, a manager or an executive.

Consequently, management focus must be acute, persistent and, perhaps, quite hard in driving employees to achieve various strategic outcomes. As an added observation, the more complex any situation might be, the less reliable will be the associated employees. This is because, usually, they are unaccustomed to dealing with the prevailing factors that affect the likelihood of business success in very challenging situations. As a consequence, the hard edge of leadership and management become quite likely, if not compulsory, in those situations. Again, that makes sense, especially when managers in those types of circumstances are pushed by executives or business owners to achieve specific objectives.

Also, the more serious is any given situation, the more probable it is that a manager does not have the luxury of time or any concern for pleasantries. Accordingly, it is a matter of whether subordinates respond positively, and promptly, or are unprofessional in failing to follow what the manager expects.

The preceding commentary regarding the four-sector analysis of management behaviour raises an interesting issue as to the perception of management in relation to the actual urgency of any given business situation, as well as in terms of correctly assessing the reliability of employees. We can assume that managers will be sufficiently skilled to appraise properly any situation as to urgency. Or, we might suggest that they will pursue urgent objectives given to them by decision makers, such as executives. The question, then, is whether employees can correctly determine why a certain management style is put into play.

#### **4. Lessons Learned in East Asia**

In relation to the preceding point about the assessment of employees, consider the general characteristics of people in Thailand, and elsewhere in the neighbouring Mekong region. In this article, Thailand will serve as a proxy for workers across Asia, especially when many attributes are shared across the continent.

The following section summarises my long-standing observations and supporting conclusions derived from my work in Asia, over several years as a manager, executive and advisor. Of course, first-hand experience provided by these roles might not be applicable to all sectors of the Thai economy or that of East Asia as a much greater whole. Even so, in providing direction in this article, I am very much guided by the needs of management in addressing business issues and in achieving strategic goals.

#### **4.1. Employee Characteristics – Lacking Business Basics**

I can see quite clearly that, when confronted by a superior, Thais can be shy, reticent, reluctant, cautious and passive. Also, they can exhibit a lack of adequate problem-solving capability in organisational situations. The ‘systems thinking’ approach, whereby the causes and effects of issues are explored or are apparent, seems alien to Thais in my experience. Instead, everything is seen as an isolated and disconnected instance and, of course, the ramifications of that approach are far from optimal. To some extent, I have found differences in people from elsewhere. I have found that Chinese, for example, are more reliable and this also applies to Sino-Thais (insofar as it is possible ever to separate Thais from Sino-Thais) and especially to Singaporeans, many of whom are capable and responsive. However, it must be said that mainland Chinese can still carry traditional opinions that make them less responsive. I expect that this will improve over time as younger people replace those who are of the old ways. Certainly, there are cultural, ethical and religious differences across East Asia, and these influential factors can, and do, shape the thinking and behaviour of people.

The aforementioned perception of Thais lacking basic business skills can be seen in conjunction with the extent to which students are raised on rote learning. Consequently, they are assumed to lack independent thought. A pertinent example sheds some light on this view. In Australia, I taught international business and management subjects to postgraduate students (almost all of whom were Asian, including many Thais, and from affluent business families). I guided them as to the reasons why an international business should be established. In the concluding exam, I asked what would justify the discontinuance of an international business, which would be the exact opposite of the requirements for establishment. However, that question was answered calamitously because it was something unknown to them, despite the fact that they had learned all the necessary answers, although in



reverse order. The students, in the main, could not distance themselves from what they had learned to see the obvious answers.

Possibly because of poor understanding as to cause and effect and deficiencies of perception as to the whole, there often seems to be disorganisation in Thai organizations. There is also the communal nature of Thais who usually like to do things in groups or as part of teams. To an outsider, team-bonding activities can make it seem that efficiency is not the primary objective so much as it is all about giving themselves a good time. Additional problems that I have observed include lack or adequate forethought or planning, even among people with tertiary level education. The problem of inadequate problem solving persists and this is exacerbated by the rigid hierarchies endemic in Thai society which make it extremely difficult for people to speak out about or in opposition to the views of others.

Given these observations, it can be said that Thais as a whole tend to be task-oriented rather than project-oriented and are very rarely strategically-oriented. In fact, as suggested earlier, the actual orientation for people at low organizational levels, life is about small moments of enjoyment and avoiding the critical gaze of superiors. This is clearly problematic when it comes to paid employment and it adds to the challenge for foreigners working in Thailand, who are likely to have a different view as to what employment entails.

Furthermore, the lack of information exchange in a Thai workplace can be very apparent and may be as much a matter of misinformation as it is about Thai employees transferring insufficient amounts of information. In addition, given the disincentive to take initiative, Thai employees can be insufficiently inquisitive and this affects their capacity to solve problems or to conduct worthwhile research. This can cause a paralysis in information sharing even when passing on a fact could have a dramatic impact, positive or negative, on a task with which they may be engaged.

The delays caused by a lack of adequate focus and follow-through are costly in terms of additional operational expenses incurred, such as extra labour input required for finishing a job. This occurs when anyone is involved with a task or project for longer than is necessary or if any project completion is delayed. A more important and hidden cost is that of lost opportunity. The incapacity or unwillingness of people to see any opportunity or their failure to react positively if any such thing is ever discovered can be costly.

For all of Thailand's celebrated charm, there are some unfortunate things that happen because of an exceedingly lax attitude as to rules largely caused by the culture of impunity. Lack of respect for rules is rooted in the lack of social solidarity caused by the ability of powerful and wealthy people to ignore rules. When combined with a background in agricultural seasonality and the tedious traffic jams of Bangkok, this tends to make Thais slack as to punctuality, other than stopping, religiously, for lunch at noon. With business expecting timeliness, it can be yet another challenge when many Thai employees show no concern about when a meeting starts.

In the workplace, another widespread aspect is that of Thai employees, fearful of sudden and often unwarranted criticism from superiors, tending to try to look busy as much as possible. Consequently, the associated efficiency level can be low, since the lack of genuine responsibility to make changes leads to inadequate focus, poor dedication to the task and a propensity to being distracted. Of course, to be fair, following a misguided employer or lax manager can be a cause for employee inefficiency.

In effect, from a business perspective, Thailand seems to offer a poor working environment, except that people do not seem to wish any ill or hardship to others, which is more than can be said for some other countries. In a Thai context, any damage that does arise is incidental and all liability is denied if anyone is challenged.

## **4.2. Corruption – Ever Present**

Corruption is another issue in the workplace. As such, employee honesty can become a problem, especially when any accessible money is involved. Note that poor governance and inadequate controls in Thailand suit people who have a personal interest in keeping everything running that way. Otherwise, the process of skimming, kickbacks, or outright theft, could not occur. There is a general perception in Thailand, and Asia generally, that corruption is not only a fact of life, but a necessary one in getting things done. It amounts to being, in the minds of many people, a transaction cost or expeditiousness fee that is in the order of ten to fifteen percent of the total sale or revenue figure.

At the micro and macro level, corruption is not considered to be a problem if things do get done. In the public sector, whether in Thailand, the nearby region, or elsewhere in Asia, infrastructure is a critical component of economic development, as well as social harmony. It is probable that the large amounts of money involved in related government spending provide many politicians and bureaucrats with the glorious chance for reaping lucrative benefits from large ‘transaction fees’. But, if all goes well, no one seems to care.

This brings to mind India, where I spent some time recently, which is a country that had the golden opportunity to showcase its capabilities to the world in the form of the hosting the Commonwealth Games. Yet, that event and the related projects were reported to be plagued by gross inefficiencies, financial mismanagement and rampant corruption. This was instructive for anyone contemplating India as a destination for foreign direct investment. My own observations, whilst in that country, reinforced this opinion. This gave added texture to the existing PESTLE risk assessment that was prepared for my client. Certainly, Indian infrastructure proved to be poorly maintained or built badly. Driving along the tollways and highways proved this. For

instance, and this is a telling thing, levels of the road surface changed when one length of bituminised road met another (as happened every few kilometres) or when it met at the edges of a previously-constructed concrete bridge. This meant that all drivers, especially of cars, had to slow down considerably whenever such a situation was seen. If not, they would suffer a jarring jolt caused by hitting the significant rise, the large fall or even the wide gap, that happened to be there because of shoddy work. This type of unprofessionalism in road building was apparent everywhere, even on a stretch of the national highway network that was recently completed.

I could not quite comprehend how such a situation could exist. So, I asked my Indian host about this obvious issue. Without any hint of humour, I was told that related government contracts were given to several companies, rather than just one road builder. The idea for doing so is that more contractors at work will lead to faster completion. However, since no one is given proper control of the situation, the sections of road are built and bituminised with no consideration for the next section or bridge. It is a ridiculous situation.

As a related afterthought, one can also argue that more corruption money could be extracted from several construction companies than by manipulating just one. The end result, appalling as it was, raises the obvious question. Is 'the system' working in that country? The clear answer is a very firm "No". It shows ineptitude. In comparison, no matter what the related financial arrangements might be, generally, the quality of Asian roads is of a good to excellent standard.

### **4.3. Strong Management of Employees: A Cultural Necessity**

The primary purpose of management is to understand, internalise, implement and demonstrate business plans and goals, as well as encourage others to do the same. When dealing with Thai organisations, there sometimes seems to be a distinct lack of active and adequate inquisitiveness and an overall inability to see real reason

for change. Besides, there is almost a national forgetfulness, resulting from the wide morass of subject matters which it is forbidden to discuss, which adds to the challenge of dealing with people in Thailand. One way for the manager to deal with this is through constant, intensive attention to details, milestones, progress, outcomes and achievements. Management and control, therefore, are very necessary, as in setting direction and monitoring progress. This means that regular reminders are required, as are subtle suggestions framed in a way that do not appear to be criticisms. It is noteworthy that Thais, generally, often seem incapable of admitting any wrongdoing, even if it is glaringly obvious and, astonishingly, even if the manager was present when something had happened. At best, that sort of thing has the solid makings of a black comedy.

No matter how much care is taken by a manager in pointing out a possible problem or actual error, clumsy speech can be taken as an affront by Thais and treated as an actual attack upon their person. Deep offence can be taken by people subjected to criticism, especially in public and good managers will try to avoid alienating employees needlessly. Furthermore, in any situation of that kind, as can arise when a manager asks for an explanation about any transgression, replies given may be ambiguous to avoid the loss of face. For people unfamiliar or uninterested in cultural issues, this can make the employees appear to be uncaring or unobservant.

#### **4.4. What to Do about Control and Motivation?**

It is a well-known fact that confrontation and public chastisement of an employee in East Asia, no matter how mild, can cause severe personal upset, due to loss of face. Yet, this is incongruous with contemporary business situations, which require people to be able to adapt rapidly with often wildly changing circumstances and, therefore, changes in responsibilities and required duties. Sadly, honesty (more so the lack of it) can be an issue when any employees defend their inadequacies with purposeful untruth and wild fantasy. Convenient

forgetfulness is another strong probability. As indicated, in terms of business objectives and professionalism, there are incongruities present.

Simply put, the perennial pull of fun has more power over Thais than does dignity. In other words, it is convenient for Thais to have malleable self images that can be seen to support entertainment and enjoyment above anything else but which may fail to secure their self-perceived level of respect and status in their particular social setting, such as the workplace. This means that motivational efforts must be recalibrated to take account of specific local conditions.

All of that brings forth to me the ultimate conclusion that it is better to be forceful and to push employees for a conclusion than it is to try and train, coach, coax, motivate, cajole or jolly along someone who, in truth, is beyond the realms of generally accepted western methods connected with inspiration and motivation. Once again, such a presumption supports the firm, stern and unfriendly management model that experience shows to be prevalent and as is in keeping with the paternal, familial, cronyistic ways of much of traditional Thai management. It may also be prevalent in other parts of the Mekong Region and East Asia.

Although there does not seem to be an easy remedy to the predicament of poor performance, one is plausible if not necessarily practical. This solution is for a manager to focus on what is important and ignore any deficiencies in employees that are not relevant to the task at hand. This must be done immediately, without comment, and as a matter of course. Accordingly, the way to go about managing Thais is to use the current situation, whatever it is, as the basis for the next instruction and that can mean a long process of trial and error, with deficiencies ignored and remedies explored without ever accusing someone of any bad behaviour. The same applies to suggestions for improvement, as a manager might do to coach and steer an employee or a colleague.

Consequently, extreme patience and overt understanding are fundamental elements of any manager in Thailand, as can be said to be the case in managing anyone. This is especially the situation when employees and colleagues are unlikely to have the same framework of reference education or commitment to the business as that of a manager, especially if the manager is a foreigner. From a business perspective, that is, why Thais behave as they do is irrelevant, especially when managers and employees are responsible for achieving organisational outcomes. Basically, human resources must be dependable. However, previously discussed characteristics in Thai behaviour can be widespread and ingrained. This, of course, is in the purview of social scientists and psychologists and, for a manager in any Thai organisation, if business or organisational objectives are to be achieved, it is a matter of constantly training, coaching, coaxing, mentoring and monitoring managing and leading people to a conclusion. This may contradict the background and expectations of employees and sensitivity will be required to manage this situation in a sustainable way – of course, the situation will be different for a manager (often a foreign manager) who is only interested in a short-term fix before moving elsewhere. That amount of management effort necessarily adds to the investment of time. Still, it must be considered that, when time is crucial and in short supply, it is better and less difficult to go for the harder approach in managing people. Quite frankly, it is easier to let Thai nature take its course, rather than argue the point, even if this may appear contrary to the efficient pursuit of short-term business objectives. This approach, therefore, is more of an ongoing training exercise and, naturally, cannot be done for important tasks when management must focus on immediate achievement of goals or the undertaking must be given to someone who can do it successfully.

The reality is that a task not done properly is unlikely to serve as a future reminder that ensures more efficiency. As suggested earlier, the underlying, innermost persona of a Thai employee has a tendency to be resilient in maintaining itself and all the foibles and failings that it

generates. Success in circumstances outlined in the previous section, therefore, is more about the management of people, rather than any collective effort, as may be the case with effective teams in well-run organisations elsewhere. Of course, the innate communal characteristic of Thais and others in the Mekong region can bring people together when something must be done, preferably when a sense of enjoyment can be attached to the activity. Again, management is necessary and, in that situation, managers must be leaders, motivators and work as if in charge of a social committee.

This suggests that a manager needs to be soft and communal. Yet, one cannot forget that the viable alternative is to give commands and drive people, as was identified in the preceding four-sector diagram, with application of the hard management style being met, all the while, with the disarming smile and pleasant countenance of most Thai employees.

The question for the manager is between the soft or the hard management style, as in the model summarised in the previous section of this article, usually comes down to the manager's preferences. Often, this is a product of their personality and related characteristics, although the dominant corporate culture of an organisation can influence people to such an extent that it that overrides any personal preferences of a manager.

#### **4.5. Paternal Society and Its Effects on Business**

It is generally agreed in business that time is a precious commodity and that it should not be wasted on long-winded decision cycles or in seeking the agreement of all concerned, especially in any environment where some sort of consensus is expected by employees. In such cases, as when any threat is imminent or has arrived, decisions must be made instantly and that is all about good, strong leadership.



If managers are not in a position to make the mission-critical decisions in isolation, they tend to follow the leader. In contrast, it is noteworthy that any manager playing a dominant, hard, paternal role is very much in keeping with the very nature of autocratic Thailand and that of many parts of East Asia generally. This is expressed in the circular flow diagram of Figure 2.

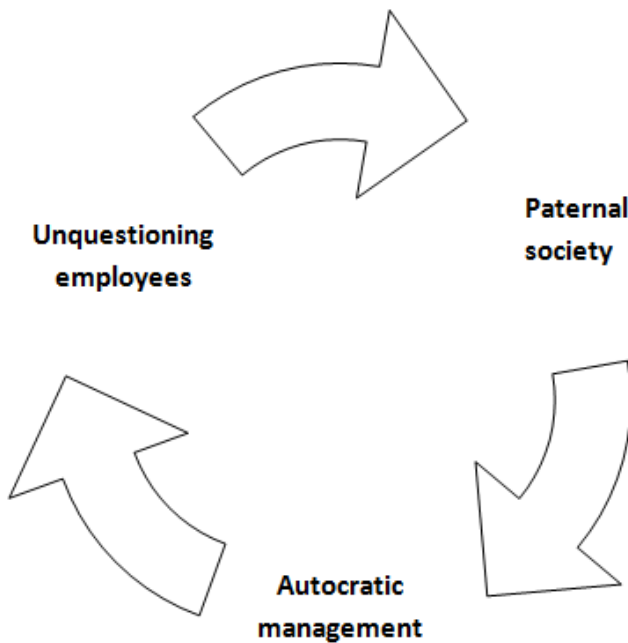


Figure 2: Paternal Society in Asia – Its Effects and Self-Reinforcement; Source: Author’s Own Composition

Working in entities controlled by other nationalities is an added challenge for anyone working internationally. In the case of East Asia, a paternal society tends to cultivate autocratic management whereby the chief executive or owner of an entity treats employees as family members, although doing so as a hard task master akin to being the

head of the household. In turn, as suggested by the diagram above, employees follow what is commanded, and do so unquestioningly. That, of course, reinforces the very elements that make an East Asian organisation, and the prevailing society, as it is. In the microcosms created by Asian organisations, such as in the private and public sectors, autocracy and tyranny are obvious, and possible, outcomes.

In the traditional hierarchical structure of a paternal organisation, for people in more senior positions, less softness and much more hardness is evident in terms of the style of management. So it is that the 'father figure' borders on being unyielding and unforgiving. Again, generalisations sweep aside people who do behave differently. Still, the overall model is appropriate, especially when anyone new to the region wants a guide by which to understand the way of things in Thailand and in much of East Asia.

In that type of environment, where there is fundamental adherence to the musing of one person, consider that the chance for organisational change is low. As is understandable, Thai employees respect their manager or executive or the business owner. That is all well and good but respect for elders extends to following their lead faithfully, even if incorrect as to their vision, judgement and decisions or if it is entirely contrary to whatever was said to be the objective of the business. It is possible that a so-called leader can be so misguided as to have no real clue as to where he or she wants to go. Yet, employees will still follow and no one will say anything out of place. This is also problematic.

Another issue is that people who were suppressed by authoritative leadership and lacking any power as a direct consequence seem to relish the opportunity to act paternally and autocratically when they get their own chance and are promoted to management roles. That adds a significant degree of difficulty to the attainment of organisational efficiency, if it is even an objective, and gives many who must deal with such managers a very trying time. Also, cronyism

is a by-product of paternalism. This can mean that incompetent people are placed in positions of small or large influence, with this leading to gross inefficiencies.

The good thing is that the generally casual and accepting attitude of Thais means that whatever they are told to do is taken in their stride and related ramifications may well be forgotten. Again, that adds to the pleasantness of working with Thais, even if it does little to generate any confidence in their ability to see good reason as to why decisions occurred or if there were better options available at the time or subsequently. In the prevailing paternal culture, Thais dare not challenge authority or even question what others might think of any topic and so it is that the status quo remains unchallenged.

For managers, there can be a lack of the executive-level information flow (if any exists at all) that is necessary to do the job well. Also, there are not likely to be transparent decision making processes (if any exist at all). Consequently, it is problematic for a manager when subordinates do not have any real idea about business purpose or courtesy. The same can be said when dealing with colleagues of equal standing in an organisation who show no capability to offer help of any sort. It is extraordinary to think that managers and even executives show no apparent evidence of sharing or caring about others of equal or lower, rank. It is tricky, if not difficult, to be manager in Thailand, and may be thankless too.

Understandably, inadequate information is an obstacle for a determined manager. I recall a situation where a very competent foreigner was appointed as President of an entity in a popular province south of Bangkok. Despite the lofty position, he was never given access to financial statements. As expected, this situation hampered his ability to run the business, and to make economically-sound decisions. Of course, withholding vital information also had the effect of making that man feel that he was not on equal terms with senior executives, all of whom were Thai and, predictably, he resigned. The

reality in any international setting is that locals can resist any push for change from foreigners due to the high likelihood that the foreigners will leave and they will stay. In another part of the world, I have had as much said to me when trying to save a business in the grips of a vicious takeover battle.

Owing to the inefficiencies of some Thai organisations, it must be pointed out that foreigners may be recruited to establish a business or garner some sort of positive public image. Once that sort of objective is achieved, the foreigner is discarded, even if it means that the Thai replacement cannot maintain the level of previous accomplishment or the former pace of progress. This may be done for reasons of national pride, inflated egos or exaggerated opinions of Thai skills and without any value placed upon the positive contribution that foreigners, in such cases, can continue to provide. In the case of a prominent professional services firm in Thailand, when it merged with another, all foreign partners were terminated so as to ensure full Thai control, with that happening regardless of the loss of reputation or diminution of the client base.

Back in the Thai workplace, it is best if a manager deals with what must be done to the full extent of the responsibilities entrusted to them in their role. Anything less might not be in keeping with their level of professionalism and personal expectations of themselves. Anything more and they would be seen by others, including colleagues and superiors, as having interfered in the workings of another person. That can be the case, even if positive outcomes can eventuate. Of course, possible opposition and polite antagonism is unlikely to arise if a manager was asked for help or if it were the consequence of a communal, group effort. The reality is that, amongst Thai employees, someone exhibiting a less than an acceptable standard of work might not be commented upon by others for fear of upsetting that person. Societal sensitivity, therefore, can compromise the chance of advancement that comes from utilising skills and abilities to the fullest.

Note that this sensitivity does not end when someone becomes a manager or an executive. The situation can become ridiculous when a mission critical issue cannot be expressed for fear of inadvertently upsetting or accidentally insulting someone. For instance, in a board meeting, I listened to a director speak, at length, about his business idea, which was flawed. No one said anything in opposition. Then, the chairman asked for my opinion and I gave it. The previous speaker, later, spoke with his colleagues and wondered why I had attacked him personally and why I did not like him. Of course, I had questioned the validity of the business idea and had not mentioned the person, as that would have been inappropriate. However, the person concerned did not restrict the extent of his sense of self and that means all comments are interpreted as attacks. That particular incident suggested that inadequate attention was paid to the objective of the meeting and of the business. For the person who felt attacked, it was more about him wanting happy families than it was about obtaining better business outcomes. As a direct aside, it is worth noting that the chairman had honoured me in asking for my opinion so as to show everyone present that I was worthy of being heard. In addition, consider that the chairman had utilised my response as a way of downplaying the topic on the table, rather than him having to do it, which would have been difficult for a Thai person, especially the chairman, to do to another Thai. In this regard, consider the possible absence of clarity as to lines of reporting, as can arise from complex matrix frameworks and that there is sure to be a lack of transparency. In relation to decision making, for a manager, that can become an unfathomable nightmare. Of course, all of this confusion might suit the owners or primary executives of an organisation. Either that mystification is maintained for financial gain, so as to shroud any corrupt activities, or it ensures that their position as head of the household is sustained because they are the only person who knows what is really happening.

Again, leadership can be biased and not at all in accordance with generally accepted business principles or organisational goals. For example, at a very critical point in time, the output of a particular

employee was crucial to a business in my care. Yet he left for a few days to attend a family event, despite the fact that his attendance was not mandatory. Also, he had failed to speak with me about his planned absence, having gained some sort of concurrence from a low-level manager instead. Of course, I sought an immediate explanation, only to cause uproar amongst colleagues (including the chief executive) who, being of the same ethnic background, had all placed their cultural norms ahead of what had to be done to move the business toward success. It was another lesson for me as to the way of things at that workplace. Still, I remain steadfast that all employees need to put aside much of themselves to remain effective in a business setting or adapt to suit it. It is all about focus, as opposed to distraction.

#### **4.6. Employee Focus and Distraction**

For any manager working in Thailand, yet another challenge is seeing the significance of something when it happens and, then, having the additional adventure of convincing others that it is a genuine issue. For subordinates, that can mean another dose of hard management. However, if it involves peers or superiors, the challenge of convincing them about the magnitude of an issue can be substantial. Ideally, employees need to be focussed upon whatever is placed before them so as to move the organisation onwards and upward, as per the strategic plan of that entity. Consequently, managers must be aware that there are four main aspects that can drive employee action and involvement in the workplace. These are presented in Figure 3 below.

As is suggested by this diagram, simplistically, an employee can be driven by:

- Self-interest, whereby they support themselves;
- Cronyism, by supporting a Thai superior or sponsor;

- Friendship, being a bond that supports a manager on a personal level;
- Business focus, by supporting a manager entirely on a business level.

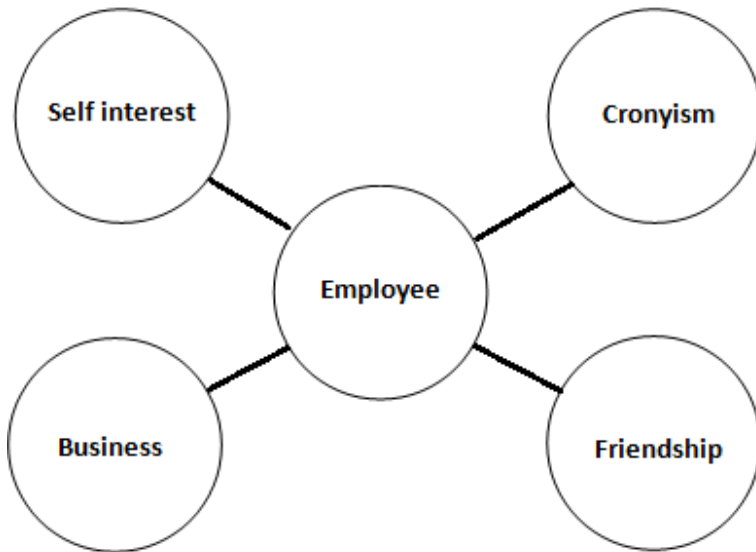


Figure 3. Areas of Possible Focus and Influence for an Employee;  
Source: Author's Own Composition

From an employee's perspective, there is a trade-off between focussing upon the attainment of work-related objectives and allowing for more personal goals to affect their thoughts and actions. It is necessary, then, for a manager to know subordinates well enough in the hope that this understanding can help in shifting their focus, thinking and actions to the low side of the preceding diagram, whereby employees support business aims directly or through their

friendship with the manager. There are constant questions that must be asked by a manager. For instance, is an employee aligned with the needs of the business? Or, at the expense of the organisation, does self-interest lead them astray?

It should be said that management becomes something of an art in balancing the needs of a business with the sensitivities of employees. An alternative, one that can also be effective, although potentially problematic in the longer term with regard to employee retention, is to be dictatorial and show only hardness. In that regard, the question is whether a manager pays sufficient attention to improving outcomes or allows a management regime that is less demanding upon employees time to prevail. This is determined by the social environment as well as employee interests. Again, this is a dichotomy concerning what is necessary when selecting an appropriate management style.

Obviously, a manager must be diligent in ensuring that human, physical and financial resources are employed optimally. It is as much about return on investment for a person as it is for infrastructure, facilities, equipment or funds invested on the short-term money market. Fundamentally, this is a constant question of whether an individual is pursuing the achievement of business objectives.

In business, timeliness is important. Delays should not be allowed. Often, delays do arise due to personal interests, as can become evident through a continued lack of initiative, enthusiasm, curiosity or business focus. I recall an instance when I was running a large part of a particular Asian-based business. At that time, a new technological innovation was announced and suppliers were offering an easy-to-install trial. I could see that this application would provide definite benefits to the President of the business, as well as others if the benefits were proven and, therefore, I asked the technical manager when that application could be installed. "Three weeks" was the answer. My immediate reply was "Why not by Monday?" Pleasingly, and necessarily, it was done in my timeframe, and not in line with



what that less-than-focussed manager thought was right. Again, it comes down to a misalignments of what an employee believes is required, by way of a mixture of interests, and what a manager, or executive, knows is vital to business success. Even so, in a business context, there is the persistent matter of employee self interest and also the strong probability that this is at odds with what is required in the workplace. It is no wonder, therefore, that some managers in East Asia can take on behavioural characteristics of the old ways, as discussed in the earlier section about paternalism, if only to ensure that employees achieve any allocated objectives. Nevertheless, it must be said that management in any location has challenges. Motivation, coaching, counselling, guiding and leading are ever-present. In addition, patience and persistence are universally required skills for managers who strive to do well. This leads to the view that managers must be of a mind to find any way that can improve the productivity of people, policies and processes. Even if the latter two are outside the scope of a manager's responsibilities, people are not and should never be an afterthought or aberration. Getting employees onside is vital in terms of securing a manager's success, not to mention that of the business overall.

#### **4.7. Building a Sub-Culture Based upon Trust**

In a veritable sea of complexity, it is best for a manager to be a stable point of reference around which employees can rally as and when it suits them. Since there can be a lack of constancy exhibited by employees, consider the range of possible management styles that were introduced earlier. Managers can act toward employees in a soft manner or, as was expressed in Figure 1, managers can harden that approach considerably. However, no matter what the style, it is paramount that everything is anchored and driven by the same sense of purpose that is evident in the strategic intention of the organisation. Before reading on, please give some thought to that notion for a moment.

Consistency on the part of a manager can also act as something of a social catalyst that will foster a beneficial group culture emanating from a manager's point of view and his or her persona. In relation to this, mull over the following diagram as a representation of this anchoring aspect.

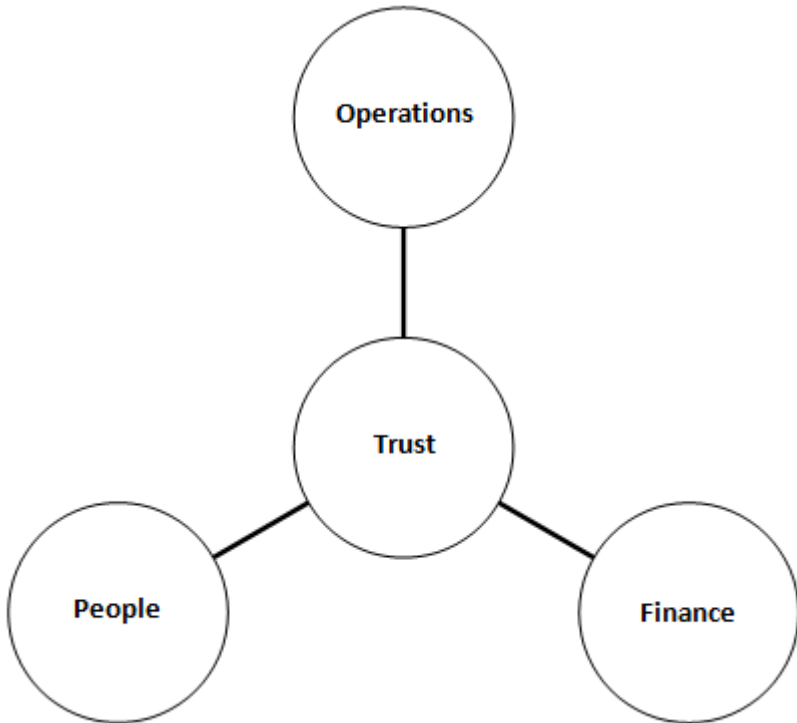


Figure 4. Trust as the Stable Foundation for Any Organisation;  
Source: Author's Own Composition

The preceding diagram arose from a conversation with a leading corporate lawyer about the topic of turnaround management. He asked me what was most important in dealing with a critical business situation. Was it the operations, the financial aspects or human

resources (HR)? I replied that it was something else: the constancy of trust. From my perspective, this is central to any situation. Of course, operations are important, as they are necessary to produce the goods or services that an entity sells in a market. Also, finance is important as there should be no overruns in terms of money and HR is important as there is the need to have people committed to a project. Obviously, success cannot be achieved without the support of employees.

However, in relation to one thing being of the utmost importance, it must be consistency, which can only come from unwavering support for the business goals. Without that steadiness, people involved with the business cannot have the trust in the manager that is necessary in relation to attaining the envisioned objectives. In effect, the manager, ever-mindful of what the business requires, should not allow any other distractions to affect his or her personal behaviour. Employees, thereby, see constancy that can be relied upon and this supports the thoughts related to the three aspects of a business shown in the previous diagram. In effect, everything in an organisation must be underpinned by centrally-located trust.

Moreover, when dealing with business issues, whether these are financial, operational or related to human resources, a manager must be trusted to provide consistent guidance as to how employees and the business must function. Usually, this involves garnering the support of employees, since this can yield in any organisation a sub-culture that revolves around a reliable manager. Basically, to look at the counter-factual argument, if a manager does not have the support of employees and they do not trust the manager's judgement, the three functional areas mentioned above, as well as any others, will fail to meet expectations.

An allied consideration is that there is a need for personal integrity on the part of a manager, if only to ensure the manager's peace of mind. In a turnaround situation or any other where the aforementioned sense of urgency is high, there is a need for a manager to have knowledge

and nerve in dealing with the numerous issues of a struggling business. Even in such circumstances, it is vital that appropriate focus is maintained. Also, throughout, market competitiveness must be an underlying consideration. If an employee, manager or executive does not do as well as possible and identical aspects of a competitor do better, this can lead to loss of market power, market share and profitability, which can undermine the financial position.

Again, we can see that a manager must delegate work to those in their particular area and help them to achieve tasks and projects as assigned. Short of doing the actual work, a manager must also provide an environment that is conducive to effectiveness, which might need the aforementioned coaching and so forth. Without wishing to repeat myself, consider that trust is central to the point of organisational stability grown by a manager. Without that, employees will not be able to discern differences between what the manager does and the complexity that already exists. Of course, this does not suggest that a manager can undo the rudimentary elements of an East Asian organisation. That should be evident due to the self-supporting paternal scenario that was considered earlier.

#### **4.8. Becoming International**

Given all of the preceding commentary, it is little wonder that Thais do not seem to be in high demand in the global business community. It is difficult to imagine that people who were born into and raised by a society that has the characteristics and expectations explained here will do well elsewhere, if they dared to leave. Even so, the pleasantness and caring of Thai people does have a particular home in the service sector, including the tourism and hospitality industry, especially when jobs are task-based. Naturally, there are pockets of perfection, although these are few and far between. That these exemplars exist at all is a saving grace, although not when others also employed in an entity are obstacles to possible progress. Notwithstanding widespread cronyism, anyone who does stand apart

from the rest of the employees has the potential to become a splendid leader and can also become an ideal candidate for international work, whether on an individual project, a longer-term assignment or a more permanent placement.

To determine the readiness of employees for international roles, it is necessary that they:

- Know their strengths and possible limitations;
- Know particular languages that are required;
- Know what to do when faced with serious business issues;
- Know how to seize opportunities;
- Know how to fix any non-business problems that arise when in a new location.

Without support from an existing manager of employer, how can someone begin a process of internationalisation? If that is the case, people should:

- Go to the country where they want to work;
- Become immersed in the targeted culture;
- Sell themselves to people who could make good use of their capabilities;
- Look for opportunities that suit their skill set;
- Learn from others.

Note that it is easier to find a job in a place where an aspiring manager is physically available, rather than being too far away. In addition, it is about:

- Fitting in - this can be done by affecting local mannerisms but, it is better to remain observant, rather than to participate fully doing so in order to learn from what is happening and from what others do.
- Eating habits – consider the details of fine dining, the use of chopsticks, the Thai style (with a fork in the left hand and a spoon in the right), using finger tips or an entire hand. Also, there is the associated etiquette as to what is necessary in each case.
- Beliefs – have actual respect for fundamental beliefs, such as in Buddhist, Christian and Islamic societies. Still, one must understand the demands of business and that these can be counter to prevailing cultural expectations.
- Patience – especially when in East Asian cultures that applaud serenity.
- Proper assessment – making certain of the consequences before any related decision is made.

#### **4.9. The Best Approach for Managers**

Experience I have gained in Asia and elsewhere suggests that the best approach for workplace management is a mixture of things and that much depends upon context, as well as the persons with whom a manager interacts. For instance, it appears that managers must be beneficial, believable, consistent and kind, yet stern when necessary. Optimal management is not about supporting one type of style. It is situational, fluid and in accordance with what is required by the

organisation that has engaged a manager to meet strategic objectives. That flexibility, foremost, is the deciding factor as to how a manager must work, as well as how to interact with others. This involves finding what is right for the moment, the person, the project or whatever it is that comes into view and that requires a manager's attention. For a manager to do less than what is proposed is to be less than optimal in the job and, therefore, it is to be less than professional.

Having said all of that, if a manager is ever put into extremely challenging roles, as referred to earlier in relation to start-up and turnaround situations, the necessary management style is sure to be hard and will require discarding all pleasantries in the pursuit of necessary business outcomes.

Certainly, how to be a good manager should be judged in accordance with business outcomes. Still, that can mean a manager must be considerate, approachable, compassionate, understanding of people, as well as accepting of their obvious weaknesses and failings. It is also advisable to encourage, if not initiate and engage in, non-work activities. Alternatively, the manager must be a tyrant or hard task master, which is a common management style in East Asia and is a recurrent theme in this article.

The primary point arising from my experience and, probably, the main lesson to be learned, is to remain calm and clear in situations where those qualities are absent. The soft human quality provides a skilled manager with a hard-edged tool to use in pushing people to pursue and attain business outcomes. This form of behaviour, I believe, provides the grounds for succeeding in international roles that have a remarkable array of challenges.

## **5. Conclusion**

East Asian workplaces offer considerable complexity and uncertainty, as well as too much bureaucracy, low to no strategic direction,

inadequate leadership and poor management. Accordingly, such workplaces are a great training ground for anyone who is contemplating international business opportunities, and going global. The lessons in East Asia are there to be learned and applied.

Given all of the aforementioned problems that are attributable to Thai characteristics, with this serving as a surrogate for East Asia generally, it is best for any aspiring international manager to be very philosophical in order to remain quite composed and lucid as to what must be done to remedy any business situation. As such, that approach makes the perfect basis for dealing with difficult issues and thorny people.

You might recall that this article started with a heartfelt paragraph as to the meaning of management, which might be worth revisiting here. There is the need for readers who are current and prospective managers to give serious thought as to what they ought to do in making their work day more productive, especially when engaged with others over whom they have potential or actual influence.

Consider that any place of work is international, in one form or other, and that each one of these workplaces is a school for managers who want to become international. It is, simply, a matter of learning lessons that are there for the taking and making the right decision when any strong opportunity comes along.