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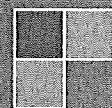
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## **THE CONGRUENCE BETWEEN THE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND THE NATIONAL CULTURE IN DOING BUSINESS ACROSS CULTURE OF MNCs IN THAILAND**

DR. SANTIDHORN POORIPAKDEE<sup>1</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

Managing across cultures has long been recognized as a potential problem for multinational corporations. In particular, MNCs are discovering that they must carefully investigate and understand the culture of where they intend to do business and modify their approaches appropriately. Awareness of cultural similarities and differences is becoming increasingly important to the successful strategies of MNCs as they become more transnational. The main purpose of this research is to focus on the congruence between the management practices and the national culture in doing business across culture of MNCs in Thailand. The multinational corporations that operating business in Thailand need to modify their management practices to the Thai national cultures in order to achieve effective performance as follows (1) the expatriate managers need to have some adaptations in their managerial styles to be in accordance with the host country's culture they are working with, especially in Thailand. Providing cultural preparation including language training to the expatriate managers who will be sending to work in Thailand; (2) the expatriate managers perceived the differences between Thai and their home cultures, they need to understand the host country national work values, as well as give rise to managerial approaches that are suited to the local employees; (3) MNCs that have adjustment on their management practices to Thai culture have achieved higher performing than those who have not made adjustments. To prevent the expatriates from "going native" and losing the commitment to the parent firm, the expatriates should be encouraged to see themselves as "dual citizens" in order to achieve higher performance in doing business in Thailand.

**Key Words:** Management practices; National culture; MNCs; Cross-cultural.

### **INTRODUCTION**

International trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) have increased tenfold over the last 20 years and they are now becoming more competitive in the modern world. A foreign direct investment (FDI) is an investment made by a company or entity based in one country, into a company or entity based in another country, therefore, many multinational corporations (MNCs) have holdings throughout the world. The Asia-Pacific region has become the largest recipient of foreign direct investment (FDI) among developing countries. Certain factors that make it attractive to foreign investors are: economic growth, the size of domestic markets, the availability of natural resources, the growth of trade, the existence of adequate infrastructure, and the quality of human capital. Thailand is one of the most attractive countries in the Asia-Pacific region for foreign direct investment. Over the past two centuries, Thailand has been open to the economic and political forces sweeping across region and the world. In the nineteenth century, it was sucked into colonial trade. From the 1940s, it became a theater for the political rivalry of the Great Powers during the cold war. From the 1950s, it was open to the internationalization of economic forces - the spread of multinationals, the expansion of Japan, the relocation of manufacturing, and the globalization

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of capital. Thailand has been very open to external influences. These external influences have been mandated through forces in the local economy and society. Foreign direct investment has been an important element of Thailand's economic development, and the country is an important FDI destination. Thailand offers an attractive and modern legal framework and its economy benefits from the regional dynamism. According to the UNCTAD World Investment Report 2015, Thailand, with USD 12.6 billion, is the 5th largest FDI recipient in East and South-East Asia.

Multinational corporations or MNCs are defined as “corporation which have their home in one country but operate and live in the different country” (Bishnu, 2010). MNCs can also be characterized as a group of geographically dispersed and goal-disparate organizations. Essentially, they are workplaces where different ethnicities and cultural values are intertwined. Workers often bring different values, attitudes, and goals into the workplace, thereby causing interpersonal conflicts (Chang & Taylor, 1999). This causes MNCs to face cultural differences that strongly affect their ability to deploy and manage business-critical applications. Now, MNCs have been plagued by the problem of premature return of expatriate managers due to their inability to adapt to the culture of the host country. Internationalization has increased the demand for individuals who can manage effectively in a foreign environment. Therefore, an understanding of culture and its ties to trade and investment would be valuable information for policy makers as they determine potential partner countries for international business (Mac-Dermott and Mornah, 2015)

MNCs must function in more than one external environment, and respond to a complex set of factors such as the diverse nationalities of employees, floating exchange rates, geographically imposed problems of communication, cultural difference and so forth (Chang & Taylor, 1999). Awareness of cultural similarities and differences is becoming increasingly important to the successful strategies of MNCs as they become more transnational (Luthans & Doh 2014). Culture is central in managing the current global workforce dynamics. The transnational organization, the form that many internationally operating companies are moving towards, offers important strategic capabilities, creates a host of new managerial requirements and demands managers to pay attention to cultural differences. All over the world multi-national companies find themselves in cultures different from their parent country cultures and therefore call for such companies having to deal with different cultural orientations. The success of such firms can as such be impacted by how these are handled (Dartey-Baah, 2013). Therefore, to understand the culture of the country in which they are working will make international managers understand better how to manage and organize their companies. Because managerial attitudes, values, behaviors, and efficacy differ across national cultures, hence there is no one best way to manage a business. Differences in national cultures call for differences in management practices (Newman & Nollen, 1996).

The main purpose of this research is to focus on the congruence between the management practices and the national culture in doing business across culture of MNCs in Thailand. For those multinational corporations where operating business in Thailand, they need to modify their management practices to the Thai national cultures in order to achieve effective performance. Multinational corporations that manage consistently with national culture expectations will be better performing than multinational corporations whose management practices do not fit the national culture.

## INTERNATIONAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIES

In an increasingly global business environment, the interaction of people with different culture requires that multinational corporations consider these differences in addressing the concerns of stakeholders at home and abroad. Digman (2005) proposes that culture clashes or differences can create major problems in doing business in other parts of the world or with companies or people



from other cultures. Therefore, a major challenge of doing business internationally is to adapt effectively to different cultures. Such adaptation requires an understanding of cultural diversity, perceptions, stereotypes, and values. In particular, MNCs are discovering that they must carefully investigate and understand the culture of where they intend to do business and modify their approaches appropriately (Luthans & Doh 2014). Culture can be defined as the set of key values, assumptions, understandings, and ways of thinking that is shared by members of an organization and taught to new members as correct (Daft, 1999). Culture is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group (Carla, 2016). Culture is acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior. It also serves as a framework for shaping and guiding the thoughts, the actions, and practices as well as the creativity of members in the organization. Culture represents as an imperfectly shared system of interrelated understanding, shaped by its member's shared history and experiences. It defines the "shoulds" and the "oughts" of life. In short, culture is "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another. People are culturally conditioned as people all over the world share a common biological nature and universally live in social groupings, the way they live, the meaning they give to their lives, the way they see their world, and the way they interact with their environment and among themselves, vary from culture to culture (Komin, 1991). If people from all countries in the world were similar, there would be no conflicts between the people in the international organizations. There is a growing body of evidence to indicate that national cultures differ widely, and the result is marked differences in behavioral patterns worldwide.

National culture is defined as the values, beliefs, and assumptions learned in early childhood that differentiate one group of people from another, has been shown to be a relatively stable component of countries (Schuler & Rogovsky, 1998). National culture is the software of mind, and it is deeply embedded in everyday life and fairly resistant to change (Newman & Nollen, 1996). It refers to the primary values and practices that characterize a particular country (Komin 1991). Much cross-cultural literature uses national boundaries as a convenient synonym for a culture. Clearly this framing of the concept is somewhat a theoretical and imprecise, since no nation is so pure that all of its members share a single dominate viewpoint. Nevertheless, members of a nation face a set of common experiences, themes, and institutions that shape their value orientations. These include geography, climate, economy, political system, racial mix, religious mix, media, language, educational system, and many intangibles that result in a unique national character that is more clearly apparent to foreigners than to the national themselves. However, it is not enough that MNCs have to know the extent to which national culture differ from each other. Rather, they must understand how national differences influence headquarter-subsidiary relationships because different cultures prefer different rules of conduct and administrative procedures (Very et al. 1996).

Komin (1991) notes that understanding the culture in the country where they are working can make international managers more effective. Interaction between members of different cultural groups is an increasingly common element of modern life, as more and more people study, work and settle in cultures other than their own. It makes accurate understanding of another culture a necessity. This is where cross-cultural psychology makes its strong contribution. While psychology is the scientific study of human behavior, social psychology and cross-cultural

psychology in particular focus on the ways in which behaviors are shaped and influenced by social and cultural forces.

Doing business in Thailand may not necessarily be the same as in other countries. Just because everyone appears to accept your ideas so receptively, it may not necessarily mean you have come up with a real winner. It is, after all, impolite to question the decision of one's superiors or even business associates to their faces. There are certain things to always bear in mind. Never shout or lose your temper if something doesn't seem to be happening as well as you expected, otherwise it may well work out that what you wanted will not be done at all. The occasional confrontation in the West is an acceptable way to clear the air, but in Thailand, it will more likely just bring down an impenetrable fog (Muangkul, 1991). Thai culture is founded on Buddhism and tradition. Buddhist fatalism and acceptance of one's karma (result of one's action) renders it somewhat superfluous, if not tedious (Lewis, 1996). Unlike the rest of Southeast Asia, however, Thailand never belonged to a colonial power, and the traditional way of life is still very much apparent (Selmer, 1996).

Each culture has its own system of values that can best be summed up in only a few words or expressions. Thailand is no different; the important values in Thailand are loyalty and trust. Building the relationship is an essential factor of success in doing business in Thailand, a country where social engagement play an important role in developing trust. Hierarchy and seniority are also important and senior officials and business people will most likely expect to meet representatives of similar positions, not their juniors. Social engagements and personal contact play an important role in developing trust and the weekend round of golf, dinner or cocktails with business contacts are important adjuncts to the daily working routine. The gestures that are considered very rude are do not touch people in their head and do not point anything with your feet. And show respect to Royal Family (Santander Trade Portal, 2016) "Face" is also important in Thailand, and "loss of face" is one of the penalties for breach of trust. Conciliatory compromise is always the best approach to adopt in business dealings as this is politeness and will not cause either side to suffer "loss of face". Promotion may be based as much on the reciprocal relationship between junior and mentors is best summed up by the expression "kreng jai" which is best understood as being considerate – the junior for the senior's position and the senior for his junior's respect and/or efforts. The expression "kreng jai" can really only be appreciated through a sensitive and open-minded approach to the Thai culture and the way of doing business here (Muangkul, 1991).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this study is to focus on the essentials of successful organization for doing business across cultures in Thailand. In doing business in Thailand, the foreign managers need to study the cultural differences in order to understand Thai culture better. This will make them get highly effective coordination in doing business across countries. This paper offers qualitative analysis of the congruence of management practices and national culture in doing business across cultures in Thailand. In this study, I focus on MNCs operating in Thailand by basing on several management practices on Thai culture. I use MNCs as the context of this research because MNC is the international organization that interacts with various people and societies. This interaction brings people of one culture (expatriates) in contact with those of a different society with different culture.

Data were collected through personal interviews in depth with senior expatriate managers of 10 multinational corporations in Thailand. The study is mainly addressed several board questions: (1) Should expatriate managers adapt the management practices that are being followed

at home to fit with Thai culture? (2) What differences do they perceive between Thai and their home cultures? (3) Do MNCs that have adjustment on their management practices to Thai culture have achieved higher performing than those who have not made adjustments?

However, the finding results were also based on the secondary data search from the literature reviews. There is some research about Thai culture in management issue. All of this research both written by Thais and foreigners were focused in details to find the differences of the viewpoints of Thai values and cultures.

## FINDINGS

International management should consider management in a variety of cultural settings. For expatriate managers working in the foreign cultures, cultural and value differences could be a barrier to their effective management of host country national employees, as they may unable to empathize with or anticipate their host country national subordinates' behaviors. Organizations are usually created by leaders, whether the leadership is despotic, individual or collective. Leadership functions in two modes – one of networking and one of task orientation. In the network mode, the concerns, in order of appearance are: the status of the leader(s), the chain of command, the management style, the motivation of the employees and the language of management used to achieved this. In the task-orientation mode, the leadership must tackle issues, formulate strategies, create some form of work ethic, decide on efficiency, task distribution and use of time. By changing or strengthening the culture of an organization, a leader can indirectly influence the motivation and behavior of its members (Yukl, 1998). Noypayak and Speece (1998) also propose that the effective managers may need to perform well on the four major perspectives in organizational and management effectiveness literature: (1) human relations perspective (participation, openness, morale and commitment), (2) open system perspective (innovation, adaptation, growth and resource acquisition), (3) rational goal perspective (direction, goal clarity, productivity and accomplishment) and (4) internal process perspective (information management, documentation, and control). Hoecklin (1996) also proposes four strategies employed by internationally operating Western organization for successfully managing cultural differences: (1) building a strong corporate culture internationally, (2) developing a common technical or professional culture worldwide, (3) relying on strong financial or planning systems, and (4) leaving each culture alone

Hofstede has defined his four cultural dimensions as follows: (1) power distance-the extent to which inequality is seen as an irreducible fact of life. It would condition the extent to which they accept that their boss's opinions and decisions are right because he or she is the boss, (2) uncertainty avoidance-the lack of tolerance for ambiguity and the need for formal rules (Hoecklin, 1996), (3) Individualism-the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. It implies a society in which people are expected to look after their own interests (Digman, 2005) while collectivism is defined as the subordination of individual goals to the goals of the collective, a sense of harmony, interdependence and concern for others (Niles, 1998) (4) Masculinity-the dominant value in Thai society are success, money, and things; while in femininity the dominant values in society are caring for others and the quality of life (Hodgetts & Doh, 2014). Using Hofstede's four cultural dimensions, the scores for Thailand are as follows: Power Distance (64), Uncertainty Avoidance (64), Individualism (20) and Masculinity (34). Therefore, it can be concluded that the power distance score of 64 means that Thai people accept and expect the power is not allocated equally. The uncertainty avoidance score (64) indicates that Thai people avert novel and unstructured situations by adhering to strict norms and rules. The degree of

individualism (20) is shown low or as collectivism. Hence Thai people are united and protected by extended families in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. Finally, the masculinity score (34) is low when compared to Western countries (Selmer, 1996). Thai people are caring for others and quality of life more than the importance of earning power, recognition, advancement, and challenge. They tend to place great importance on cooperation, a friendly atmosphere.

## DISCUSSION

Thai culture is much more relationship oriented, and favors a softer approach. The Thai social system is strongly hierarchical, but where individualism and interpersonal relationship are very important. Thai people place high value on smooth interpersonal relation they consider it unacceptable to show anger, impatience, or dissatisfaction, and place high importance on soothing and nurturing behavior which will make the counterpart more comfortable (Komin, 1991). This is one of the prominent Thai values which is called in Thai “Kreng jai”. Kreng jai can be said to be an attitude whereby an individual tries to restrain his own interest or desire, in situations where there is the potential for discomfort or conflict, and where there is a need to maintain a pleasant and cooperative relationship. Klausner (1993) describes “Krengjai” as a combination of deference and consideration. Linguistically, the word is a compound composed of two separate words, *kreng* means to be in awe of, to fear and *jai* means heart. When made into compound of *kreng jai*, the word has the meaning is to be considerate, to feel reluctant to impose upon another person, to take another person’s feeling into account, or to take every measure not to cause discomfort or inconvenience for another person (Komin, 1991). Thai people know how far they should go in displaying the degree of “Kreng jai” in accordance with different persons, degree of familiarity, and different situations. But definitely, it is a basic rule to be “Kreng jai” in Thai society. Several examples of “Kreng jai” of Thai people such as when they avoid asserting their opinions or needs and they are reluctant to ask questions when they have not understood someone. They don’t ask when they don’t know because they are *kreng jai*. They avoid asserting their opinions or not ask questions in the meeting because they don’t want to disturb or delay somebody. The interviewee recommend that the expatriate manager should try to prove that he can be sincerely receptive to employees’ questions, opinions, objections, and even criticisms by telling to his subordinates not to be *kreng jai* to him. It will not make Thai subordinates drop their *kreng jai* toward their boss altogether. Some of the expatriates also support that they can use the term of *Kreng jai* as a motivator to improve communication and trust among two parties in their organization. This is the way to reduce “*kreng jai*” of Thai people in order to get a better understanding among the foreign manager and Thai subordinates for MNCs in working outside its home country across cultures.

As a culture of relatively tight hierarchical social system with accepted existential inequity, which also strongly values “relationships”, The expatriate manager notes that Thai subordinates can be motivated to work devotedly for the leader they like and respect. Straightforward, ambitious and aggressive personalities, similar to the west, although highly capable, are not tolerated and are hardly ever successful. But personalism with a soft and polite approach often guarantees cooperation. Compromise is a principle in itself and often used as an instrument in avoiding conflict in Thai culture (Holmes, et al. 1997). Because the nature of Thai people is to avoid confrontation, they will avoid direct strong criticism if possible. If they really have to criticize as in the role of a critique, they often end up by hiding their toned down criticisms in general and vaguely stated terms. It is for the person, being criticized, to figure out himself. And if the person truly wants comments, he can seek out the critique afterwards and discuss it in private. Hummel and Sethsathira (1991) also support that a visitor to Thailand should understand that Thais learn how to avoid aggression rather than how to defend themselves against it. They also mention that



another part of Thai culture is not to shout. As with conflict and aggression, shouting or showing the anger is considered a character default and if an individual gives into this, Thai people would probably think less of that person. Therefore, the western way of thinking confrontation can be constructive if the result is the emergence of better understanding or a better process of getting a job done can't be used managing Thai people (Holmes et al., 1997).

In order to get the job done, the international managers have to find some ways of reaching their goals so that the relationship remains intact and cordial, and one of the most important thing for Thai culture is not to "bang heads" (Holmes et al., 1997). Komin (1991) also says that "face saving" is a key criteria in handling all people-related decisions, particularly negative ones. And compromise is often used as an effective means to save face, and to keep the "surface harmony" even at the expense of some task or organizational progress.

Communication between people is essential to running business anywhere in the world. Communication is also essential to the maintenance of any culture anywhere in the world. And since all cultures differ to a greater or lesser extent from all other cultures, otherwise they would cease to exist, it seems reasonable enough to suspect that forms of communication and messages being passed back and forth within different cultures are not universal. (Cooper, 2008). The expatriate managers in Thailand can increase their performance and his company's profits by being sensitive to the particularly Thai nature of communication between people in Thailand. One of the five main commandments of Buddhism is not to tell untruths; but it may seem that this commandment is broken everyday. There is another teaching of Buddha which states that one should avoid conflict. Thais may not deliberately lie, but they may not completely tell the truth either. Thais prefer to avoid conflict by not confronting. They don't want anyone to think less of them (Hummel & Sethsathira, 1991). These are the reasons why Thai people always say "yes"? When a Thai says "yes" he has probably made a rough English translation of the Thai word "krab" or "Kha". This Thai word, when spoken with the right degree of enthusiasm, can be correctly interpreted as a show of understanding and commitment. But when spoken without energy or conviction, it could mean as little as "I acknowledge the fact that you have said something to me", and not a lot more. This can make the foreigners confuse and misunderstand in communications.

Another problem in communication with Thais is language barrier. Thai language is not easily accessible and the English proficiency of Thai nationals is relatively low. Language is a great barrier to bringing expatriate managers and Thai subordinates closer together. It seems to be different expectations about how people should behave and interact in the office and it creates a social gap between two parties. Rogers and Roethlisberger (1991) recommend that we can achieve real communication and avoid conflicts by listening with understanding. This means seeing the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, sensing how it feels to the person, achieving his or her frame of reference about the subject being discussed. The expatriate managers need some strategies to produce the reassurance result without constantly asking for repetition of what you just said. One simple method is to set down as simply and clearly as you can in writing precisely what you want done and send it to the staff member with a request that he study the instructions then come to discuss it with you. To reduce the obstacles and ensure more successful instructions to Thai subordinates: (1) to make sure that he or she is free from other work and is ready to listen before assigning any task to him or her; (2) give instructions in small doses and check along the way; (3) use a friendly written note on occasion, to clarify or confirm details; (4) take more time to check his or her understanding because many Thai people actually decline to ask questions precisely for fear they will be seen as incompetent. These recommendations may help the expatriate managers to know how to supervise Thai subordinates better.

## CONCLUSION

Managing across cultures has long been recognized as a potential problem for multinational corporations. In particular, MNCs are discovering that they must carefully investigate and understand the culture of where they intend to do business and modify their approaches appropriately (Luthans & Doh, 2014). The international managers have to develop the culture of continual cross-border learning in order to complete successfully on the global market. From the perspective of cultural values in organizations, effective organizations or more specifically effective management, cannot implement management theories wholesale from their home countries. Effective expatriate managers cannot choose their styles at will. What is feasible depends to a large extent on the cultural conditioning of the manager's subordinates. Culturally, the inapt management theories are of limited use and might do more harm than good. Therefore, to answer the research questions in order to be successful in running business across cultures in Thailand as follows:- (1) the expatriate managers need to have some adaptations in their managerial styles to be in accordance with the host country's culture they are working with, especially in Thailand. Providing cultural preparation including language training to the expatriate managers who will be sending to work in Thailand; (2) the expatriate managers perceived the differences between Thai and their home cultures, they need to understand the host country national work values, as well as give rise to managerial approaches that are suited to the local employees; (3) MNCs that have adjustment on their management practices to Thai culture have achieved higher performing than those who have not made adjustments. To prevent the expatriates from "going native" and losing the commitment to the parent firm, the expatriates should be encouraged to see themselves as "dual citizens" in order to achieve higher performance in doing business in Thailand. These suggestions will make the expatriates understand Thai culture better and can operate their business organizations in Thailand with effectiveness and efficiency because doing business in various parts of the world requires the recognition and understanding of cultural differences (Luthans & Doh, 2014). And the MNCs need to tailor their management practices to suit the local national culture of the subsidiary.

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