



Bridging the Gap

## High-performance teams and Thai values: not always the best fit

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A high-performance organisation consists of high-performance teams working together. However, such teams in Thailand often are unable to achieve the excellence they are capable of. One big reason is that the Thai values we cherish as part of our unique identity can have a negative impact in the workplace. I have in mind four values in particular:

**Kreng-jai** or consideration: Team members don't want to give feedback to each other when they notice a mistake.

**Raksa-nah** or saving face: Team members don't follow up the work even they see that it is delayed.

**Prani-pranom** or compromising: Team members accommodate others on the team even when they are aware of possible negative consequences.

**Avuso** or seniority: Team members won't express disagreement with another member who is older or higher in rank.

How do we prevent these otherwise admirable values from having the wrong kind of impact on teamwork and performance? I propose two levels of prevention, at the personal and team leader levels. On the personal level, let's deal with each value one by one:

**Kreng-jai**: Not giving feedback to a friend is a selfish act, because the friend will continue to make the same mistake in the future, to the point where career advancement is impossible if the mistake is serious. Or if the friend is promoted, he or she could create even greater damage because of a blind spot that you could have pointed out but didn't because you were too kreng-jai.

Instead of being kreng-jai, you can provide constructive feedback by doing the following:

1. Make it normal. "Nobody's perfect. I believe you had no bad intention by giving the wrong figure during the presentation."
2. Explain the benefits. "I want to give you some feedback so you won't have the same difficulty again in the future."
3. Show empathy. "I know that negative feedback is quite bitter."
4. State the facts. "The figure you gave for last year's revenue was incorrect."
5. Suggest alternative action. "Please be careful in the future. We should double-check all the key figures before putting them in the slides."

**Raksa-nah**: A lot of people don't follow up on work because they want to preserve the "face" of the other team member. But failing to follow up does more harm than good for that person, because he will lose a lot more face when it becomes clear that he was the cause of the delay by the whole team. Here are some tips to help you follow up professionally:

1. Agree with other members that there will be a follow-up process.
2. Ask what kind of approach fits each person's style.

3. Follow up according to the preferred style.
4. Do it in a polite and straightforward manner.
5. Observe the reaction during the follow-up. Make adjustments when necessary, e.g. if your style is too direct, perhaps be less assertive next time.

**Prani-pranom: Compromise** is good when used properly. But compromising while you see your friends make mistakes is unacceptable. Here are some useful tips:

1. Things that you must not compromise are: law, compliance policy, ethics and the company's core values.
2. Before making any compromise on the above, ensure that you have already asked your boss's permission.
3. If another team member insists you compromise on any item in No. 1, remember that you have the right to say no.
4. Don't use friendship as an excuse for compromising your integrity. Remember that a true friend will not ask you to compromise.

Avuso: This is the most difficult one. Here are some tips:

1. Ask to express disagreement. "May I beg to differ with your opinion?"
2. Be polite but direct. "Next year GDP will not be 4%."
3. Refer to your facts. "Based on research from xxx, it will be 2.5%."
4. Pause and observe the reaction. If the senior member tries to attack you because he takes your comments personally, use your judgement for the next move. You can stop or pursue the issue further.

At the team level, the team leader needs to establish the norms. A good leader doesn't try to win popularity. He or she must be willing to make unpopular decisions occasionally. Here are some norms that the team leader should propose to any team of knowledge workers:

1. Equality. Each team member has to respect the other members regardless of gender, race, culture, religion, age, sexual orientation, educational level and disabilities. Everyone has an opportunity to voice their opinion.
2. Agree to disagree.
3. Trust. Each member has a role in this team because of their capabilities. Each one has a unique skill, knowledge base, talent and strength. Hence, whenever anyone says anything, the others have to listen first to understand.
4. Politeness matters.

The team leader has the right to make a judgement call if the members aren't able to come to a conclusion. All team members must support the team decision. There should be no other talk after the meeting.

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