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Editorial

If your company is active in Malaysia or if you have teams there, this article is going to interest you. If you do not, you are going to be interested too.

Why? Simply because Marie Christine's article has to do with the relationship between team members and their...hmmm... how should I call that person? *The boss? A superior? A colleague? The manager?* So, it's not just about national culture but about corporate culture and interpersonal relationships as well.

As Malaysia rates highest in the world (104) on Geert Hofstede's "High Power Distance" dimension, those of you involved with Malaysia should read Marie's article bearing 2 questions in mind: What should our expatriates do with this **information**? How should our regional headquarter deal with it?

Other readers—for example those concerned about adapting to a stronger boss than they have been used to in the past—will no doubt find that several suggestions in this article also apply to them.

Now, I would like to ask how you reacted to the word "**information**" above. My guess is probably not very strongly. Yet the information in question is of tremendous importance. Having to work with a colleague, an employee or a boss who has a significantly different view of the hierarchical relationship than yours affects much more than the cognitive part of the brain (as normal information would do): it affects your daily activity, your efficiency, the quality of your sleep, and maybe your willingness to get up in the morning to go to work. So we'd better know how to deal with it!



Laurent Lepez, Associate Partner

Malaysia and the 'yes, boss!' culture: How to deal with it?

By Marie Christine Tseng, Senior Consultant based in Kuala Lumpur

Respect or submission?

Signs of respect and status are everywhere in Malaysia: from the police escorts on the streets and the special treatment reserved to VIP at official functions ('VVIP' signs can even be spotted in Kuala Lumpur!) to the numerous titles and honorific that are common in Malaysia: Dato, Tan Sir, Toh Puan ... and the long titles of the sultans of Malaysia.

Some expatriates used to a flatter societal structure find it difficult to accept this respectful treatment and sometimes interpret it as a sign of submission. They keep asking their staff to call them by their first name, and often get the answer "Yes Boss!" without realizing that it is as unnatural for a Malaysian to call them "Bob" as it is for them to be called "Boss"!

Why is that so?

In the study conducted 30 years ago by Geert Hofstede on cultural dimensions, Malaysia scored as the most hierarchical society in the world. Clearly in Malaysia, it is essential to know where one stands in society. As Dr. Asma Abdullah puts it: "A place for everyone and everyone in its place".

The Malay society was traditionally a feudal society with a very clear distinction between the aristocracy and the Rakyat (the people). Until today, the term Rakyat is still used – often as opposed to the elite or the royalty, giving people a very clear notion of where they stand.

Likewise, in a Chinese family, roles are very clearly defined. No two members of a family carry the same "title" and the way one person addresses another member of the family states without ambiguity the position of the both persons within the family. The clan system was equally important in building an organized and hierarchical society.

Malaysians of Indian origin have also inherited a strong sense of hierarchy and deep respect for parents and elders. Until today, it is not unusual that people follow the decision of their parents even in the choice of their spouse.

Malaysian society is evolving quickly, but these behaviors are still deeply anchored in most Malaysians regardless of ethnicity, age or gender. Even though the younger generation is calling for more equality, less cronyism and more meritocracy. This doesn't mean at all doing away with the respect for age and status.

Meeting your business partners for the first time?

When meeting someone for the first time, it is wise to have a good look at the name card to spot any title or enquire about the person before addressing him or her. One should always use the title of a person when addressing them in public. Omitting the use of a title can sometimes lead to awkward situations.

Malaysia and the 'yes, boss!' culture: How to deal with it? (continued)

Family, company and... **tasting salt**

"Saya makan garam lebih dulu" (I have tasted salt before you did): This Malay saying emphasizes the importance of respecting older people's knowledge and experience.

Another Malaysian saying goes "You can express a disagreement to your parents once, but if they don't accept it, it is better to forget about it."

Both convey the same message: don't disagree with your parents, as they are older and have more experience than you. It is therefore not advised to go against their opinion and it is wise to follow their recommendations. Showing respect and avoiding disagreements with older people, parents, teachers, superiors is a sign of good upbringing.

In Malaysia, children and young people often refer to older friends of the family as Uncle and Aunty. This is a mark of politeness and it shows respect for the older people.

Observing the protocol that surrounds the 9 Sultans of Malaysia helps to feel and understand the aura that still surrounds the Sultans, and the importance given to status and birth.

Strong and sincere

The respect that is shown within a family and with the royalties, also applies to a boss in the work environment.

In Malaysia, the leader is often seen and respected as an omniscient father figure. Hence it is very difficult for subordinates to argue with the boss or sometimes even contribute new ideas as this could be perceived as a lack of respect.

As a father would, a leader needs to show the way, giving team members and employees a sense of strength and confidence. A hesitant leader will be less appreciated than a strong leader.

The leader is expected to have all the answers and make all decisions. The challenge though is to check with all the stakeholders in a subtle manner that they agree with the decision, prior to announcing it!

However, as the boss, the respect one gets also comes with duties and responsibilities.

First of all, in order to be respected, a boss must be experienced, knowledgeable and competent.

But, what will **make a real difference** between a good and an outstanding boss is how the boss relates to employees and team members. It is essential to establish sincere relationships with all team members.

Malaysian expectations from their expatriate colleagues

When asked what attitude they would like to see in expatriate colleagues, Malaysians often mention the following:

- Show more respect for hierarchy
- Show that you care
- Speak from the heart

This might sound odd and out of place to a Western manager, but in Malaysia, caring and looking after team members are among the top qualities required from a leader. Much more so that he or she would do at home.

Authority, to be effective in Malaysia, needs to go hand in hand with care and concern for one's team.

First, be humble...and then adjust

To live and work well in a highly hierarchical organization, it is essential to understand one's position in the company as well as the society at large. A foreigner, especially if coming from a more egalitarian cultural background, will find it challenging to accurately position himself in the Malaysian society.

When in doubt, the best course of action is to be humble while accepting the signs of respect that you will receive from your Malaysian friends, colleagues and business partners. Likewise, understanding who's who and showing respect to your Malaysian counterpart is essential to build harmonious and useful relationships. This attitude will eventually help you to adjust to the appropriate behaviour.

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Mini Bio: Marie Tseng



Marie-Christine spent the last 25 years in 8 different countries (France, Taiwan, UK, Netherlands, Brazil, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia) and has made South East Asia her home for the past 13 years.

Marie started her career as cultural competences consultant in 1996 with the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, and has since worked with multinational companies, SMEs and government institutions in Europe, Asia and South America.

She was chairman of the Indonesian Heritage Society in 2004-2005, and founded the Museum Volunteer Malaysia group in 2007, under the Department of Museum Malaysia.