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Thailand Tales:

Jai and Thai - Managing the Thai heart

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In the Thai language, Jai means "heart". If you listen to conversations among Thais you will hear this word several times each day, and you will see the word used frequently in advertising campaigns. It is usually used as part of a phrase to reflect "relationship" or "humanity". It is so entrenched in the Thai culture, an understanding of jai is essential for successful management and supervision in Thailand. Let's see how some examples of these frequent "jai" phrases.

Nam jai

Nam jai directly translates as "Water from the heart" (Nam = water). It refers to a kind, generous person, who thinks about the other person. Nam jai is one of the strong values by which Thai people judge each other. If you are perceived as mai mee nam jai (lack of nam jai), you are in trouble because people will not cooperate with you. Here are some examples of nam jai.

A boss assigns extra work to her secretary. The secretary works very hard on the assignment with her boss late into the night. At the end of the night, the boss gives her secretary a ride home even though her residence is in a different direction. The next day, the secretary chats with her colleagues and they will admire the boss since she has demonstrated nam jai!

A sales manager works side by side with his sales team on a special project at the office. They work till late evening. It's about dinnertime, and everyone is still busily engaged on the project. The sales manager decides to order a pizza delivery for his team and pay with his own money. Again, the next day the sales team will say that the boss has big nam jai!

A boss spends time with his family in Chiangmai for the Songkran holiday. He buys snacks and eats from Changmai and brings them back to work after his holiday for his staff to enjoy. The boss is full of nam jai!

Management lays off staff and pays severance pay according to the labor law. The staff will say that management does not have nam jai since the laid off staff were loyal and worked very hard in the past.

Frequent nam jai can be boon koon (reciprocating a debt of kindness). When a Thai is bonded to boon koon, then they must reciprocate in the future.

Hen jai

Hen jai means "sympathy". (Hen = see). Hen jai is used to describe the humanism of a person. Hen jai can be used together with nam jai. Some examples follow:

The board meeting starts in the next ten minutes, but the boss sees his secretary frantically sorting documents and he knows that she cannot finish on time. The boss hen jai and jumps in to help his secretary with sorting the material. The secretary thanks her boss for his nam jai.

A company has to cut costs and top management decide to cut their own salaries 50% instead of laying off 10% of their staff, They hen jai those who have less opportunity.

Jai dum

Jai dum is a cruel lack of humanity (dum = black). In Thailand, as in many other cultures, the color black has negative associations as black is quite literally the "full lack of light". Again here are some examples of Jai dum.

The boss sees that sales performance is far behind the target. He orders his team to work 7 days a week for the next 6 months. The sales team will gossip among themselves that this boss is jai dum.

A restaurant manager does not allow his staff to give left-over food to the street dogs. His concern is the customer as he feels the dogs will hang around restaurant and disturb the customers. However he does not think of the feelings of his staff, and how a compromise can be reached. The staff will gossip that the boss is big jai dum.

Jai boon

Jai boon means "generous" and "full of merit". Someone who is jai boon gives away or donates what they have to others (Boon = "merit", reflecting the Thai Bhuddist custom of "merit making" in this life for the afterlife by doing "good works" and providing alms to monks). When people donate goods or money to people who have been severely affected by a natural disaster, they are called kon jai boon (kon = "human" or "people").

Some organizations in Thailand link jai boon with marketing. For example one oil company regularly donates a small amount of money for every litre of fuel purchased by their customers to social causes and charities.

Sabai jai

Sabai means "laid back", "easy going", or "comfortable". The term Sabai jai is often used in advertising slogan or body copy. It is one of the most highly valued rated product or service attributes, and you will see it in many advertisements in most media throughout Thailand. Several companies incorporate the term in their product brand names. For example, "Sabai jai loan" is a highly advertised financial service from the Thai Military Bank. Another example is "Home Sabai Sabai" from Land & House. There is a motto that say "Sabai jai krue Thai tae (Sabai jai is the true Thai).

Jai is one of the most important concepts for foreign bosses to understand when they commence working in Thailand. The traditional Western work ethic is often very pragmatic and business-like, but this culture can be misinterpreted by Thais as jai dum. To be hen jai does not take a lot as I have shown - just a closer understanding of the culture of Thais.

If you have read this far I hope you can say "...Ah ha, I've got it!..." We call this kao jai (understanding).