

LEADERSHIP AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THAILAND

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First Impressions

The introduction to Thai culture begins as soon as you arrive at Bangkok airport. It appears to be chaos with no order or structure, yet somehow you are through customs within 20 minutes. This quality of functional chaos is a signature trait throughout the entirety of Thailand and you soon begin to appreciate how incredible it is. Our first day in Thailand began with a supposedly one-and-a-half-hour bus trip which quickly turned to three hours, courtesy of that famous Bangkok traffic. We journeyed towards the Myanmar border and spent our day attempting a zip line course. Most of that day was spent laughing as it turns out, none of us were natural zip liners.

Culture

Our first immersive experience into Thai culture was our two night homestay in a small community run village. We opened the carved timber doors to a huge room with mattresses spread all over the floor. This was our first experience living as the locals did. We had our first traditional Thai dinner, which consisted of rice, curry, tom yum soup and two dishes which I still couldn't tell you what they were. Our next morning was the highlight of the trip as we woke up at 6am to give alms to monks. The monk pulled up to our small dock on the river in his traditional Thai boat as the local Thai people tried to explain to us (with no English) that we needed to sit as we prayed. We sat and listened to the monk pray and even with no understanding of the language, this was by far the best way to start the day. We presented the monk with the alms and he drifted off down the river.



Our next adventure was a traditional Thai cooking class. We were each given the name of an ingredient in Thai and then dropped off at the local market to find it. The difference between this market and an Australian market is that it is set up on train tracks and the entire market has to rush to move everything every time a train comes through. Despite this, we were assured there was at least an hour before the next train. As we traipsed around we saw an unusual amount of seafood that was still moving and upon further investigation, discovered that the vendors would not kill the seafood as they did not want the bad karma that came from



killing. Attempting to find our assigned vegetable was our first experience in learning to communicate without language and a few stalls later, we were pretty sure we had the right one. Learning to communicate without language has become one of the most valuable lessons that I have taken from this trip. This skill is not exclusive to a language barrier, but can be applied when there are differing opinions and you feel as though someone else may not be understanding you. Having the tools to communicate in different contexts is inherently valuable.

Leadership

My perception of leadership was fairly vague prior to my participation in the program, and has changed considerably since my return. A common theme that appeared in almost all lectures and site visits was that leadership requires adaptability. While events may be planned a year in advance, circumstances can not. Things often change, and a person who embraces leadership and not authority will recognise this and use their position to allow for alterations. The significant differences between Thai and Western culture require you to be adaptable from the start. Our schedule changed about six times before we had even arrived and almost once a day following our arrival. In Australia, this would drive almost anyone to insanity as we are taught to plan ahead and follow through. Despite the Western perception that this Thai system is dysfunctional and chaotic, our entire trip ran smoothly purely due to the Thai people's ability to stay calm and pull everything together no matter how late. This quality is one that I hope I will use consistently throughout the year as using the Western thought of planning ahead and following through combined with the Thai thought of staying calm and looking for alternative options provides a much more cohesive understanding of the requirements of leadership. As someone who studies an interdisciplinary degree (Politics, Philosophy & Economics) it has been incredibly rewarding to be able to implement the practice of combining different schools of thought into a real world context.

Volunteering

Our final days were spent in a remote village approximately one and a half hours outside of Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand. We were once again thrown into the depths of Thai culture as the English language returned to being a foreign concept to everyone around us. After having been in Thailand for over two weeks, by this point we were much more adjusted to communicating without language and didn't see this as a challenge anymore. What followed this was a new challenge that proved to be even more difficult. Throughout our lectures and site visits over the previous two weeks we had heard the term 'indirect communication' used a countless amount of times, but had never had the opportunity to experience it for ourselves. This 'indirect communication' is a common theme throughout Asia. It is all about saving face and never making anyone else feel embarrassed. In theory this seems like an extremely positive concept, but we soon learnt that it often became negative.



The nature of our volunteering was construction work in the morning and teaching English in the afternoon. Our construction project was to build a canteen and so on the first day we were shown to some bags of cement, some sand, gravel and a hose and told to start mixing so that we could pour the floor. Not one of us had ever made cement from hand before yet somehow, between the nine of us by the end of the day we had a floor. What followed the next day was the school maintenance worker complaining of a sore back, which is the Thai way of telling us that we had not mixed the cement well enough and it had been hurting his back every time he had to pour it. From a Western point of view, we could not understand why he had not mentioned this the previous day while we were mixing the first tub but instead went on to pour about 15 tubs without telling us. In Thai culture this is the right thing to do as he in no way wanted to ever make us feel as though we were doing the wrong thing, even though we would have been happy to receive any advice possible.

The next day we were shown to some bricks and told to start building the walls. Once again, indirect communication got in the way. Every time we would look at the school worker he would smile and give us a thumbs up, yet as soon as we'd finish a row he would start tearing bricks down and do it all again. We soon learnt that we needed to do two bricks at a time and walk away for long enough that if it was wrong he would

fix it, we could watch and then understand how to do it the right way. Cross-cultural communication is an instrumental tool as we live in such a globalised world. It is not always about trying to force people to adapt to your culture, but learning how to adapt yourself so that you can communicate across many cultures.

Prior to my global program in Thailand I had no expectations of what it would be, but following my return I am actually astounded at the skills that I have been able to bring back with me. These skills are not limited to Asian culture or leadership, but can be applied in every aspect of life. Cross-cultural communication is particularly esteemed by employers and governments currently as we live in such a globalised world, and more specifically to the Asian region as the Australian government moves toward being a more Asia-literate society. Taking on many schools of thought when in a position of leadership allows you to become more adaptable and take unforeseen circumstances and turn them into something even better. I am extremely appreciative that I have had the opportunity to take on this experience and hope to participate in many more like it in the future.

