# SENIORITY CULTURE:
# GLOBAL COMPANY IN THAILAND

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**SENIORITY CULTURE: GLOBAL COMPANY IN THAILAND**

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ABSTRACT

Thailand has a sophisticated historic background and traditions that deeply influence people, at the same time, educational background has a big influence as well. Even though international companies came from western countries and there are regional teams from around the world visiting Thailand branch, companies and foreign visitors may need to consider adapting themselves to Thai seniority. It is very important to understand how the seniority culture in Thailand impacts international companies in order to align the behavior and culture accordingly. So, this research will address the influences of Thai seniority culture on work environment in an international company?

The result revealed that the advantages can be benefited when juniors greet or start a conversation with seniors. But seniority culture can create more distance between juniors and seniors when seniors try to use their power, such as giving feedback, award and promotion. Seniority could plays an important role and influence seniors to favour personal preferences, which could have negative impact on people who think it is unfair. This situation does not only create difficulties in workplace but also makes business develop slower.

Workplace environment will be able to improve when all people in the organization support each other and have open-communication that can professionally overcome the disadvantages of seniority culture in international workplace.

KEY WORDS: Seniority Culture/ Seniority Culture in Thailand/ Company Culture/ Working
Culture/ Thai Culture/ Global Company in Thailand

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# CHAPTER I
# INTRODUCTION

As the first generation of the youngest employee the company ever hired, I have been working in an international company in Thailand for 7 years. Normally, the company always hire staffs with high professional experience, because they want the person to be able to work individually without an extensive training, but my case was an exception. I went through a lot of working experiences with senior staffs and must develop interpersonal skill and learn how to react appropriately with others. Eventhough the company was not found in Thailand, i.e. a western company, Thai culture will still be a major influence in the company, especially seniority. After three years at the international company, the company recognized the value of young generation and they hired more young generation of employees. Currently, 3% of employees are young generation and they are younger than me. As a current senior employee, I have learnt what we should do or should not do with junior employees, and I am able to advise on appropriacy when dealing with others. However, I am still eager to explore more aspects from other colleagues about the culture of seniority.

Over the past twenty years, the global expansion of education has brought a new trend of ambitious educational goals, which required more concentration from instructors. The new trend is called western style learner-centered model (Hallinger, P., & Lu, J. 2013). Basically, many countries in East Asia mainly applied lecture-based instruction model, which students have to follow instructors or senior staffs whether they are correct or not. It is inappropriate to comment or challenge their instructions. "In Thailand, the seniority system is regarded as a social value accepted by the people and perceived as a good thing" (Boonprasert, 1973; Promyoo, 1980; Satetho, 1980, Rittipaet, 1999; Wajeesiri, 1999; and Wiriyapinit, M. 2016). Nobody raise questions and curiosity is suppressed. Moreover, the lecture-based model created fear to student. This fear keeps them in the box or comfort zone, and scared to ask any question. Sometimes, students would like to ask a question, but the teacher may not be well prepared and would try to

avoid answering them by marking the question as 'stupid question'. Hence, there will be no more questions from any student, and they will keep quiet. Sometimes, teachers or the seniors would say, "I have done that before, you should trust and don't argue," and the students can only nod and do as instructed. These examples are direct impact of lecture-based model, and they are the reasons why people who went through the experience grew up to be the seniors that always thought they have more expertise than younger generation.

Fifteen years ago, Thailand started this particular effort to use learner-centered model in business schools first, before gradually implemented the model countrywide. The learning box was opened and schools were not the only place we can learn as we also have field trips and campings. Learning scope has been broaden and we can ask as many questions as we want. Therefore, new generation of graduates who went through learner-centered education model are now clashing with older generation who went through lecture-based education model within Thai professional society nowadays, and this is the cause of the seniority culture conflict.

Perry, S. (2010) described that there are statistics in United States which claimed that workplaces with people from different generations will certainly have "Changes" and "Conflicts" in many ways, such as "Cultural", "Attitude", "Physical", "Mental Health", "Medical concern" and many "Cognitive Passing" processes. It is interesting to realize and perceive how to balance the differences among these generations. Moreover, it is a sensitive Thai tradition that elders should not be offended, including elders in workspaces and organizations (Boontarika, N & Kusakabe, K. 2013).

From the education backgrounds mentioned above, young generation with lecture-based educational background and older generation with learner-based educational background may find it difficult to work together even in an international company. As a researcher, I have experiences international companies in Thailand and I originally expected them to largely focus on performance. However this is not the case for new employees, since most employees are Thai and they cannot reach the target performance ortarget goal if they could not work harmoniously with co-workers, especially senior staffs, and cannot get help from them. As for promotions, they are most likely select the most senior person to be promoted. Senior person does not mean the oldest person, but the person need to be from the same era as the founders or stay with the company

the longest period. One of my colleague was promoted shortly after he joined the company because his performance was highly qualified. He had a chance to work as a top management position for a while before then he was overthrowned by a team of undercurrent senior staffs. Eventhough he worked well as a top management staff, but he was not the company's senior. In Thai society, even in international companies, sometimes we cannot be more ambitious than seniors or work better/faster than them in the early period of the employment, but we need to become a part of their work family before pushing aggressively to get into the goal.

Based on my experience and above information, Thailand has a sophisticated historic background and traditions that deeply influence people, at the same time, educational background has a big influence as well. Even though international companies came from western countries and there are regional teams from around the world visiting Thailand branch, companies and foreign visitors may need to consider adapting themselves to Thai seniority. It is very important to understand how the seniority culture in Thailand impacts international companies in order to align the behavior and culture accordingly. Hence, this research will address the influences of Thai seniority culture on work environment in an international company?

# CHAPTER II
# LITERATURE REVIEW

Since Modern Ratanakosin era, Thai people had an opened-door policy to Western influences and there were many changes towards modernization, or to be specific, Westernization. The administration of Western-style school, construction of railways and large-scale irrigation schemes, followed by the reorganization of government structure were conducted. Many western business owners came and invested in Thailand, leading to continuous development according to western western standard. Therefore, many Thai citizens were required to work in international companies since then. When a western company expands to Thailand, foreigners from the company may have their first impression on Thai people as friendly and helpful. However, Thai people behaves reluctantly when it comes to work commitment because of 'sabai-sabai' (Thai for "take it easy") working style that made them less active and more relaxed. Hence, not all western culture can be applied with Thai people as they traditionally are significantly different and have behavious which can only be described in Thai language and does not have a definition in English (Siriyupa, R. 2010). These behaviours will be discussed in the next paragraph.

In Thailand, a lot of elders complain about new generation of graduates who just first started working and hardly have patience, don't put enough work effort, argue constantly without consideration to their manager or older colleagues, and change job all the time. It could be that older staffs and new employees might not try to understand each other well enough. Younger generations were taught to think without limited scope while older generations were taught to think within a limited scope. Parental and societal pressures shaped them to "be anything", "do anything", and reach one's full potential in a broader sense of the world (Kelly, C., Elizabeth, F., Bharat, M., & Jitendra, M. 2016). Sometimes, younger generations do not intend to argue; they just try to explain or share their creativity which can be 'out of the box', but older generations do not understand the intention. Moreover, both of them will build a higher wall between each other,

which creates a wider gap and increases the difficulty of recovering their relationship. As the result, younger generations are automatically forced to leave the company because older generations have the support of colleagues who have been working together longer. This collectivism culture strengthen the relationship between existing employees and influence less effort for older generations to try to understand younger generations. Younger generations cannot endure the boxed world when they are from outside of the box (Grossman, W. M. Sep, 2004). Younger generations prefer leadership style of management more than authoritarian style, and the trust between the young generations and the manager with leadership-style of management can lead to an effective teamwork (Anantatmula, V. S., & Shrivastav, B. 2012).

Professor Geert Hofstede conducted a research on national culture in workplaces within six dimensions, which one focus on high power distance. Hofstede (2018) described the definition of Power Distance as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally." The people who has less power will find it hard to be accepted in an inequal society in a workplace, and the issue will be about how a society handles inequlities and distributes power among the people. Hofstede's power distance index (PDI) on every countries around the world scored Thailand 64 out of 100, which means high inequalities are accepted in Thai society. This may lead to paternalistic management, and the attitude of the organization will be managed by formal behaviour with hierarchical and controlled information flow. The power distance between generations of Thai society is not something new, but it is a unique traditional culture to show respect to seniors, which also created polite terms such as "Pu Yai" (superior or socially powerful figures with the power to make managing decisions), "Kreng Jai" (feel reluctant or afraid to make others upset), "Face Saving" ('face' here translates to 'ego' and it is very sensitive, hence, it means protecting one's ego or reputation), and "Bun Khun" (a favour which needs to be paid back) (Thanasankit, T. 2002). Thai people is also call other people, even strangers, by pronoun before calling by their names and give everyone a family-linked title based on age. Since childhood, we were taught to be a polite and call everyone as a family with our late king as our father, for example, Pee (older brother/sister), Nong (younger brother/ sister), Loong (a man who is older than our parents), Pa (a woman who is older than our parents), and Na (a man or a woman who is younger than our parents). Moreover, Thai

people were taught to greet older people in different way since we were kids. We slightly bow with our palms pressed together in a prayer posture, which called "Wai", and we emphasize its beauty and importance by having wai contests in schools. This is the reason why Thai organizations are more impacted in different ways when comparing with other countries.

Based on younger generation's educational background and unique Thai culture, it is a unique norm of Thai people to try to avoid face-to-face criticism in business situation, and the way Thai people comments is to admire first and comment after. Seniority system in Thailand was described in several contexts by individual employee characteristics. "For example, Satetho (1980) suggests that it is essential to pay respect to seniors, honor them, be polite to them, follow their ways, and not to argue with them. This suggestion is in accordance with Promyoo (1980), Suwanprated (1984), and Supab (1985)." (Wiriyapinit, M. 2016). Furthermore, reward and promotion system are related to seniority as well (Raksasat and Sujaritkul, 1971; and Kasemsin, 1978) (Wiriyapinit, M. 2016).

In Western society, people are called by name and age weren't focused on. Westerers greet others with a handshake whether they are older or not. In comparison to Thai culture, western management style mainly focuses on performance values as compared below:

**Table 2.1  Thai Values and Performance Management: Problems or Prospect?**

| Thai Values | Performance Management Values |
|---|---|
| • Sanuk: fun-loving | |
| • Sabai Sabai: care-free, easy going | • Transparency |
| • Kreng-jai | • Fairness |
| • Seniority system | • Equality |
| • Patron-client system | • Performance |
| • Favouritism (nepotism) | • Open-communication |
| • Kantanyu Katawethi: reciprocating favours (Bun Khun) | • Trust |
| | • Loyalty |
| • Face-saving | • Teamwork |
| • Conflict avoidance | |

Source: Siriyupa, R. (2010)

Siriyupa, R. (2010) explained that the differences between Thai values and performance management values are mostly based on emotion and personality. Traditional Thai values are the key management of human resource team (HR), while modern organizations try to achieve the highest results by systematic performance management, which initiated in western countries and value open-communications, equality, fairness and transparent performance evaluation. Traditional Thai values, such as seniority system, Kreng-jai, nepotism, conflict avoiding, and face-saving, create workplace difficulties in the organization that can lead to misunderstandings, inappropriate practices, misinterpretations in the organization, and may lead to unfair or unethical management situations. For example, the company has to promote a senior staff who stay in the organization for 10 years, even if there is a young enthusiastic employee with proven performance and teamwork who has been working in the company for 3 years, or a manager may promote an unqualified subordinate because he is a former manager's son, which is the situation caused by Kantanyu Katawethi or reciprocating favours (Bun Khun). These examples might create unfair situations for the organization, therefore the executive and HR need to work together and propose a clear vision/direction in the organization.

Despite some unfair situations created by the traditional Thai values, some of the traditional Thai values are also valuable and should be retained in the society, as well as the workplace, to establish a good relationship, harmony, team-spirit and trust. However, they need to be applied fairly with support from the management. Top management personels must be good role models in preserving traditional values, while reinforcing fairness, ethics and transparency in the organization. Otherwise, a truly high-performing work environment can never be established in Thailand.

Besides the traditional Thai values and the performance values, there is an evolution of each generation, which grew extremely fast and impact the nature and the economy of the city. The employment turnover rate in Thai society has increased and aging society is coming. Elderlies will be working longer, extending their retirement age from 55 to 60. Many countries have already started developing new retirement age policies for rapidly aging Asian societies (Fong, J. H. 2017). The space between generations will increase in the existing business scene as Thailand evolves to aging society. This will bring conflicts between younger and older generations. Thus, this opens up opportunities

for young people to utilize technologies in their work-style and some turn themselves into "Startups". There is a quantitative research in Thailand on entrepreneurial start-up and growth, and they found that half of their subjects chose to be entrepreneurs because of the motivation on desire for independence, 40.2% chose to be entrepreneurs because of job security, and 3.5% chose to be entrepreneurs because of frustrations with previous job employment (Zapalska, A., & Perry, G. 2000). This is not only about people and processes, but technology also drive this change in the world too (Leistner, 2010; Edwards, 2011; and Wiriyapinit, M. 2016).

In this millennium era, we could not deny that Facebook is one of the most popular social networks and Mark Zuckerberg is also one of the most influential role models for new generation of business entrepreneurs. Wongnai is a well-known startup application in Thailand and all 4 founders are aged less than 30 years old. They are role models of young people in Thailand, and they started working on the application as a side project when they were still working a full-time job. They resigned from their full-time job after lauching the application for 6 months. Line application is another famous social application that is managed by Ariya Banomyong (CEO) who may not be a new generation, but he is a role model of successful business manager for young generation because he tries to understand every junior staffs and he is always opened for any ideas. New startup businesses have been growing up in many fields, but the core businesses might be moving slowly because the existing seniority culture usually clashes with new generations who want to change how businesses operate. This research will elaborate how seniority culture has an influence on international companies operating in Thailand.

# CHAPTER III
# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research comprises mainly of interviews by open-ended discussion and questionnaire. The research focuses on only one private international company in Thailand and the interviews were conducted on 1 foreigner executive, 2 management executives, 1 older generation senior, and 4 younger generation juniors who shared their perceptions, perspectives, motivations, inspirations and interpersonal relationships while working in the international company and surviving traditional Thai culture such as seniority culture.

The company is headquartered in San Jose, United States of America, and was founded in December 1984. It is the largest networking company in the world with many branches across the world. The company develops, manufactures, and sells networking hardware, telecommunication equipment, and other advanced services and products. The company is an expert in the technology market, including Internet of Things (IoT), Datacenter technology, Video conference, Cloud networking, domain security, and energy managerment.

As mentioned in the introduction, I have been working in the company's Thailand branch for 7 years. The branch had only 80 employees when I started working and it now the number has increased to 300 employees. Most of the company's staffs in Thailand brach are salespersons and they mostly have extrovert personality. I was the first generation of the youngest employee that the company ever hired, and I have been growing in my career path along with seniority culture ever since. Only 3% of the employees are young generation employees, and some of them are very opened to discussion me to open discussion about seniority, because they have experienced it while working here. When I started working in this company as the youngest person, I greeted every colleagues with a 'wai' to be as polite, gentle and docile as much as possible and be acceptable into the senior culture. However, they felt very strange eventhough I recognized that they also like the gesture. They asked me to stop to wai but I did not,

and continued doing it until last year when many junior colleagues started working here. I still do it for some seniors people eventhough nobody is doing it even if they are younger. During brainstorm sessions, I tried to share creative ideas, which may or may not work, but I never had much chance to share them. I was consistently asked to stop sharing ideas  because some ideas might be too contrasting to the seniors' ideas and they felt that I always tried to contradict them. Therefore, I just kept quiet for many meetings. My ideas had never been accepted and I have been insulted that I would not be successful in this company for 2 years. They tooked me for a little girl who they can treat without respect and many senior colleagues used emotions when dealing with me. This situation continued until I won a big project and I received international award from the headquarter 3 years later. The pressure from seniority culture in the company also made me stronger, and I have become a story of successful that my manager always like to tell. Looking back in the past, I might not be successful if I grew up in a perfect and rich family. I had to be extremely patient to survive in the company because I was the pillar of my family and we could not survive without my salary. In my case, crossing the wall of seniority culture was not only for myself, but my family was also the motivation for me as well. Otherwise I might had left the company a long time ago.

In general, everyone does not expect international company to have seniority environment. After this company hired more young generations, which now makes up 3% of the employees, seniority culture seems to be softer. It may be due to the length of time I have been in the company and has become a part of the seniority culture. There are also many departments and many managers with different style of management. The point of view of foreigner who have worked in Thailand and the point of view of Thai employees who have work experiences in other countries may be different from Thai people. Also Thai people in different generations may have different consideration and different management style. This is why the seniority culture in international companies in Thailand is interesting.

## 3.1 Interviewees

1. Interviewee A: A Thai senior employee who had worked with regional team for more than 10 years and recently moved to work locally 3 years ago. He has been working in the company since 2006.

2. Interviewee B: A young generation employee who has been working as a buddy of mine for 7 years. He is a sales engineer while I am a salesperson. He has been working in this company since 2010.

3. Interviewee C, D: 2 young generation employees who have less than 10 years of professional work experience. They have been working in the company sice 2014.

4. Interviewee E: A new generation employee who started working in the company as his first job. He worked in Malaysia branch for 2 years and moved to Thailand 2 years ago. He joined the Thailand branch since 2015.

5. Interviewee F: A foreigner in this qualitative research. He is an American who has been working with Thai people for more than 10 years. He is in managing position and has a lot of experience across many regions, with a focus on Asia Pacific, Japan and China. He joined the company since 2003.

6. Interviewee G: A Thai management executive who has been working in many companies across Asia Pacific, Japan and China for almost 20 years. He did not have the background in this company, and there are many seniors from co-founder era during his time at this company. He joined the company since 2007.

7. Interviewee H: A Thai management executive who has aa close relationship with the seniors in the co-founder era. He has been working in the company for almost 20 years. He joined the company since 1999.

## 3.2 Interview and Questionnaire Questions

### 3.2.1 General Education Experience

Q1: Where did you graduate from? (Thailand or abroad)

Q2: Did your university have seniority culture between seniors and juniors?

Q3: Do you think this seniority impact Thai culture?

### 3.2.2 Employee Assessment and Job experience

Q4: When you first joined this company, was seniority culture an obstacle and how did it make you job more difficult?  Please share an example based on your experience.

Q5: Have you ever tried to solve seniority culture for interpersonal relationship? How did you do it? What was the result?

Q6: How do you help junior employees when they have a problem dealing with senior staffs?

Q7: Generally, do you think an international company promotes its employees based on performance or seniority or years of service?

- Why do you think that way?
- Can you give an example?
- Are the promotion criterion in headquarters or other countries different from promotion criterion in Thailand?

Q8: Do you think it is easy to make work relationship changes between senior people and junior people in Thailand? How to do it?

Q9: Do you think it is good to have seniority culture in an organization? What are the advantages of it?

### 3.2.3 Special question for senior employees

Q10: Based on your experience, please explain how younger generations make your work more difficult.

Q12: Do you have a solution on how to make younger generations understand older generations better?

All information are from the interviews in a closed meeting room at the compan's Thailand office. Two interviews were group discussions with 2-3 colleagues because they have close relationship and the same job level. Another 3 interviews were one on one interviews with 1 foreigner and 2 Thai executives. Fortunately, I joined the company when the company had only 80 people, therefore, I can communicate with everyone at every level directly and everyone welcomed me to interview them. The strategy of this interview was to create a social conversation and become a part of the friendly group discussion, so all interviewees will feel most relaxed while discussing the topic.

# CHAPTER IV
# DATA ANALYSIS

We can distribute the data analysis by interview questions into 3 catagories; the backgound of the seniority culture that respondents experienced in their lives, the seniority culture at work, and how to deal with seniority issues at work.

## 4.1 The Backgound of The Seniority Culture That Respondents Experienced in Their Lives.

Thai people are born into a unique culture which promotes seniority into the foundation of the society and everyone is familiar with it. Most Thai respondents are pround of this culture and the concept of calling every people as a family member. They believe it is polite and promotes harmony and sincerity.

Respondents A and Response B were born in southern Thailand and have been working together for 3 years. Respondent A graduated from a university in Bangkok, and Respondent B graduated from a university in southern Thailand, but their answers are almost the same. They were brought up with seniority culture since they were a child and it is a norm in their hometown where everyone calls each other like a family member. It is not just an act of respect to gain benefit, but to show a close relationship as if they are genuinely from the same family. In their university year, they joined the freshmen welcoming activity, which they believe it was not directly related to seniority, but promoted harmony in universrsity.

Respondent C and D graduated from a university in Thailand. They believe seniority culture is not related to activities in schools or universities. They also believe family upbringing and the society taught them the seniority culture, for example, they were taught to do 'wai' and call others as a family member.

Respondent F, the only foreigner, mentioned about the only place he learnt about seniority is during his university life in Los Angeles, United States. They have a

university community called Fraternities for men community and Sororities for woman community where seniors mentor and look after juniors. They help each other and live together in the same house and those seniors would have more roles and responsibilities than younger students. However, he did not have that experience because he used to spent 8 hours on study, 8 hours on sleep, and 8 hours on work during his university years. Therefore, he has less experience on seniority in his life because the nature of the people in United States which does not call other people as a family member, and they usually shake hands for greeting regardless of their age.

Respondent E, G and H graduated from a university in Thailand, and they responded similarly. Respondent E is the youngest person and Respondent G and H are the most senior in this interview. They said seniority culture has been imprinted into their lives since they were born by their parent and Thai society. Thai seniors usually praise juniors who admire them. If a person does not respect/admire his/her seniors, he/she will be comdemned. The university that Respondent E, G and H graduated had a freshmen welcoming activity, and they all agreed that it is a good activity to force the junior people to respect senior people by 'wai' and calling them like an older brother/ sister, which could create unity among freshmen and seniors. The unity also make the students help each other in their study and future work opportunities as well.

## 4.2 The Seniority Culture at Work

### 4.2.1 The respondents' experience on seniority culture at work

Many young generation respondents were suffering with seniority culture for a while and unwilling to accept it, while senior generation respondents think it is appropriate to apply seniority culture in the organization, even it is an international company.

Respondent A, who has been with the company for 12 years, said that seniority in his perspective is a very strong word that brings everyone together in harmony and seniority is a great culture in the workplace, especially in Thailand, because it makes relationships much stronger. Hence, he thinks seniority culture is good in the organization. He joined the company since 2006 when they had only 20 people and the seniority

culture in the company's Thailand branch was stronger than nowadays. They worked similarly to a family business, with strong respect. They took care each other with a strong sense of seniority, and they devoted themselves to the company in order to be successful together. They regularly have leisure trips and party together. Therefore, they have concrete relationship, and when somebody asked for a help or a support, everyone would be happy to help. Seniority could be a good culture when the company was smaller and consisited of with people from the same generation, because it created strong relationship. However, the world changed. Social media arrived and have a strong influence in the society, and the company grew. Currently, the company has 300 employees, there are many new employees who don't care about how long other employees have been at the company. This created a wider gap on employee relationship, everyone works for his/her own benefits, and they don't think about team success. That's why he feels the lack of harmony. Eventhough he is uncomfortable dealing with those people, he still opens his mind and tries to understand those new employees, whether they are older or younger than him. He mainly focused on the work.

Respondent B is the youngest employee in his team. He shared that his boss does not really listen to him and tries to oppose him. His boss always appreciate other senior employees' idea, which made respondent B think that this behavior is related to seniority. However, it is also about the personality and nepotism as well. Respondent B is my partner since he started working here, and he mentioned an interesting situation where 2 seniors (Senior M and Senior N) discussed about him and me. Senior M said, "I think the way these 2 juniors (Responsent B and me) work will not be successful and may fail.They are too young and I do not understand why the company trusted them." Senior N then disagreed with senior M's insulting remark, and he opposed back with different comment. After the incident, they had not talk with each other for a while. These situations are the the direct impact of seniority culture on Respondent B, which made him suffer a lot. Nonetheless, he was forced to accept it, because he is younger than others.

Respondent C is a young generation, but she has a lot of professional experience prior joining the company. Based on her experience on seniority from other company, she shared that she was afraid to share idea to all senior employees when she first joined

in this company and the interesting point is what Respondent C mentioned about international company.

"I used to be in a traditional Thai company and the seniority system forced me to talk less and afraid to comment in discussion sessions because seniors would make me stop and I had to just agree on their opinions. This situation made me a good listener. On the other hand, it is more open-communication in this international company. The seniority system still exists in international companies in Thailand, but it is less than traditional Thai companies."

Respondent C shared her experience that she tried to be very polite when she first joined this international company, and she applied all her experience she learnt from previous traditional Thai company to this international company. She has less experience dealing with seniority system, and her female boss is very opened to communication and trusted her wisely, which made Respondent C respect her boss. This reflects how traditional Thai values co-exist with performance management values. Eventhough Respondent C is used to seniority culture from previous local company, she found her new boss in the current company to be respectable, reasonable, and supportive.

Respondent D is a young generation, but she has a lot of experience before joining this international company, because this company is not her first professional job. Respondent D shared that her male boss is a very aggressive person and always think that his idea is the best. Respondent D is a talkative person; she consistently tried to share her idea, but her boss never agree, and just ask her to follow his way. The power distance between the age of her boss and herself created a communication between them and led to uneasy work environment in the organization.

Respondent E is in the same generation as me, and this company is his first job. However, he worked in this company's Singapore and Malaysia branches as well. Respondent E shared that the working style in the oversea beanches was easy going, because he could share any idea, and there was no need to worry about being direct with the boss. If there was a disagreement, he could explain and discuss the idea further. On the other hand, he can not directly comment on ideas with his new boss or any other senior employees in Thailand branch, so he would just keep quiet (Respondent D and E report to the same manager). This environment also created difficulties to work in the company as he is a salesperson and he requires supports from pre-sales engineer.

When he asks for a schedule to get a  support from pre-sales engineers who is more senior than him, the engineers would response, "I will be available in the next 3 weeks." The engineers do not have a sense of urgency to help/support Respondent E and have no priority for Respondent E, which might impact the work time and costs misopportunities for the company.

Respondent F shared that he started working earlier than other people in the company. He is in a higher job position than some older people, but he never experience limitations on seniority system in this company. Previously, he worked in a government organization, which has a strong seniority system, and he could adapted himself to the government organization. That is why he could easily adapted himself to this technology company.

Respondent G shared that he got promoted to be a top executive after he joined this company in Thailand branch for a while, and he was opposed by employees who had been in the company longer than him. Those people complaint to higher managements in the headquarter, and Respondent G was moved to regional branch, which he is currently happy at. His previous position is later filled by an ex-employee in the founder generation who re-joined the company, which seems more acceptable to everyone. Based on Respondent G expertise as a part-time university lecturer in Thailand, he loves to listen and prefers an open-communication with everyone regardless of their seniority. He does not think that seniority culture plays an important role in this company. Seniority is not just about age, but the length of time you have been in the company as well.

Respontdent H shared that he cares a lot about seniority culture. It plays an important rold, even when he deals with older customers, and it works very well. He always think that seniority culture is the most important culture for Thai people. He is very concerned about respecting other people, especially about bowing one's head to 'wai' seniors. There was a guy called Mr.P that Respondent H first met in a restaurant, and Mr.P did not 'wai' him. He later found that Mr.P was in a partner company that he worked with, and he was not impressed by the first impression, which he still remembers today. He believes bowing one's head or polite talk (ka/krub is a pleasing word for Thai people when ending a sentence) is still importantly required when interacting with seniors in Thai culture. On the contrary, contradictions are forbidden, and juniors have to be

more like a listener rather than a speaker. Respontdent H is a senior staff that has very strong opinions on seniority culture, and young generations around him might be forced to align with his idea before he can accept to work with them.

### 4.2.2 Evidences of seniority culture on job promotion, feedback, and award.

It might not appropriate to judge people by seniority. In reality, there are many unfair real-world cases with respondents in this international company. However, seniority may not be the only reason as personality also plays a part.

Respondent A and B, they shared that the promotion and award in this company are not much related with seniority but it is related with personality. It is the same with the working style of regional teams which depends on bosses. For example, who is the boss's favourite and who is good at flattering. Respondent A shared that he had done an incredible job for many years, but his foreign boss never awarded him. Instead, the boss awarded anorther person who did not have better performance than him, and he still cannot understand the reason. Respondent B shared that he worked very hard in the past 3 years, but his boss keeps awarding the boss's favorite person every single year. Respondent B also shared that he asked his boss on what is the criteria for getting awarded, but his boss could not answer. Even in international company, employees in Thailand still find it difficult to have direct communications, and bosses still unable to express their sincerity. This situation creates a difficult environment in workplaces.

Respondent C and D shared that there are 2 types of evaluation criterion based on real performance and personal preferences (nepotism, seniority and experience), and it depends on the manager.

Respondent F shared that this company used to have a systemetic criteria for a promotion, feedback and award 10 years ago, but it does not have the same system nowadays. However, he has never experienced unfair evaluation before.

Respondent E, G and H shared that this company has a clear KPI which can be gained by achieving goals. Executives from headquarter also initiated a program called "early in career" that allows juniors to have more roles, duties, and opportunities, in order to be promoted to a higher level faster and more effectively. However, it is rarely

acceptable in Thai organizations and some positions still require seniors status. This is a compromisation as the company has a clear KPI system, but seniority is still required in some positions, and it aligns the international company with Thai tradition of seniority culture.

## 4.3  How to Deal with Seniority Issues at Work

Seniority culture could be good in a workplace if it is applied in an appropriate way. Seniority culture can lead to politeness and respect, which create positive environment in a workplace. If difficulties in working environment can be resolved, the business might proceed faster.

Based on a case, Respondent A shared that if there is a new junior employee who has problems with seniority culture problem in the company, Respondent A will help to compromisingly talk with a senior employee if he knows the guy well. Respondent A also shared his opinion about the effort in adapting to the seniority culture.

"Seniority culture is not a problem that really need to be fixed, but it would be great to find out how to apply its advantages in the workplace. Thai people has been taught about seniority since we were born, so nobody can change this culture. We should just understand seniority culture, and understand the role and responsibility of one another."

Seniority culture is not always the culture to avoid, but everyone need to consider how to apply it. Respondent A thinks that the way to figure it out is to have a coaching system in the company that does not only try to solve problems on seniority culture, but also tries to adjust the attitude and mindset of employees. Finally, seniority culture is important in Thai tradition and it will be best if we apply it properly in the organization.

Respondent B, C, D and E shared that they try to be very polite, keep quiet, and let seniors say what they want. It does not matter whether Respondent B, C, D and E agree or not, they would just keep quiet. Respondent E mentioned about one interesting point on Thai traditional value as below.

"It's human nature not to like people who contradict or disagree with his/her idea, especially Thai people who has a big face (ego). These people will be upset when

there is somebody disagreeing or having a better idea which hurt their ego. Specially for the seniors, they will be upset and will try to get back at you later. So, I just keep quite and also "Kreng-jai" all seniors. I usually don't get support from anybody in the company, and I just keep working to my own capability."

From respondent E's comment, it means the company can be more efficient if everyone listen to comments of others (open-communication) and support each other equally with less seniority culture.

Respondent F shared that he tried to prove his knowledge and efficiency in order to be accepted by the sneniors in the organization. He started by volunteering to be a public speaker for a new interesting technology, and he asked his boss to invite other people to mandatorily attend the session. Based on his experience, he would be acceptable by the seniors in the organization after he has already proved his ability. It is a smart solution and I think it can also be applied to other activities such as CSR activities and company philantrophy.

Respondent G shared that he never get that kind of feedback about seniority issues in the company, and his case is such a special exceptional case. He said he always open his mind to listen to any feedback on seniority issues, and he thinks the issues need to be solved case by case, and it still does not have a solid process to improve it.

Respondent H thinks that juniors must be polite as taught in traditional Thai value, because this is the way to protect the unique Thai culture. However, he does not think anyone in this company has seniority issues, but he always open his mind to communications or feedbacks. I believe the word "must be" from him still express a gap of power distance between him and juniors, which created nervousness to somebody who really need to give him a feedback.

In summary, the collected information from all interviewees can be organized to as shown in Table 4.1 below:

**Table 4.1  Summary of Seniority culture analysis in the international company**

| Interviewee | Problems | | | Resolve method | | | |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| | Promotion/ Feedback Award | Open-communica-tion | Manners/ Politeness | Quietness | Politeness | Coaching | Knowledge sharing |
| A | ✓ | | | | | ✓ | |
| B | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| C | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| D | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| E | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| F | | | | | | | ✓ |
| G | ✓ | | | | | | |
| H | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |

The most noteable feedbacks are from the juniors as shown in the above result from Respondent B, C, D and E, but some information from seniors may not be a genuine point of view. For example, some seniors said they will open their mind and accept ideas or comments from everyone, but they actually want to look more open-minded in the research.

Therefore, these 2 main problems of seniority in the organization are about promotion/ feedback/award and open-communication. The 2 key resolve methods are quietness and politeness.

# CHAPTER V
# RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

## 5.1 Conclusion

From the literature review and the analysis of the collected data, we can say that Thai people are deeply rooted into seniority culture, and Thai people has been influenced by seniority culture in work environments, which does not only happen in local companies but also in international companies. After combining and analyzing all findings from the literature review and the collected data analysis, there are advantages and disadvantages of seniority culture that has been applied in the international company, and they can be concluded in the following Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1  Advantages and disadvantages of seniority culture in the international company**

| Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|---|
| 1. Politeness | 1. Power distance |
| 2. Respect | 2. Unfair organization |
| 3. Charming | 3. Creating difficulty environment |
| 4. Engaging | 4. Stress and pressure |
| 5. Relationship | 5. Close-communication |

The advantages can be benefited when juniors greet or start a conversation with seniors. Thai tradition expects younger people to be very polite to older conversation partner in order to persuade them to open their mind, and younger partner will gain more benefits from the other party as they would view younger one as more charming, easy to engage, and more open to a relationship. When seniors open their mind and listen to juniors, they would try to advise politely in return. These seniors will gain more respect from juniors, and juniors will not hesitate to communicate with seniors.

But seniority culture can create more distance between juniors and seniors when seniors try to use their power, such as giving feedback, award and promotion. Seniority could plays an important role and influence seniors to favour personal preferences, which could have negative impact on people who think it is unfair. Sometimes, seniors simply interrupt juniors and make them stop sharing their ideas with complaints and providing less support. Juniors respond to this situation with silence and avoid sharing idea, which reflects close-communication and creates stress and pressure in the workplace for juniors. This situation does not only create difficulties in workplace but also makes business develop slower.

In the international company in Thailand, we also have the seniority culture in term of close-communication, and unfair feedback, promotion, and award. Eventhough the international company has Key Performance Indicator (KPI) that clearly measures competency with the goal achievement in the sales department, but it still is not completely the same KPI used in international companies, it is influenced by Thai norms and culture.

## 5.2 Recommendation

Human Resource (HR) team alone cannot resolve this issue entirely whitout the supports from all executive managers in the organization to help improve workplace environment. We wish every organization pays attention on this issue and try to resolve power distance, so the company will operate smoothly despite the generation gap. The recommendations in this paper can help to encourage seniority to be applied in the organization appropriately as follow:

### 5.2.1 Direction and vision

Managers should cooperate with HR to build awareness on seniority culture in the organization. Integrating seniority culture as a part of company direction and vision, such as encouraging open-mindness, open-discussion, and give more chance to juniors be creative, and remind seniors to realize when they try to control juniors' idea. After building awareness, we could introduce a role model manager program which would focus on the unity between the manager and junior staffs. This unity could persuade

the other seniors when they see how it could benefit the company. We can then arrange a session to share the experiences between juniors and seniors after improvement.

### 5.2.2  Encourage more activities

Arranging activities to create different way of building better relationships between juniors and seniors. Allow juniors to be a host of the activity, persuade the seniors to support, but discourage them to lead, because the juniors need to make the activity successful in their new ways. However, the activity should receive consents from both parties before it can start. As the result, the junior and senior will be surprised by different approach to the achievement.

### 5.2.3  Coaching, community and club

HR might need to spend some times to survey all employees on unfair situations are the result of seniority culture. An example in this company is, some juniors created their own club to share their experiences with each others. It is good to have the feedbacks from this group, so we can start coaching a small group of management level employees to learn their expectations on juniors and their perspectives on juniors. Furthermore, the coach can recommend how to improve the relationship between seniors and juniors to create better workplace environment.

The first step is the most important step. Once the HR team get full support from the management executives, they can move forward steadily. We can apply these recommendations in the organization easily, but the sensitive part is how to fine tune it to fit each personality. This can be further researched, for example, some people feel more powerful in seniority culture, while some people feel less confident when they are in seniority culture. Open-communication in seniority culture should not be considered as disrespectful, and there should not be silence amoung colleagues. Workplace environment will be able to improve when all people in the organization support each other and have open-communication that can professionally overcome the disadvantages of seniority culture in international workplace.

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