

**THE KEY FACTORS TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE  
SELF-ORGANIZING TEAM IN THAILAND  
DURING THE VUCA WORLD ENVIRONMENT**



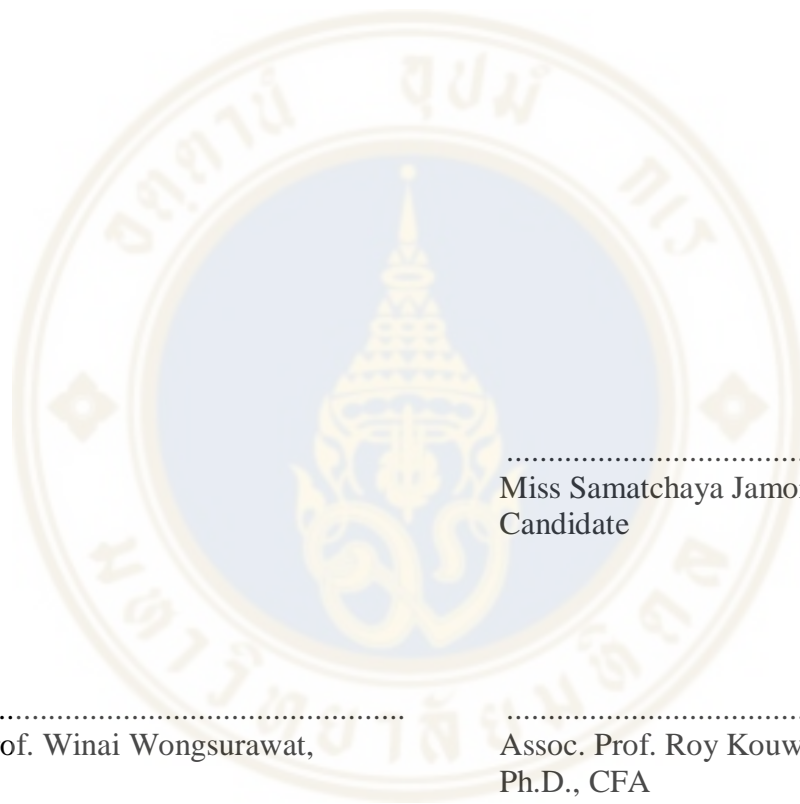
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**THE KEY FACTORS TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE  
SELF-ORGANIZING TEAM IN THAILAND  
DURING THE VUCA WORLD ENVIRONMENT**

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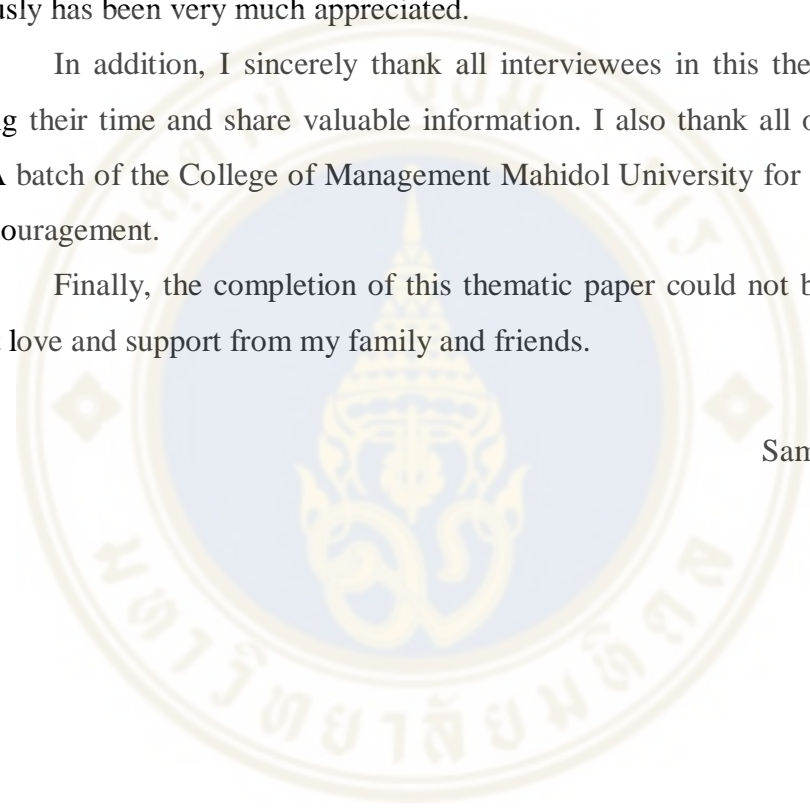
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**THE KEY FACTORS TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE SELF-ORGANIZING TEAM IN THAILAND DURING THE VUCA WORLD ENVIRONMENT**

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M.M. (GENERAL MANAGEMENT)

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to perform an in-depth research on the factors that could be a key success for building an effective self-organizing team in Thailand during the VUCA world environment. The Hypotheses were examined by interview and collect information from three employees in software development domain.

The results of this study are four key factors that would help managers achieve and able to build an effective self-organizing team.

**KEY WORDS:** Self-organizing team/ Process Improvement/ Organizational Change

20 pages

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

“The world is changing very fast. Big will not beat small anymore. It will be the fast beating the slow”. It is a famous quote from Rupert Murdoch, who is the CEO of Fox Corporation including Fox News, The Times of London, and The Wall Street Journal that precisely describe the business competition nowadays.

Accordingly, there is a new acronym to represent a recent business situation, which is the VUCA world. This word first appeared on the American Military in the early 1990s. It stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. Every single day, there is a new solution, business model, technology, and innovation emerged in the business world to respond to demands. Hence, the best practices in the past may not be successful today (Waltraud, n.d.).

The organizations need to be aware and embrace change instead of ignoring it in the VUCA world. Therefore, the organizations are required to have a strategy to respond to change faster and more effectively. Some organizations prefer to reduce or simplify a working process in order to respond to change faster while some organizations focus on finding a solution to solve their customers’ problems rather than focus on a certain or specific product. Consequently, there are various famous methodologies that organizations attempt to implement to survive in the market such as Agile methodology, Scrum, Kanban, Lean management, design thinking, etc.

Besides, it is essential for the whole organization to understand and align with an organization's strategy from the management to operational levels. It is undeniable that the operation plays a key role to achieve an organization's goal. In order to adaptively and flexibly respond to change at the operational level, the organizations are required to build a strong and efficient team. However, it is not easy to create a team with high potential and efficiency. There are several influencing factors whether it be an organization's values, country cultures, market atmosphere, timeframe, and many more.

In Thailand, many organizations started to give priority to a self-organizing team, especially in the software development industry (Begel and Nagappan, 2007). Though, other business fields such as a real estate business, financial institutions, and insurance business are also striving to implement a self-organizing team as well. A self-organizing team is quite a popular concept among startup companies considering that they have limited human resources. Furthermore, some startup's management may lack experience and expertise in certain areas. A self-organizing team at operational level would empower and encourage the team to make a decision and take a risk. Hence, it can enhance a decision making among a team at a certain level.

Moreover, it has been a while since the world is in the globalization era where economics, cultures, and resources become a cross-border. Inevitably, the majority of organizations have to deal with different diversity, cultures, and time zones. Therefore, a self-organizing team would enhance the speed and performance of organizations that have headquarters and local branches in different regions and time zones. It would reduce the time for decision making and operation, for instance, a team in Bangkok does not need to wait for a team in New York to manage themselves or solve their problems.

Though, the essential element of the self-organizing team is the outlook that team members must take ownership and make decisions among themselves. Unfortunately, this mindset is conflicting with one of the Thai culture in which people who are younger or are in a lower position should follow and obey people who are older or are in a higher position. Moreover, Thai people have embedded the collectivism in the culture that tends to avoid conflict among the group.

The objectives of this study are to perform an in-depth research on the factors that could be a key success for building an effective self-organizing team in Thailand during the VUCA world environment. The reader will perceive different perspectives from a process team and a team leader who worked on a team transformation. This research will mainly focus on the key factors to having an effective self-organizing team starting from the beginning. Therefore, this research aims to be a guideline for management and leaders to overcome the challenges and successfully building an effective self-organization team in Thailand.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Definition of a Self-organizing Team**

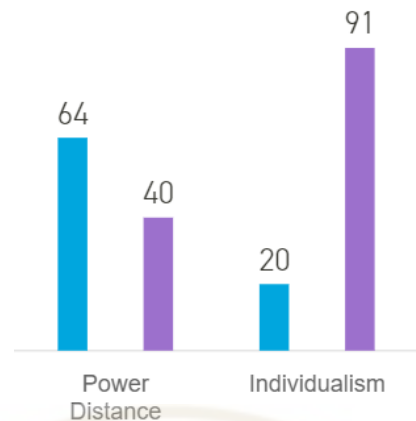
The self-organizing team was introduced extensively as one of the twelve principles in the Agile manifesto (Fowler and Highsmith, 2001), which has been used widely in the software development industry. In the self-organizing team, all team members should understand and share a common goal in order to move towards the same direction. Highsmith had described a definition of a self-organizing team below.

*“Individuals manage their own workload, shift work among themselves based on need and best fit, and participate in team decision making”*(Highsmith, 2009)

In addition, a self-organizing team requires autonomy management. To be an effective self-organizing team, a team ought to share the same goal, trust, and respect (Cockburn and Highsmith, 2001).

#### **2.2 Thai Cultures in Hofstede’s Theory**

According to Hofstede’s theory, Thailand exhibits a high power distance with a score of 64 as well as a high collectivism with a score of 80.



**Figure 2.1 The culture comparison between Thailand (Blue color) and the United States (Purple color)**

### 2.2.1 High Power Distance

The high power distance culture is a society in which people tend to accept inequality. People in the lower hierarchy of the society accept that people in the higher hierarchy possess a privilege and superior power. The hierarchy could be in terms of age, position, social status, financial status, and others. Regarding Hofstede's theory, the definition of high power distance is defined as follows.

*“The extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally”* (Hofstede, n.d.)

### 2.2.2 Collectivism

Collectivism society focuses on ‘We’ rather than ‘I’. Hence, people who reside in a collectivist culture have a strong relationship with the in-group. These people feel uncomfortable if they express different opinions from their group. These people will take care of each other and try to avoid conflict among the group in order to maintain the relationship. According to Hofstede's theory, the definition of collectivism is described as follows.

*“The society fosters strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group”* (Hofstede, n.d.)

## 2.3 Organizational Change

According to Kotter, there are 8 stages of strategic change across 3 phases, which are Adopt, Implement, and Institutionalize (Hallinger, 2018).



**Figure 2.2 Kotter's 8 stages of strategic change across 3 phases**

### 2.3.1 Adopt

The Adopt phase is an initial phase that occurs after an organization decides to make a change. First of all, it is essential to create a sense of urgency. Though, some people may resist change as a natural state. In this stage, a crisis should be created and raised to a team. Consequently, the team will feel that it is urgent to act in order to solve the problem. The first move is to talk to people, raise urgency, and provide information. The second stage is to create a guiding team as the first team to

implement change. The guiding team should consist of the right people who possess position power, social influence, expertise, and enthusiasm. The guiding team should be involved in all key activities that relate to a change in order to effectively lead and drive a change in an organization. The third stage is to create a vision and strategy. In this stage, the top-level management should initiate the process by providing a high impact vision of a change in order to direct and influence employees in an organization towards the same direction.

### **2.3.2 Implement**

In the Implement phase, a vision and strategy need to be communicated in an organization through multiple channels to motivate and inspire people. The fifth stage is to enable people to act or execute a change. If there are any obstacles, they should be removed to facilitate a change process. Hence, it is important to follow up and review a change blocker. The sixth stage is to create quick wins or short-term wins. An organization can demonstrate or share a success story of short-term wins to prove that change is constructive and practical. It would help to create an impact and encourage others to follow.

### **2.3.3 Institutionalize**

The seventh stage is to make more change since nothing is forever sustainable. A new change is always coming. Therefore, an organization needs to prepare and continue to improve. The last stage is to anchor a change in an organization's culture. This stage is to embed a change as one of the core values in an organization.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this research, the writer applied the qualitative method to obtain and crystallize the information by conducting one-on-one interviews. There are three interviewees who have different backgrounds in terms of experiences, roles, and positions as process team and team lead. All of the interviewees have experience in building more than one self-organizing team under different circumstances, but the majority of team members should be Thai members.

As this research aims to comprehend the insight and in-depth experiences of an interviewee, the qualitative research methodology is applied to acquire and gather information. The qualitative research is primary data and generally used to uncover ideas and problems through open-ended questions. During the interview, the qualitative method provides an opportunity and adjustability to obtain insight information. Therefore, it is an appropriate research method to understand the opinions, perspectives, emotions, and motivations of an interviewee.

This research essentially focuses on the key factors of building and transforming an existing team into an effective self-organizing team in Thailand. The factors could be a requirement or element, in which an interviewee thinks that it is an essential component for building an effective self-organizing team.

#### **3.1 Interviewee Selection**

To obtain comparative information, the writer decided to select interviewees from the same fields, which is a software development field, but in different business domains. Besides, the interviewees should experience building or transforming a self-organizing team at least twice. There are three interviewees who have different backgrounds, perspectives, and roles during their involvement in team transformation. As some part of the information is confidential and sensitive, the

identity of the interviewees and organization names will be concealed. The background and introduction of the three interviewees are below.

The first interviewee: Miss Anna has worked as process team or coach training for more than 15 years. For the first ten years of work, she worked with a data provider business to build and transform a software development team into a self-organizing team under the Agile methodology. After that, she worked with a financial institution to transform a team from several fields to a self-organizing team such as marketing team, finance team, and operation team. Approximately, she works on transforming 2 - 3 teams each year. The phone interview with Miss Anna was conducted on 17th October 2019. It took one hour for Miss Anna's interview.

The second interviewee: Mr. Brad has an IT background. He had worked as a software engineer for 9 years and then promoted to work as a team leader for 5 years. His current position is a development manager, and he has more than 40 people in four countries under his reporting lines. According to his working experience, he had built and transformed more than 5 software development teams. The phone interview with Mr. Brad was conducted on 18th October 2019. It took a half-hour for Mr. Brad's interview.

The third interviewee: Miss Cindy had worked as a quality assurance engineer for 6 years and stepped up to work as a manager for 10 years. Miss Cindy is currently working as a team lead for the insurance company to manage a software development team. Miss Cindy has experience in driving a self-organizing team from both top management level to team level and from team level to top management level. The face-to-face interview with Miss Cindy was conducted on 22nd October 2019. It took a half-hour for Miss Cindy's interview.

### **3.2 Interview Questions**

There are two parts of the interview questions. The first part of the questions is to understand the background and perspective in a self-organizing team of the interviewees. The second part of the questions is to find out the key factors of building a self-organizing team from interviewees' perspectives and experiences.



Though, the majority of the questions were developed to be open-ended questions that allow the interviewees to freely express their opinions and discover information.

**Table 3.1 Interview Questions**

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Question</b>
1. To understand the background and perspective of interviewees toward a self-organizing team	1.1 Can you briefly share about your previous working experience?
	1.2 What is the definition of an effective self-organizing team in your opinions?
	1.3 How does a self-organizing team benefit you and your team?
2. To discover and explore the key factor for building an effective self-organizing	2.1 What are the key factors that allow your team to achieve an effective self-organizing team?
	2.2 What are the main challenges and how did you overcome or solve them?
	2.3 What are the trade-offs when building or transforming a team into a self-organizing team?

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1 Definition of a Self-organizing Team**

The interview started with questions about the definitions of a self-organizing team in the interviewees' perspectives. All interviewees answered this question in the same direction that a self-organizing team should be an autonomy team. A self-organizing team should be able to handle an unexpected change and effectively deliver a product or service. It is a team in which all members make a decision, planning, and action together. A self-organizing team shares information and knowledge among the team members, understand the role and scope of each member, and support the other members.

According to Miss Anna, it is easier to build a self-organizing team, but it is a challenging job to build an effective self-organizing team. The big challenge is how to embed a self-organizing team DNA into an individual member. If there are any sort of reorganization or re-allocation such as team member resignation, new team member introduction, change in the team size, or an individual member should be able to have a self-organizing mindset to handle and adjust oneself to a self-organizing team in any circumstances.

#### **4.2 Analysis**

When organizations decide to build or transform a team into a self-organizing team, the direction of transformation can initiate from two directions. The first direction is a vision from the top-level management to a team level (top-down) and the second direction is driving from a team level to top-level management (bottom-up).

Miss Anna worked as a process team when a self-organizing team was not well-known as nowadays in the software development industry. As there are not many

self-organizing teams in Thailand, the majority of the ambition to build a self-organizing team was initialized from the top-level management to a team at that time. Nowadays, there have been many success stories of a self-organizing team. Therefore, the desire to build a self-organizing team may come from a team level to top-level management as well. Hence, the writer had summarized and categorized key factors of building an effective self-organizing team as follows.

#### **4.2.1 Support from Management**

All three interviewees agreed that support from management is essential. Building a self-organizing team requires time and budget. Hence, approvals from management need to be acquired in order to build a team. Mr. Brad said that building an effective self-organizing team takes at least six months to one year. Team members need to be trained to adjust their mindset and knowledge as well. Miss Cindy also mentioned that productivity is essentially decreased and thus the project could be delayed at the initial stage of building a team. It is a trade-off that managers have to acknowledge the top-level management.

If a change is driving from top-level management, it is mostly negotiable and easy to get support from them. However, if it is driving from a team level, it requires an effort to negotiate and convince management to buy-in a solution. Therefore, managers need to gather internal and external information such as a success story from others to raise an urgency to the top-level management in order to drive a change. Miss Cindy said that the team needs to start from a small change and gain short-term wins. When there are short-term wins, the team will have an evidence to prove and show to top-level management in their actions in order to proceed a step further.

#### **4.2.2 Understand a Team's Nature and Build Trust Among Team Members**

It is mandatory to analyze and understand a team's nature that will be built or transformed. All interviewees agreed that understanding the team is the most challenging part. To build a self-organizing team, the mindset of all team members must be changed in several ways. Team members need to have teamwork,

commitment, trust, and ownership as a team. Miss Cindy said that different team consists of different team members who have different backgrounds and characteristics.

Therefore, it is essential to understand and prepare the method for convincing and driving change for each team member accordingly. In order to understand each member, Miss Cindy will have one-on-one session to talk with each team member every month or bi-weekly. Miss Cindy said that this session is an opportunity for team members to express their thoughts and feelings. The topics could be work, life, or anything that team members want to share so, Miss Cindy can get to know each team members from this session.

Mr. Brad said that the best way to build trust is to build a strong relationship among team members. He encouraged his team members to participate in group activities, both inside and outside the company. Miss Cindy said that when a team is formed, she always holds a bi-weekly team lunch to get closer with the team. Since Thailand embraces a collectivist culture, Thai people are generally willing to be cohesive and give trust to the in-group. When team members have a good relationship, working as a team becomes smoother.

#### **4.2.3 Remove Barriers and Encourage Team Members to Share Ideas**

One of the challenges for building a self-organizing team is to create an atmosphere where the team members are comfortable to express and share their ideas. All interviewees faced the same issue as Thai people rarely express their opinions or ideas. It is the effect of Thai cultures that managers have to deal with.

Miss Anna said that Thai people adopt the seniority system. Younger people or people in a lower position are discouraged to share ideas or information. It can cause a problem as the team will only get partial information and make a decision based on the opinion of a specific group of people. Mr. Brad said that he had to observe the team and talk with both seniors and juniors members separately. The one-on-one session of Miss Cindy also help to understand and observe team members' obstacles as well.

In order to encourage juniors to speak more, Mr. Brad introduces a rule to his team called 'Juniors speak first'. He said that his rule is working very well for the

team. Before having this rule, seniors normally spoke first and juniors always kept silent or followed through as they are afraid to share their true opinions. This rule allows juniors to share their ideas first and then the ideas will be adjusted and brainstormed collectively by all team members. Mr. Brad mentioned that some seniors do have their own pride, so it is important to talk to them and adjust their mindset as well.

In Miss Cindy team, she will ask her team members to take turns to lead a meeting. This will give an opportunity for team members to practice soft skills. Moreover, juniors who lead a meeting will feel the empowerment and encourage them to speak more in the meeting. Another benefit of this activity is when seniors or team leaders are on leave, junior can step up and effectively lead a meeting.

Miss Anna and Mr. Brad said that another barrier of such change is the fact that Thai people always try to avoid conflict. As Thailand embraces a collectivist culture, it has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is when the team members feel that they are in-group, the team will have strong unity and teamwork. However, it can create an issue as well because the team members will avoid sharing different ideas or opinions that might conflict with the majority of the team members. When there is no brainstorming, there is no new innovation or creative solution to solve the problems. It reduces the effects of team productivity.

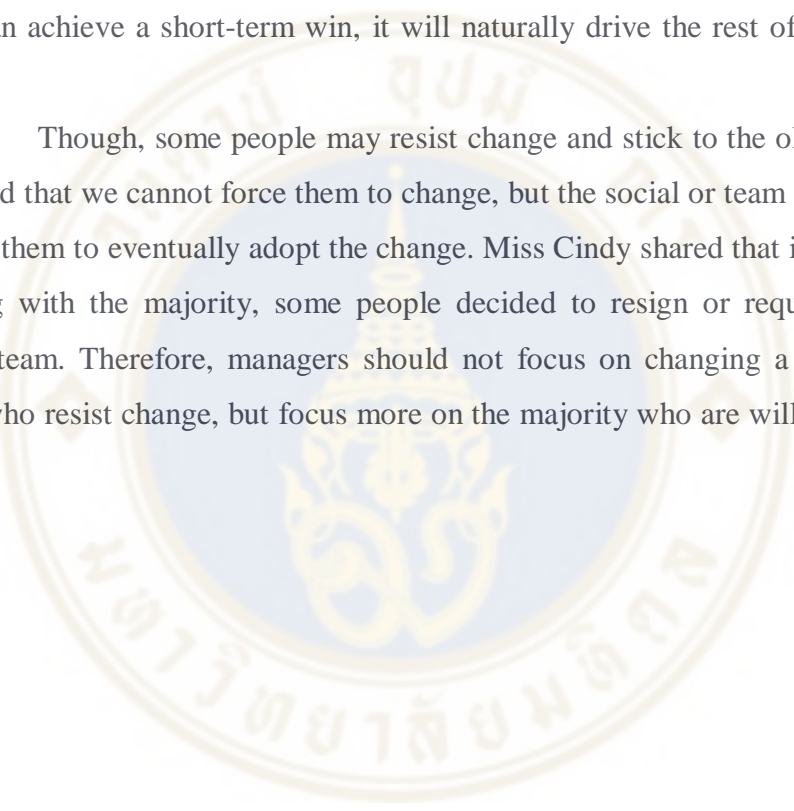
#### **4.2.4 Focus on the Majority**

“It is impossible to focus on all team members”, Miss Anna said. Especially for a team that has many members. Miss Anna was assigned to transform a team of 60 people to self-organizing team. At that time, she had to select a potential people or a guiding team to be trained. Miss Anna said that she and director selected a team that have a potential to transform first. The selected team will be a pilot group to transform to self-organizing team. During the transformation the progress will be updated and shared a short-term win to the big team (60 people) in the town hall meeting. The short-term win can be a new innovation, continuous improvement, or team productivity. It created an interesting and demand from the rest to transform team into a self-organizing team.

Miss Cindy also faced a similar situation. Miss Cindy said that she would select a potential people who have both soft skills and technical skills that can convince and influence other team members. The most important criterion is a soft skill in people management as these group of people will be a key to drive the transformation.

In Thailand, managers should select a socializer who can influence and gain respect from the majority as Thai people embrace a collectivism culture where Thai team members tend to listen and follow in-group members. When a guiding group can achieve a short-term win, it will naturally drive the rest of the majority to follow.

Though, some people may resist change and stick to the old process. Miss Anna said that we cannot force them to change, but the social or team atmosphere will pressure them to eventually adopt the change. Miss Cindy shared that if they could not go along with the majority, some people decided to resign or request to move to another team. Therefore, managers should not focus on changing a small group of people who resist change, but focus more on the majority who are willing to adopt the change.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study aims to understand the factors that could be a key success for building an effective self-organizing team in Thailand during the VUCA world environment. The VUCA world represents the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in the business environment nowadays. In order to adaptively and flexibly respond to changes in the recent business world, organizations are required to build a strong and efficient team.

The writer conducted qualitative research to gather information from one-on-one interviews with the selected interviewees. There are three interviewees who have different backgrounds in terms of experiences, profession, and positions. The criteria of the interviewee selection are having experience in building more than one self-organizing team and the majority of team members are Thai. The interview questions were developed as an open-ended question to allow the interviewees to express in-depth information and experiences. Hence, the questions aim to understand the background and perspective in a self-organizing team of the interviewees and obtain key factors of building a self-organizing team from interviewees' perspectives and experiences.

As a result, the writer analyzed and crystallized the information and experiences from the interviewees. There are four factors that play an important role in building an effective self-organizing team in Thailand during the VUCA world environment. The four factors are 1) Support from Management, 2) Understand a Team's Nature and Build Trust Among Team Members, 3) Remove Barriers and Encourage Team Members to Share Ideas, and 4) Focus on the Majority.

The first factor is the support from management. Building a self-organizing team requires time and budget as trade-offs. In addition, the team productivity will somehow expect to be decreased during the initial or beginning phase. The decreasing productivity may impact to the project timeline. Hence, approvals from management need to be acquired in order to build a team and proceed

a step further. Thus, building a self-organizing team is not suitable for a time-constraint project.

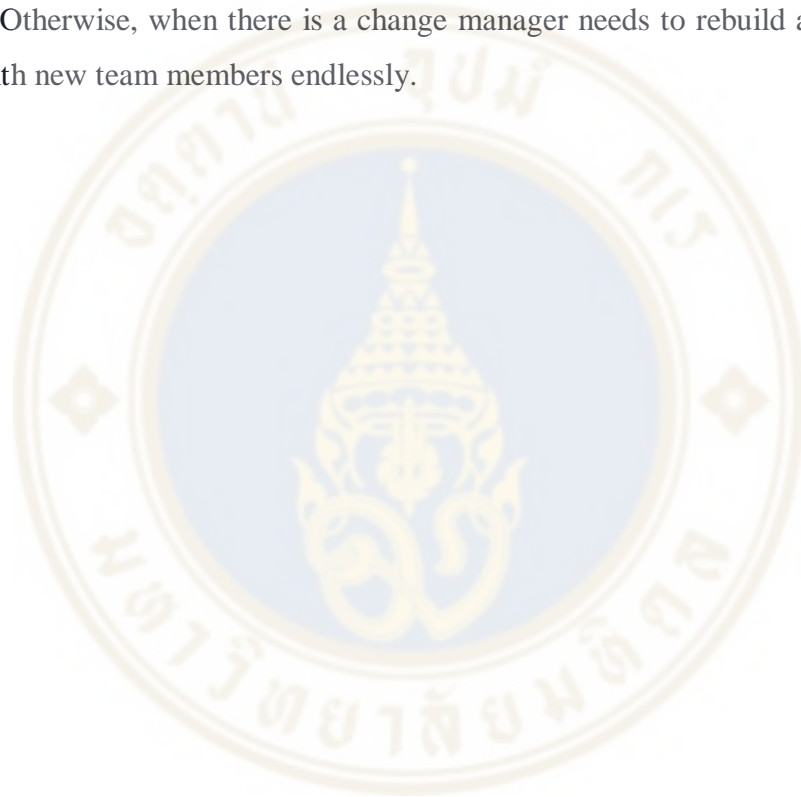
The second factor is to understand a team's nature and build trust among team members as a self-organizing team requires teamwork. It is the most challenging factor for all interviewees. The different team consists of different team members who have different backgrounds and characteristics. One of interviewee's techniques is to have a one-on-one session with each team members to get to know them better. It is essential to understand them and persuade them to have teamwork, commitment, trust, and ownership as a self-organizing team. Another technique is to have a regular team building activity in order to build a good relationship among team members. A team activity will not only break the ice and personal prejudice but also enhance the trust and teamwork among team members and enable a self-organizing team to work smoother.

The next factor is to remove barriers and encourage team members to share ideas. The managers need to create an atmosphere where the team members are comfortable to express and share their ideas. The barriers could be individual's issue or cultural issue. As Thai people owns the collectivism, the seniority is one of the challenges. It causes a problem as the team will only get partial information and make a decision based on the opinion of a specific group of people. Hence, managers have to apply a technique to encourage juniors to speak and share ideas to the team. One technique from the interviewee is 'Juniors speak first' to encourage junior to share ideas before seniors. The most important thing is to adjust mindset that everyone is free to share and express ideas to the team.

The last factor is to focus on the majority. It is impossible to focus on all team members. Therefore, managers would select a guiding group to transform into a self-organizing team. A selected guiding group should be people who have both soft skills and technical skills that can convince and influence other team members. These group of people would play an important role to drive a change. Though, some people may resist change and stick to the old process but the social or team atmosphere will pressure them to eventually adopt the change. Therefore, managers should focus on the majority.



These four factors would help managers achieve and able to build an effective self-organizing team. However, building a short-term self-organizing team is precisely easier than building a sustainable self-organizing team. Undeniable, organizational change is the nature of the current organization. As there is a competitive business atmosphere, there are several re-organizations, re-allocation, and other procedures that may affect to teams. It is essential to anchor a self-organizing team mindset as oneself and organizational values. The best practice is to exercise a self-organizing activities regularly until it embedded as organization cultures and values. Otherwise, when there is a change manager needs to rebuild a self-organizing team with new team members endlessly.



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