



The cross-cultural adventures of a young Westerner, leading expatriates in a Thai public school

Case study

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This case was prepared by Kyle Rydalch and Sabrina Bresciani. Its objective is to illustrate cross-cultural management, leadership and communication challenges, when Westerners and Asians work together. The case is based on a real experience in an existing organization: fictitious names are used to preserve the privacy and anonymity of the subjects involved. Information sources included personal experience, observations and examples from a real public school in Thailand. This case is intended as basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of management situations.

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Abstract

The case portrays the real story of a young American who takes an educational job in South East Asia. The story narrates the cross-cultural challenges associated with the interaction of foreign teachers with the local administration of the public school in Thailand.

Shane, despite having lived for two years in Thailand and being fluent in the language, is surprised by the local management practices: he was often asked to conduct a number of extra-curricular activities which were not outlined in his work contract, such as organizing trips for the students, setting up an English club or supervising students who were preparing for a singing competition. Shane feels overwhelmed by the collateral activities, and frustrated when he is often interrupted during class for what he considered trivial reasons. A critical incident evolves when all teachers are asked to participate in decorating the school for the upcoming conference of local schools. The major argument between Shane (as the spokesperson of the foreign teachers) and the Thai administrators, helps to shed light on the causes of the mutual misunderstandings.

These episodes help learners gain insights into cross-cultural management, different leadership models across cultures, and intercultural communication challenges which persist beyond language issues and knowledge of the local culture. Through the case, the readers can learn about typical sources of cross-cultural misunderstanding when Westerners and Asians collaborate, with particular focus on the public education sector. By analyzing the case, readers should identify the major critical incidents occurred, explain their underlying causes making reference to theories of cross-cultural communication and management, and propose best practices and strategies for conflict resolution.

A New Experience

Shane, a young American national and aspiring English teacher was looking for an experience teaching at a primary school in Southeast Asia. He had spent years in the region studying the language up to the level of a fluent speaker, travelling, and tutoring adults. After a fair amount of job searching, Shane decided to take a year contract teaching English, Science, and a few other subjects in a public school in northern Thailand. The school had just opened a program employing foreign teachers, and Shane was the only American, working with colleagues who came from several countries in Africa, the Philippines, and the Netherlands. The supervisor of the foreign faculty, however, was a Thai woman who had never worked extensively with foreigners and had never lived abroad. Upon his arrival, Shane was surprised to find that there was literally no orientation or cultural training of any kind; he was simply shown our classrooms and expected to teach. It was an intense introduction to his teaching experience, but since the program was so new, he simply assumed it was

part of the growing pains associated with establishing a new program. Initially, he noticed a host of superficial differences between his previous experience in a western education system and his experience teaching in Thailand. Still, given his regional experience and competency in the language, he was confident that he would be able to adjust to the new circumstances and began his teaching responsibilities with great enthusiasm.

The First Weeks

However, the first few weeks of Shane's experience at the school were full of odd, surprising, and even confusing situations, one after another. First, during the first week of classes, Shane was asked by the head teacher for his grade to help lead the students on a field trip to the local temple for their annual session of religious studies with the local monks. He was also asked by the supervisor of the foreign teachers to establish an English club, which met bi-weekly to provide games and activities in English for all interested students in the school (not just for Shane's students). He was also asked to help supervise and assist students who were preparing for a district-level singing competition. Shane felt overwhelmed, especially given the stress associated with the first week of classes, and annoyed to be given such a load of extraneous duties that seemed completely unrelated to his position as a teacher in the school's fledgling English program. In fact, as time went on, his role as a teacher was constantly being stretched to include tasks wholly unrelated to education. He was asked to take a shift in helping the kindergarten students cross a busy street after school was out, and was asked to help lead some Boy Scout and Girl Scout activities, as well as to act as a host for a farewell party for retiring teachers. Each time he was presented with one of these assignments, Shane would think to himself "None of this was in my contract. I'm here to teach English, not to waste my time with other activities." And yet, the pattern continued; one day a pupil of Shane's scraped his knee badly on the playground. Shane took the student to the nurse's office, only to find out that the nurse was out for the day. With no other health professionals around, Shane had no choice but to treat the wound himself. "Teacher, are you a doctor?" asked the young student. Shane smiled faintly, but didn't reply.

Shane was also surprised when he received the curriculum and course materials for his classes. The English textbooks in particular were a far cry from what Shane had seen in the USA. The textbooks were authored and printed in Singapore, and utilized pictures, puzzles, songs, and cartoon depictions of everyday situations. Shane had expected books with detailed explanations of grammar, pronunciation, and writing principles, as well as extensive exercises, and thus utilizing those textbooks during his lessons proved to be very difficult.

In terms of the English program, Shane noticed several issues with the organization and communication (or the lack thereof) between the foreign faculty and the program's administrators, as well as glaring issues with the curriculum. He hoped that these issues would be the focal point of the first general faculty meeting of the new school year. Instead, during the meeting, the administrators

spent the entirety of the meeting discussing the plans for the construction of an additional building on campus which, as the principal was eager to point out, would be the largest educational building of any primary school in the province. The topic then shifted to the upcoming competitions for sports and other subjects with other schools in the district, and then the meeting was adjourned.

Later that week, Shane stopped by the school copy center to print some additional worksheets for his afternoon classes. However, the secretary of the copy center refused to print his worksheets without written permission from his direct supervisor. She explained that this was the protocol that the principal had instituted several years ago. Shane pleaded his case, but to no avail; the secretary would not print without the required authorization. Frustrated, Shane took his work to a copy center outside of the school during his lunch break.

As a few weeks passed, Shane completed a series of evaluations to assess the English-speaking capacities of all the students in his class, and he was dismayed by the discrepancy between the highest and lowest scores. Worried that some students should not have been placed into the English-speaking program, Shane thought he would raise the issue with the principal of the school, who had invited Shane and some other teachers to lunch at a nearby restaurant. Just as Shane was beginning to express his concerns, he was interrupted loudly and forcefully by a Thai colleague (and friend) who changed the subject immediately. Meanwhile, another Thai teacher leaned over to Shane and whispered "It's not appropriate to talk about those things here."

There were other characteristics of life at the school that seemed strange to Shane as time passed. He had been informed that it was school policy for all teachers to arrive by 8:00 am and that all classes and activities should conclude by 4:00 pm. However, Shane often witnessed members of the Thai faculty arriving late to school in the morning, but also teaching or holding meetings beyond the designated time. He found it odd that nobody, including the administration, ever seemed to notice or complain about non-adherence to the scheduled times. Additionally, there were numerous occasions when Shane was in the midst of teaching a lesson, only to be interrupted by other teachers, administrators, or staff members. Usually they had some sort of question, announcement, or request, none of which seemed particularly urgent and/or time sensitive. It bothered Shane greatly, especially since it seemed quite distracting for his students. The rest of the foreign faculty shared his frustrations, but when Shane mentioned them to a Thai colleague, his colleague was indifferent. "I don't think it's really an interruption," said the colleague. "It's just normal here."

The Visit

One day, Shane was informed that he would be missing an entire day's worth of classes to travel with a large contingent of faculty, foreign and Thai, to a school visit at a school in a province about 3 hours away. Shane was not pleased to be missing classes again (he already felt so behind with his lessons), but the words of a Thai colleague gave him hope that the activity may actually be

beneficial. “The school we’ll be visiting is one of the best primary schools in Thailand,” said the colleague. “Everybody wants to be like them. Everybody wants to do what they do.” Similar sentiments were abundant in the days leading up to the excursion, and Shane couldn’t help but hope that his chance to observe the state of the other school’s program would give him insights as to how he could deal with his concerns at his own school and how the program as a whole could be improved. He wrote a list of questions regarding the curriculum, effective teaching styles, the organization of the program, classroom management techniques, and a host of other topics. He had this list of questions in hand when the visiting contingent arrived at the host school.

Immediately upon arrival, all the visiting teachers were taken into a very well-appointed conference room and given a wide assortment of food and drink. A recording of a television program about the host school by a Thai television station was shown; the program praised the beauty of the school, the good behavior of students, and the popularity and influence of the administration, specifically the principal of the school. That same principal then arrived in person and gave a short speech to the visiting faculty. Shane noticed that the principal never mentioned anything even remotely related to academics; rather, the hosting principal’s speech was a long, seemingly never-ending list of accomplishments framed using “We did this first...” or “Our school is the only school in Thailand to do this...” After the speech, the visiting faculty were taken on a tour of the school. During the tour, they were shown various school facilities; a nice computer lab, a posh lounge for teachers, and even a swimming pool. They were taken through rooms with various awards, banners, and pictures of dignitaries who had visited the school in the past. They were able to observe a class for about 5 minutes, but Shane noticed that everything in the class seemed very staged, as if the students and teachers were performing a skit instead of participating in a class. The teachers would ask a question, all of the students would eagerly raise their hands as though they knew each answer, but the teacher would only choose a small number of students to answer the actual questions. Shane and his colleagues were unimpressed; the teaching styles employed by the host school’s faculty seemed oddly unimaginative. Later, they were briefly allowed to see the English curriculum, and Shane was surprised to see that the textbooks used for the different English courses were very similar to the ones which he had been provided with. Though Shane remained unimpressed by the unstructured content of those texts, he noticed that all his Thai colleagues were carefully copying down the book names, authors and publishers in their personal notebooks. Before long, the visiting teachers were led to the cafeteria where they ate lunch, and the visiting principal announced that the tour had been a great success, that the visiting faculty had been well-instructed, and that they would now return to the bus for the journey home.

Back on the bus, Shane stared blankly at his list of questions, all of which remained unanswered. “What was the point of all this?” he thought to himself. He was joined by Anthony, a colleague from Kenya, and they discussed the situation between themselves. “I don’t understand why

we came; it seems like a wasted day” said Anthony. “From what we saw, their school and their academics aren’t far ahead of ours, and we just opened our program!” exclaimed. “Their students are like our students, they use materials similar to what we use, they even teach the way we teach. But I was told multiple times that this is the best primary school in Thailand!” said Anthony. “It can’t be the best.” Shane replied. “They put on a good show, but in terms of academics, there are many schools that have better programs, I’m sure. Maybe their school is the most famous, the most well-known, but it’s not the best.” said Shane. “Yes, but perhaps in Thailand, being the most famous means you *are* the best.” remarked Anthony. The two pondered that statement in silence throughout the duration of the journey.

The Incident

After the school visit, the foreign faculty continued to try to adapt to their circumstances as much as possible, and things were bearable for a period of time. However, as time went on, some tensions between the foreign teachers and the local Thai teachers & administration began to appear. For example, the administration would often call lengthy (usually unannounced) faculty meetings during teaching hours, forcing Shane and his colleagues to skip lessons in favor of what the administration claimed to were “urgent” meetings (although, to Shane, they appeared quite unproductive and inefficient). Additionally, the foreign faculty noticed that their advice on how to improve the English language program with much-needed changes seemed to fall on deaf ears, as very few of their proposals were ever put into motion (despite promises that those suggestions would be considered). Some foreign teachers expressed their frustrations to Shane, who tried to act as a kind of mediator by using his Thai language ability to communicate feelings and thoughts for both the foreign and Thai teachers. Despite his best efforts, Shane was frequently caught in the crossfire as the relations between the two sides deteriorated.

One specific incident became especially controversial. During normal classes one day Shane was approached by a group of Thai teachers who asked him to abandon his classes for the afternoon to come help create display boards and other decorations for an upcoming conference of local schools which being hosted by Shane’s school. No previous notice had been given, and the details of the foreign faculty’s role in the actual conference were not especially clear. Annoyed at being interrupted yet again during classroom hours, the foreign teachers convened informally to discuss the situation together. During the meeting, many pent-up frustrations were voiced. Many of the teachers viewed the Thai teachers’ request as sacrificing their primary responsibility as a teacher for their students (their official job and responsibility), for something which they deemed to be utterly trivial, especially given the fact that they hadn’t been previously notified. “How important could this conference really be?” asked Jennifer, one of Shane’s colleagues from the Netherlands. “If it was truly important, they wouldn’t have waited until the last minute to prepare for it.” Anthony quipped: “Every time we get

interrupted or asked to do something instead of teaching, it always seems like a complete waste of time! I came here to teach, not to sit in meetings or decorate display boards.” Many heads nodded in agreement. After the discussion, the entire foreign faculty decided to continue with their classroom hours as planned in the original schedule, despite the call to action from the Thai faculty. Each of them felt confident that they had made the right choice given the options available in that situation.

Later that night, Shane received a phone call from one of the Thai administrators of the school. She was furious that the foreign teachers hadn't assisted in preparing the school's decorations for the conference. When Shane attempted to explain what he considered to be perfectly sound reasoning, she became even more agitated (to his incredulity). “How could our foreign faculty be so disinterested in how our school appeared in the conference?” she asked. “Every other one of our teachers knew how important it was!”

The argument lasted for more than 20 minutes, but finally, the administrator said something that brought a moment of clarity that illuminated Shane's understanding of all his previous observations of Thai education as a whole as well as the source of the present misunderstanding. She said: “In the Thai education system, it is generally perceived by education professionals as well as the general population that high quality schools must present themselves in the most appealing way possible in order to gain respect and build admiration and respect for the school - and subsequently, a desire for students to attend that particular institution”. Attracting students to the school in this manner had huge consequences in terms of school budget allocations from the government, financial support from key donors as well as support from the school's Parent Association. It brought face and respect to all who associated with the institution. Thus, conferences, hosting visitors, and other activities were incredibly important opportunities for each school to showcase itself, something that was much more impactful than simple student test results or other more quantitative measures of a school's quality.

At last, Shane understood. He recognized that this conference had been a hugely important matter for his Thai colleagues, and the fact that the foreign faculty had dismissed it as a trivial event and even questioned their colleague's commitment to education was deeply offensive. He also came to understand that in that setting, advanced notice wasn't considered essential by Thai social standards; one is merely expected to pitch in and help when called upon, regardless of his or her previous engagements. In these circumstances, the “show” was more important than quantitative results, a different dynamic other education systems which Shane had observed. Ultimately, Shane came to realize that neither side was actually “wrong”, but that cultural dimensions differed so much as to cause a significant amount of misunderstanding from this single incident. Shane was able to explain these lessons to both his Thai and foreign colleagues, and each party benefitted from the cultural insights throughout the remainder of the year.

Questions

1. Based on the evidence presented in the case, please identify cultural differences between Thai and Western culture, according to cultural dimensions (Hall, 1976; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998; Hofstede, 2001; Levine, 1998; etc.). Which cultural dimensions are different across the two cultures? Please provide specific reference to the events narrated in the case to support your answer.
2. Identify the cultural differences in thinking patterns (according to Nisbett, 2003) which lead to the incident. Please make reference to specific episodes described in the case.
3. Describe the leadership traits of the principal, considering cultural differences in leadership and management, based on the GLOBE study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).
4. Do the managers of the school use appropriate motivational techniques to manage their teachers? Provide suggestions.
5. Why is the Thai administrator upset when the Western teachers explain their behaviour? Please describe the difference in communication styles between Thai and Western personnel (Hall, 1976).
6. What is the role of schools and of institutions in Thailand and in the West? Please discuss how these differences affect the behavior of the teachers and administrators. The cultural differences that were observed by Shane in the incident had manifested themselves previously, but in diverse circumstances. Had Shane been able to identify the underlying causes of these differences, he may have mitigated future conflict. What could Shane have done differently? Provide concrete suggestions.

OPTIONAL

7. Please analyze the intercultural incident by creating a visual map to explain the underlying causes of the issue. When mapping the critical incident, you should analyze it by referring to theoretical concepts of intercultural differences, such as dimensions, Geography of Thought (Nisbett, 2003), Geography of Time (Levine, 1998), communication styles, etc. This exercise will help you think visually, reframing and re-structuring the critical events and their causes. The suggested visual mapping technique for this exercise is the fishbone diagram (also known as Ishikawa diagram)

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