

Kreng Jai in the Workplace

By: Virginia Maguire

Kreng jai ('awe heart') is something foreigners only slowly become aware of, only then to be confounded by its labyrinthine workings. Kreng jai is sometimes translated as 'consideration' or 'deference', but neither of these words do justice to the connotations of kreng jai: if one is in 'awe' of others' feelings, this carries with it an implicit obligation to respect others' feelings. This involves two aspects, the first of which is to avoid imposing on other people, and the second of which is to avoid confrontations which suggest dissent. All of this leads to indirectness and reticence, both in language and behaviour. The Thai people have a remarkable ability for saying things without actually saying them, but foreigners often fail to pick up such subtle signals.

เกรงใจ:

"[is] reluctant to impose upon; deferent to; is considerate of (another's feelings); respectful of (another's privacy, space, etc.); fearful to approach."

(www.thai-language.com)

All of this led me to wonder whether there were problems in the multi-cultural workplace, so I decided to talk to four young Thai professionals to see if they could help shed some light on the workings of kreng jai, and to find out if it influenced their behaviour at work. All of them spoke excellent English, were highly educated, and were doing well in demanding jobs in multi-cultural organisations, yet kreng jai – a uniquely Thai form of behaviour - influenced their dealings with both Thais and foreigners. Prasit (33), a customer service officer, described kreng jai as 'what we should do, or must do, or shouldn't do with another person', indicating it was a set of social norms Thais feel obliged to adhere to. No less than six different types of kreng jai emerged, and when they overlapped the feelings of kreng jai were compounded. The first set related to difference in hierarchical status; the next group to degree of distance in the relationship; and the last type related to oneself. All six are outlined below in the

hope that it might help bewildered foreigners understand the rationale which underpins kreng jai, and how important it is for Thais in the workplace.

1. Respect for Elders (Unequal Age Status)

Respect for one's elders was mentioned most times, and by all the interviewees. They also surprisingly stated that age had far greater importance than rank in the workplace. They were all aware that Western cultures attached less importance to age, and identified this as a problem since it could produce conflicts of interest in the line-management structure. Manop (25), a CMU lecturer, described the previous department where he worked, and where the head (the first to return with a PhD from overseas) was 37, while the senior lecturers were aged 45

plus. He had felt more *kreng jai* towards the senior lecturers and had been unable to 'say no' to them; while he had felt able to discuss things openly with the department head.

Neils Mulder, an anthropologist, sees respect for elders as the central ideology that imbues the Thai way of life and underpins the operations of *kreng jai*:

Respect and obedience to elders, trust in their wisdom and protection, and the need to return favours received, all these are strong themes in Thai culture. The underlying idea is the principle of mutual dependence and reciprocity, and the principle of being practically and morally indebted. It is the recognition that people need each other if they want to go on living, formulated in a system of mutual but unequal moral obligations, with due respect for tradition and wisdom of elders (Inside Thai Society, p59).

2. Respect for/ Fear of the Powerful (Unequal Power Status)

Yupin (29), an assistant MD, described feeling *kreng jai* towards those who hold more power. Since Thai bureaucratic institutions wield great power, business organisations – and their employees – are often placed in the position of supplicant. Yupin described bureaucratic interaction as being interpersonal, saying Thai society is constructed as 'a network, connections, so if we would like to get things done, in Thai culture, we believe that we have to have more connections. And with the people who have more connections, we have to be *kreng jai* to them'. Thus the person with less power is obliged to adopt the position of supplicant so that the more powerful person in turn feels obliged to behave in a generous manner befitting his or her station. Unlike the immutable respect for elders, this form of *kreng jai* is superficial rather than sincere. Respect in the form of obsequiousness allows certain roles to be played out in order to achieve functional business ends.

3. Respect for Superiors (Unequal Rank Status)

Any workplace, however open and informal, has a clear hierarchy defined by job title and line management structure, and each member of staff knows exactly where they fit in the organisational hierarchy. Thai workers are likely to feel *kreng jai* towards those of higher rank, and work efficiency may be hindered by a Thai feeling too *kreng jai* to impose on a superior. This can cause problems with Westerners who attach most importance to getting the job done, and for whom, as Yupin pithily put it: 'Time is money, business must be done'. Although she was aware of this and had been singled out for promotion, she felt very *kreng jai* about disturbing the foreign MD because she knew he was busy. Before going into his office, she said, 'I have to take a while. I have to make sure that it's okay for me to go in. He may be okay and welcome me at any time, but still, I see his face, I see his desk with a lot of papers, so I feel like it's not the time'.

4. Consideration for Foreigners (Distance: boundaries unknown)

The interviewees also said they felt *kreng jai* towards foreigners because they were an unknown quantity. This distance led to what they described as ‘consideration’, which involved the avoidance of imposition because boundaries were unknown. Some of those unclear boundaries related to language, and Manop said he knew it was okay to be direct with the native-speaker teachers, but he was not always confident about how to say things appropriately in English. Other unclear boundaries resulted from a lack of intimacy. Jantima (29), a production manager, described the sense of distance when dealing with Western colleagues: ‘we don’t know them at all, what they think, what they want’, and explained this was why she felt she had to be more careful when dealing with them.

5. Consideration for Thais (Distance: feelings unknown)

Kreng jai was also described as ‘consideration’ for Thais, and the need to avoid hurting their feelings. Since Thais conceal their own feelings, their colleagues are often unsure about what might cause offence and have to exercise caution. Yupin said she dealt with Thai members of staff differently ‘because Thai staff don’t want something more direct and criticising and are still concerned about feelings’, while Westerners preferred communicative efficiency in the workplace.

6. Self-Effacement

Such is the nature of *kreng jai*, that self-effacement becomes a positive virtue. Self-effacement, though prized, is not automatic or easy. Prasit, the customer services officer, spoke of a hot-tempered colleague whose outbursts affected other people, and who gave him a ‘headache’. He contrasted this to his own behaviour: ‘But the best way, which I choose, is to be calm and speak quietly and not talk to her much, just work on my own’. Manop, the lecturer, also felt the stress inherent in self-effacement, saying he often regretted feeling *kreng jai* because he knew he needed to speak out to get things done.

The main reason these young Thai professionals felt *kreng jai* towards foreigners was a consequence of distance rather than hierarchical considerations. They were willing to suspend their status-oriented feelings of *kreng jai* when dealing with non-Thais, since all appreciated that a greater degree of directness was beneficial in the workplace. The complex workings of *kreng jai* therefore need not be a problem for foreigners, though they should be sensitive to the necessity of respecting elders. If foreigners focused their attention on building relationships instead of getting the job done, they could actually break down the barriers of formal politeness which hinder efficiency. As Shakespeare, and the Thais, would have it: ‘By indirections find directions out’.