

# Leadership with Heart in the Asian Context: Lessons from the Field (Philippines and Thailand)

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## Introduction

This article presents Leadership with Heart, specifically from the context of two Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines and Thailand. Insights were sought from leaders and managers of these participating countries through an on-line questionnaire using open-ended questions. The questions dealt with two main inquiries: 1) Describe what leadership with heart is to you? and 2) How is leadership with heart experienced by you?

Based on the contents analysis of collective insights, there are both similarities and differences in terms of its traits and styles. Both Filipino and Thai on leadership with heart demonstrates three emphases: (1) Care and Concern: Malasakit and Meta ; (2) Spirit of Communal unity and cooperation ; and (3) Character and action.

## Leading with heart

Asia is emerging as the region invariably gains distinctiveness in its leadership both traits and styles. Asians seemingly take pride in what they do and how they do what they do. The way Asians' leadership is distinctively practiced is impulsive and spontaneous and is not as objective as the west world.

Leadership in the Philippines has a unique blend of Confucianism, Christianity and Communal Values (Corcuera, F. n.d.) while Thailand embraces Hinayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Communal concepts in the practice of leadership. These unique characteristics of similarities and differences have their strengths and limitations, varying by how they are perceived and practiced in real-life situations.

First, the words for heart in Thai language is "jai" and in Filipino is "puso". In both countries, these words are also interchangeably used to describe the physical heart. Furthermore, the meanings of "Jai" and "Puso" overlap with other similar words like spirit, spiritual center, or core; soul, inner being, mind, and state of being.

### **Care and Concern: "Malasakit" and "Meta":**

Asia is changing in many ways such as the demographics within its workforce along with the progress of the economic and business landscape of the region and workplace. In the midst of these, Asians continue to put a prime value on the quality of personal relationships with their superiors and colleagues. The quality of personal relationships matter the most, thus leading and managing with

heart is a plus factor in employee motivation, satisfaction, performance, and loyalty. Leadership is always connecting on the human level.

Asian leadership is overall caring; though firm or disciplined, Asian leadership is paternalistic and parental in approach (Low, 2012). Like the father/bread-winner, the leader looks after the family (organization/nation) and ensures or promotes their well-being. (Low, 2012). The leaders indeed look after the people, and the people are obliged to be loyal and obey the leader; it is a mutual exchange and relationship, striving to attain win-win relationships for all parties. The leader devotes and heavily invests on the people; and the people follow and support the leader. (Low, 2012)

**Care and concern means showing interest and support in the employee's welfare and wellbeing** (compensation benefits) including showing interests in the subordinate's family concerns, provides financial and moral support. It is common that employees value leaders and managers who organize and join celebrations with and for family members, goes out of her/his way to be one with them. A leader values his people and shows appreciation, gratitude, concern, and understands their needs.

This quality of concern and care are considered by leaders from decision making to implementation. When top management makes decisions, the middle managers with "malasakit" (Philippine context) ensure that the rationale behind the decision and benefits (both short and long term) are made clear and satisfactorily explained to the subordinates. From firing to hiring, fair compensations and benefits packages, managers and the corporate leaders are expected to take compassion and empathy into account

**Leaders consider and engage all relevant stakeholders –empowering people to make decisions or do tasks on their own.** Although Asian leadership maybe considered as paternalistic or authority based, Employees consider their leaders with heart when they listen to their people and involves them in dialogue in decision making and in execution of plans.

"*META*" is the Buddhist Thai word that means "mercifulness". This mercifulness characterizes leading with heart from Thailand perspective. Employees consider their boss to be leaders with heart when latter practice "mercifulness-minded" in the way they listen to their employees, especially when faced with difficult problems. When the employees immediately feel the sense of connection with this deep mercifulness-minded appreciation, it most likely that a suitable solution to the issue or problem would emerge. Mercifulness-minded listening means giving a person the chance to speak out to show his/her pure intention. Allowing them to speak enhances the will and motivation to continue giving their best contribution because they feel deeply valued by their superiors. Feeling valued by senior authority or boss ultimately creates a long-lasting relationship and engagement - as Thai's saying goes "there is no place is better to work than having a mercifulness-minded boss."

**Valuing Talent and People development is part of concern and care.** The leader sincerely believes in improving the talent and skill set of his team and encourages them to take programs related to where they aspire to be in their career, and gives opportunities for growth. As leader who foresees the challenges that could come along as he helps and guides his people to proactively find a solution.

Leaders with heart encourage those who are not performing well. Instead of positioning the weakness as a negative thing, a leader with heart understands that this is an opportunity for team members to compensate and do well in other things, and at the same time learn from their team mates. Thus, the leader with heart puts a premium on the goal and aspiration of his subordinates and helps them to steer and reach loftier heights.

### **Spirit of communal unity and cooperation**

Asians are highly ranked for its collectivism. Culturally, Thailand and Philippines put high value on family and this naturally extends to the workplace. The leaders creates a team who look out for one another and for the best interest of the group while fostering and building the team spirit and bonding. In the Philippines, this is “*samahan or bayanihan*”. In Thailand, such characteristic embodies in the virtue of Thai way of shared living known as *namchai*, “water of the heart”, it is a concept encompassing warmth and compassion that allows groups to make sacrifices for friends and to extend hospitality.

The leaders is driven to accomplish team goals and has a strong desire to make other feel that they are empowered every step of the way. He/she considers the strengths and weaknesses of his/her team and finds opportunities for each individual and each team member to shine and step up using their strengths, collaboration and camaraderie in the team.

In Thailand, employees regard a leader with heart as someone who stands by them and with them when they are confronted with difficult situations. Protecting employees from losing face is a priority. It means showing respect and sympathy no matter how much mistake or difficulty is posed by a situation. The leader is expected to demonstrate the empathy and then move towards the finding the right solutions. This promotes better relationships, eases tensions, and brings about better conflict negotiation and resolutions as a team.

### **Character and Action**

Leaders with heart are competent leaders with vision and makes it happen. They know their business and provide clear directions. They always strive for continuous learning to attain personal mastery and render balance perspectives in seeing challenges, people and opportunities. Competence is not everything. One’s personal integrity is revealed by a good track record in his/her private and public domains.

Values-based leadership is highly regarded in Thailand and the Philippines. A leader with heart is and must also be a person of character – integrity. He is Person of his word – means what one says; keeps promises; and tasks are accomplished as promised. In Thailand, this characteristic of leading with heart has a direct connection to Hinayana Buddhism’s five precepts (Sila). The precept (Sila) or moral conduct is the principle of human behavior that promotes orderly and peaceful existence in a community. The character of being ‘integrity’ is the fourth precept or Sila, lying is generally regarded as wrong. When a boss is unable to deliver the promise because one has been insincere from the beginning, the employees consider it as a lack of character. However, the boss who shows consistently sincere motives quickly gain trust and understanding from his employees. Employees likely appreciate and accept the fact that

boss is unable to fulfill promises and one must gracefully submit to external forces beyond one's control, such as the effects of past karma. What matters most is to live up to one's intention and sincerity.

Furthermore, the leader with character and action also practices transparency as regards information and dissemination of information; are not conscious of the trappings of one's position and authority; and are not afraid to admit their own mistakes. These are some proves of a leader's character and who serves with honesty; conviction and direction. In Filipino, this term is "*pananagutan*": one person who serves with accountability and responsibility.

### Conclusion

The various points on presented here, particularly from the Philippine and Thai contexts, show the distinctiveness of the lived experience of leadership with heart. Asian leadership with heart is VALUES BASED: valuing PEOPLE is central along with personal integrity, mercifulness, positive relationships, caring, concern, and responsibility, among many others. It is noteworthy that Asians today see emerging Asian characters as distinctive contribution to the emerging face leadership. The dynamics of leading with heart may vary as there are many cultures in Asia, but the prime value placed on "People First" is common and noteworthy wherever a leader finds oneself in the Asian workplace. **In the heart of leadership.**

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