

Communication Styles and Culture

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Introduction

This article examines ways in which Thais communicate in the workplace and perceived cultural obstacles to open communication. The article is divided into five parts. The first overviews a system used to classify different communication styles; the second explores where the communication of Thais fits into this classification system; the third presents research findings about how conflict and culture affect Thai communication styles; the fourth sheds light on possibly contradictory issues raised in this article; and the final part discusses the implications of the research.

Much of the research mentioned here is drawn from in-class group research projects completed by students enrolled in graduate programmes of Thammasat University's Language Institute. The procedures used and the limits on the generalisation of the findings are explained in the notes at the end of this article.¹

I. Classifying Communication Styles

People prefer to communicate in certain styles for a variety of reasons. In an attempt to analyze communication styles, Hamilton and Parker (1997) developed a classification system from existing research that categorized different communicators as *open*, *closed*, *hidden* or *blind*. These four communication styles are characterised by an individual's tendency to share information with others (*disclosure*) and seek information from others (*feedback*). According to their analysis, a person's primary communication style is determined, in large part, by the degree of disclosure and feedback they use. Every person also uses a secondary

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communication style when they are under stress or when their work climate is characterised by conflict and insecurity.

The disclosure-feedback continua and directness/indirectness of the four communication styles are listed in the chart below:

Communication Style	Disclosure/Feedback Continua	Directness
Open Communication Style	High disclosure and high feedback	Direct
Closed Communication Style	Low disclosure and low feedback	Indirect
Hidden Communication Style	Low disclosure and high feedback	Indirect
Blind Communication Style	High disclosure and low feedback	Direct

II. Thai Communication Styles

Based on personal experiences and cultural perceptions, most people would likely place Thais within one of the communication styles classified by Hamilton and Parker as indirect. Therefore, the assumption would probably be that the primary communication style used by Thais is either a hidden or closed style. However, recent research into the communication styles used by Asians in group settings has raised questions about this assumption. For example, at an AMEP conference in 2001 Fitzgerald explained that her research into the sharing and expressing of opinions in informal meeting situations found that “almost all the Asian participants expressed and maintained strong positions and in some cases disagreed quite forcibly.” Her conclusion on this point was that the “situational context” of the meeting needed to be considered before generalizing communication styles in all situations (Fitzgerald, 2001).

To achieve a better understanding of what communication styles are used by Thais, thirty Thai graduate students were asked to complete a questionnaire to evaluate their communication styles in June of 2001.² These completed questionnaires indicated that more than 95% perceived themselves to be open communicators (high disclosure/high feedback). About the same percentage also indicated that their secondary communication style (when under stress) was the hidden style (low disclosure/high feedback). Since this initial sampling, these results have been

consistently reproduced by approximately 250 students enrolled in these programmes over the last two years.

Other, less formal research surveys exploring Thai attitudes towards open communication seem to indicate a very positive view of the *open style*. In fact, the importance placed on providing feedback to superiors and expressing opinions in the Thai workplace is overwhelmingly embraced. In one survey, 92% of respondents agreed it was *necessary* to express opinions and provide feedback to their boss, and 86% indicated their *willingness* to share their opinions and provide feedback.³ Another survey, specifically concerned with communication styles, showed a clear bias towards the use of the open communication style. For instance, 84% of supervisors indicated their willingness “to listen carefully to subordinates’ opinions and share ideas openly.” The corresponding figure for subordinates’ willingness to communicate openly with supervisors represented 72% of the sample.⁴

These findings were interesting since they raised more questions than answers. Were these students truly communicating in an open style, or did they simply perceive themselves to be open communicators? Given that Thai cultural norms emphasise respectful communication and deference to authority, how could these results be credible? Were there other factors that inhibited the use of open communication? If so, in what situations would the use of an open communication style be acceptable and the use of a secondary hidden communication style necessary?

III. Cultural Obstacles to Communication and Conflict

The findings mentioned above seem to indicate that open communication is perceived positively and valued in the Thai work place. However, positive attitudes towards open communication do not necessarily mean that an open style will be used in all situations. For a clearer picture of how often the open communication style is used in the Thai work setting, survey questions were developed to explore two aspects of open communication: cultural obstacles to open communication and the frequency of open communication during situations of conflict.

Cultural Obstacles to Open Communication

The indirectness of communication in Asian workplaces is often attributed to cultural influences that encourage harmony and conflict avoidance (Dodd, 1991). Within Thai society there are several cultural concepts that influence the way people communicate. Perhaps one of the most researched concepts is *kreng jai*. *Kreng jai*, in the most general sense, describes the way people behave in different situations out of concern for other peoples' feelings, to avoid potential conflict, to maintain positive interpersonal relationships, and in deference to figures of authority (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995).⁵

To identify what obstacles to open communication were most important to Thais, Thammasat graduate students were given "common questions" to include in surveys they were conducting as part of a group project.

The first "common" survey question sought to discover what factors would lead someone to avoid direct communication when faced with behavior by a co-worker that caused them to feel frustrated or angered. The two most important factors identified by the 868 respondents surveyed included the "fear of a negative reaction" and "concern for the other person's feelings."⁶ Additional research indicated that status and seniority were perceived as obstacles to the use of open communication.⁷ These results more or less confirmed the popular understanding of the influence of *kreng jai*; however, they shed little light on how people communicate during a conflict situation.

Conflict and Communication

Two additional "common" survey questions were crafted to measure the proportion of respondents who would communicate *directly* in situations of conflict or stress. The questions differentiated between policy conflicts and situations that arose out of interpersonal conflicts. The questions were framed as follows:

1. "When there is a communication conflict about a policy or procedure in your organisation, do you address the problem directly or indirectly?"

2. "When there is a communication conflict between people in your organisation, do you address the problem directly or indirectly?"

Of the 311 respondents who answered the first question, the majority (55.6%) indicated that they would address the problem directly; however, a large minority (43.4%) preferred to address the problem indirectly. The findings for the second question were not dissimilar: a slight majority (50.2%) chose a direct communication approach to the situation and 48.9%, an indirect approach. Only 1% of the sample responded that they were unsure or would use "both" approaches, depending on the situation.⁸

What is perplexing about these findings is how evenly divided the respondents were in their communication approach to a situation of conflict. The majority of respondents did indicate their preference for a direct communication approach, even when faced with a situation of conflict. However, it was equally true that a significant minority said they would employ an indirect strategy, or use their secondary hidden style.

On the surface, this seems to reveal a clash between the dominant open communication style and cultural concepts influencing communication. How is it possible to explain this paradox? Perhaps this apparent contradiction is not related to the communication style being used, but stems from cultural concepts understood by the respondents.

IV. Towards an Understanding

This brief article has explored how Thais communicate. In doing so, it has examined the communication styles of Thais and cultural concepts influencing communication. While these two aspects seem to contradict one another, they may be explainable by looking more closely at the cultural concepts influencing communication.

In *The Silent Language*, anthropologist Hall (1973) explains that culture operates on three different levels: technical, formal and informal. These three levels represent patterns of behaviors associated with a culture that are understood by members of that culture. The concept of *kreng jai*, described in this article, is situated within the formal level.

At this level of culture the patterns of behavior are well understood, but not easily explainable to people from other cultures because the behaviors have been learned over time through imitation. What is important to note here is that the cultural concepts influencing the communication of Thais are well understood by members of the culture. When considering whether or not communication is direct, this shared understanding needs to be taken into account.

The directness of communication is not only related to the volume of disclosure, but also to how accurately communication can be understood by others. Since *kreng jai* is a well understood cultural concept, it is worth reconsidering whether this concept's influence on communication actually represents an obstacle to open communication. If one accepts the argument that *kreng jai* is well understood, then it is reasonable to assume that it does not necessarily interfere with what is considered open communication among Thais.

V. Implications

The research presented in this article seems to indicate that the vast majority of Thais view themselves as open style communicators. Respondents to various surveys also revealed attitudes consistent with the behaviors of open communicators. Even when presented with scenarios of conflict, a majority of respondents chose to respond in a way that can only be described as direct. While a significant minority of Thai respondents indicated they would assume a hidden style of communication when presented with a situation of conflict, this may be equally true of any number of nationalities. The lack of cross-cultural research on the use of secondary communication styles makes it difficult to make an informed determination on this point.

If further research were to confirm that the overwhelming majority of Thais possess an open communication style, this would have important implications. For management in the Thai work environment, this information could help guide their approach to create environments conducive to the use of the predominant communication style. Holmes and Tangtongtavy (1995) suggest several practical approaches to dealing with issues related to assertiveness and feedback within meeting situations.

Perhaps more importantly, broadening the understanding of the way most Thais communicate would likely result in a reassessment of the perceived cultural obstacles to communication. Therefore, future research should rigorously examine the interplay between the influence of cultural concepts and communication styles. This would help management and employees develop more effective approaches to communication in the Thai work environment.

Notes

- ¹ The research findings presented in this article (notes 3 to 8) were drawn from surveys undertaken by students who interviewed people working in Thailand. The students were enrolled in the MA (English for Careers) and Graduate Diploma (English for Careers) programmes at Thammasat University's Language Institute. As part of their class assignments, students participated in group projects and developed surveys on a variety of communication issues. Each group was given "common questions" to be included with the other questions in their group's survey. The data from the various surveys were then compiled to calculate the percentiles of common questions presented in this article (notes 6 & 8). The main purpose of this research was for in-class discussion of related communication issues and, consequently, the findings have not been peer reviewed and published. The findings were not analyzed to determine statistical significance; therefore, it is not appropriate to generalise the findings. The titles of group surveys contributing to each "common question" finding mentioned in this article are specified in the notes that follow.
- ² The survey used to analyse students' communication styles was developed by Cheryl Hamilton in 1981 and revised in 1986. The Manager Tendency Indicator (MTI) portion of the 1986 survey included in the 5th Edition of *Communicating for Results* was used for this purpose.
- ³ *Expressing Opinions and Feedback in the Workplace* (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
- ⁴ *Communication Styles* (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)
- ⁵ Perhaps the most common factor identified as a barrier to open communication in the Thai workplace is the concept of *kreng jai*. Holmes and Tangtongtavy (1995) provide eight examples of this concept:
 1. Complying with requests even though the request may be a burden
 2. Reluctance to disturb or interrupt others
 3. Restraint of one's show of displeasure or anger so as not to cause discomfort to others
 4. Avoidance of asserting one's opinions or needs
 5. Reluctance to give instructions or pass orders to a superior, or to peers with more age or experience

6. Reluctance to evaluate a colleague's or superior's performance
7. Avoiding the demand for one's rights
8. Reluctance to ask questions when one has not understood someone

⁶ Below are the titles of group surveys that contributed to this common question finding:

1. Appropriate Communication Channels in Your Workplace (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)
2. Communication Concerns from a Manager's Point of View (CR 601, Semester1/2001)
3. Communication Styles (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)
4. E-mail Behavior in the Workplace (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)
5. How Communication Happens in Your Organization (CR 601, Semester1/2001)
6. Interpersonal Communications within the Thai Working Environment (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)
7. Manager's Communication Behavior (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)
8. Obstacles of Upward Communication (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
9. Scope of the Manager's Responsibility for Communicating with their Subordinates (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)
10. The Usage of New Technology (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)
11. Using Electronic Email for Communication in the Business Setting (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)

⁷ What is the Problem of Open Communication? (EL 540, Semester 2/2002)

⁸ Below are the titles of group surveys that contributed to this common question finding:

1. Attitudes towards Using New Technology in the Classroom (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
2. Barriers of Communication (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
3. Communication in English for Thai People in an Organization (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
4. Comparison between Spoken and Written Communication Methods within an Organization (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
5. Conflicts & Communication (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
6. Do Different Ages Affect Communication in the Thai Workplace? (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
7. Expressing Opinions and Feedback in the Workplace (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
8. Grapevine Communication (CR 601, Semester 1/2001)
9. Interdepartmental Organizational Communication (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
10. Problems in Upward Communication in the Workplace (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
11. Upward Communication Problems in the Workplace (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)
12. Vague Instructions (CR 601, Semester 1/2002)

References

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