

# วัฒนธรรม การสื่อสาร และการบริหารจัดการ: การศึกษาโฮเรนโซ ในประเทศไทย

## Culture, Communication and Management: A Study of *Horenso* in Thailand

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความชิ้นนี้ต้องการศึกษาการประยุกต์ใช้ โฮเรนโซ (หลักการสื่อสารในองค์กรตามวัฒนธรรมการบริหารแบบญี่ปุ่น) ในประเทศไทย โฮเรนโซ หมายถึงวิธีการการรายงาน การแจ้ง และการปรึกษาหารือ ที่ใช้ในการบริหารจัดการองค์กรญี่ปุ่นทุกคนภายในองค์กรญี่ปุ่นล้วนต้องปฏิบัติตามหลักการนี้ การวิจัยสำหรับบทความชิ้นนี้ใช้การสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกกับพนักงานที่ทำงานให้กับบริษัทข้ามชาติญี่ปุ่นแห่งหนึ่งในกรุงเทพมหานครจำนวน 9 คน งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้พบว่า คนไทยมีวิธีการนำโฮเรนโซ มาปฏิบัติในแบบของตัวเอง ซึ่งแตกต่างจากวิธีที่คนญี่ปุ่นปฏิบัติ การใช้ โฮเรนโซ ของคนไทยมักจะเป็นไปในเรื่องของการรายงานเป็นหลักซึ่งไม่ได้แยกขาดจากการแจ้ง และการปรึกษาหารือ อีกทั้งในการรายงาน คนไทยจะมองถึงเป้าหมายระยะสั้นและเป็นผู้สื่อสารในรูปแบบตอบสนอง/แบบผสม นั้นทำให้คนไทยเห็นความสำคัญส่วน

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บุคคลมากกว่าองค์กร การรายงานของคนไทยยังถูกมองว่ามีข้อมูลเพียงผิวเผิน และขาดข้อมูลเชิงประจักษ์ ถึงอย่างนั้นการปฏิบัติแบบคนไทยก็มีความยืดหยุ่นมากกว่า และอาจเป็นผลดีต่อการประยุกต์ใช้ โฮเรนโซในกลุ่มพนักงานคนไทยอีกด้วย นอกจากนี้ โฮเรนโซ ยังเน้นให้เห็นลำดับขั้นของตำแหน่งในองค์กรชัดเจน ผู้จัดการที่อยู่ในตำแหน่งระดับผู้บริหารมีแนวโน้มที่จะสามารถให้คำปรึกษาลูกทีมได้ด้วยประสบการณ์และทักษะที่มากกว่า นั่นชี้ให้เห็นว่าบทบาทที่ดีของ โฮเรนโซ ขึ้นอยู่กับความสัมพันธ์เชิงลำดับขั้นภายในองค์กร สุดท้ายนี้คนไทยมักจะรายงานเฉพาะเรื่องที่ไม่สามารถแก้ไขปัญหาได้ด้วยตนเอง ถึงแม้ว่าปัญหานั้นจะเกิดจากความผิดของตนเองก็ตาม นั่นแสดงให้เห็นว่าลักษณะการรายงานของคนไทยมีความสัมพันธ์ใกล้ชิดกับวิถีคิดเกี่ยวกับการแก้ปัญหาของคนไทย

**คำสำคัญ:** โฮเรนโซ, การสื่อสาร, การรายงาน, วัฒนธรรมการบริหาร, ความเป็นญี่ปุ่น

## ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate the way *horensō*, a Japanese business communication principle, is applied in Thailand. *Horensō* refers to an organised way of reporting, informing, and consulting. Everyone in the company is required to follow *horensō*. By using in-depth interview with 9 participants working in the same Japanese multinational company in Bangkok, this research found that Thai people have their own ways of using *horensō*, which are different from the way Japanese people use it. First, Thai people use *horensō* mainly as an activity of reporting which is not mutually exclusive from informing and consulting. Second, when they report, Thai people think in terms of short-term orientation with a typical character of reactive/multi-active communicator. This makes Thai people prioritise themselves over the company. Moreover, reporting style of Thai people are seen as superficial, lacking factual detail. Yet, it is more flexible which sometimes can benefit the application of *horensō* in Thai employee community. Besides, *horensō* also highlights the order of position in the company. Managers who have superior position tend to be seen as more capable with experience and expertise to give consult to their subordinates. *Horensō* is functioning well based on hierarchical relationship within the company. Lastly, Thai

people tend to report only when they cannot manage to fix the problems which might come from their mistakes. Thai people style of reporting is thus closely linked with problem solving mentality of Thai people.

**Keywords:** *Horenso*, communication, reporting, management culture, Japanese

### Introduction

The proliferation of Japanese multinational enterprises (MNEs) in Thailand has brought about Japanese management ideas, such as Theory Z, Kaizen, and 5S (Theerakorn, 2010; Vanpet, 2012; Watcharasunthonkit, 2016). These ideas have been influential towards the management and communication of Thai people and the Thai society in general. In particular, Japanese management practices or styles (Haghirian, 2010; Dobi & Bugár, 2008; Sato, 1997; Nagano, 1996; Kennly & Florida 1995; Yang, 1984; Yamada, 1981; Hazama, 1978) are essential for running businesses.

As Japanese culture is collectivist, Japanese company strategies are normally team-based (Kameda, 2013; Kawar, 2012; Nishimura, Nevgi & Tella, 2008), of which communication is a core. Good communication does not only enable employees to work in concert, but also to build a

constructive relationship between each other leading to higher performance and job satisfaction (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014). Unfortunately, communication can be a source of tensions, conflicts, and misunderstanding in workplaces, especially once involving with cultural differences.

Research found that cultural differences between Thais and the Japanese has resulted in tensions in communication in the office (Adu-Oppong & AgyinBirikorang, 2014; Aoki, 2010; Onishi, 2006; Ferraro, 2005; Lewis, 2005; Schneider & Barsoux, 2002; Gesteland, 2002; Harris & Moran, 2000). In other words, misunderstanding in communication between the Japanese and the Thai employees often comes from cultural differences. In Japanese organisations, communication tools are created to reduce the misunderstanding and systematise the communication pattern in the organisations. Among them, *horensō* as the principle for social communication is prominent. *Horensō* refers to reporting, informing, and consulting. It is one of the Japanese corporate cultures that everyone in the organisation must follow. If used effectively, *horensō* is believed to create work efficiency through coordinating with each other and reduce conflicts and miscommunication (Kameda, 2013).

In Thailand, *horenso* is wildly recognised and popularly applied in corporate training and business practice. However, it is mostly overlooked in the academic community. There are limited research focusing on *horenso* and its application in Thailand (see Piyatomrongchai, 2018; Kongnonkok & Liemsuwan, 2018; Rungruang, 2017; Ponanake, 2012). Also, qualitative research is often disregarded in the literature. Most of the *horenso* literature in Thailand is studied quantitatively. Therefore, this article will use a qualitative approach to investigate *horenso* and its application in a Japanese MNE. The main question is: how are Thai employees applying *horenso*, compared with the Japanese employees who are native to the principle?

The research purposively conducted in-depth interview with 9 participants who have experience in using *horenso* and communicating with foreign colleagues at different managerial levels. They have worked in the same Japanese MNE in Bangkok. The interviews were conducted in English with the Japanese participants and in Thai with the Thais ones over Skype in July in 2019. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 45 minutes. They were recorded and fully transcribed anonymously. Then, the interview data was analysed thematically to search for the content of the narrative given by participants. Several initial codes were

created by the researcher inspired by conceptual frameworks and then supplemented by the interview data. The research underwent the consideration of ethics in research by the Research Ethics Advisory Group from the University of Kent, UK, in 2019.

This article argues that there are differences in the way Thai and Japanese employees use *horensō* as a business communication principle. Although Thai and Japanese cultures share a high context and reactive communication culture (Nishimura, Nevgi & Tella 2008; Lewis, 2005), they are not similar (Lewis, 2005). *Horensō*, if used constructively, can help Thais communicate better with their Japanese colleagues and increase their performance in business.

### **Culture, communication, and management**

Culture is pivotal to communication pattern and management. Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001, 1984; Harada, 2017; Nishimura, Nevgi & Tella, 2008) are one of the most important theories to explain cross-cultural management and communication. The cultural dimensions theory aims to explain the effects of culture on the values of people and how such values influence people perceptions and behaviours. The theory holds that people are believed to carry their own 'mental programme',

developed since their childhood through social institutions, which contain parts of national culture. Hence, what they do, in communication, reflect a part of their culture.

In organisational level, Hofstede (1984) argues that “organisations are cultural-bounded” (p.252) and identified four important work-related cultural dimensions to analyse work-related cultural values in different countries. He then added the fifth and the sixth dimensions to explain the Asian context better (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). These six dimensions are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, long-term orientation versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint (see Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Although the theory has received a lot of criticism, such as, for its Western-centric (Yeh, 1983; Fang, 2003), oversimplification (Signorini et al., 2009), and methodological issues (McSweeney, 2002; Jones, 2007), it has been popularly and variously applied across the field of international business management, psychology, and communication (e.g. Whalen, 2016; Eringa et al., 2015; De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010; Wu, 2006). Indeed, the theory is one of the most essential milestones of cross-cultural research (Ferreira, Serra & Pinto, 2014). The explanatory power of the framework lies in its comprehensive conceptualisation of

cultural difference which allows one to study and compare cultural system, especially in management and communication, systematically.

In their study of Japanese management, Jackson and Tomioka (2004), by using Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1998) layers of intercultural contact, interestingly identify two easily found cultural layers of the Japanese culture: explicit products and implicit norms and values. They first found the *explicit products* which are easily seen at first sight such as language, dress, architecture, and food. Then, after a familiarisation period, they started to discern the implicit norms and values which are foreign to them, the outsiders. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, norms are "the mutual sense a group has of what is right and wrong" (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998, pp.21-22). They also state that norms can be both formal and informal levels such as written laws and social control respectively. The norms, hence, tend to manipulate individual behaviour, be it physical or mental. Such behaviour has an impact on the way one should or should not naturally act in culture-specific situations. To know the deep inside of Japanese culture, Jackson and Tomioka (2004) monitored examples of common Japanese behaviour like bowing, greetings and using eye contact, and found that such behaviour "can be 'learnt'

(as in imitated) but perhaps not fully assimilated or understood” (p.13) by the outsiders due to culture-specific value. In other words, the outsiders have potential of adapting to norms without necessarily changing their fundamental values; the norms, especially culture-specific one, also have potential of adapting due to time and context. These layers of intercultural contact (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998) are a cultural approach which enables one to understand and conceptualise national cultures, whether it be home or foreign cultures. The approach will be employed to help explain and understand certain cultures, particularly on intercultural communication and perception between the Japanese and the Thais, which are abstract rather than concrete objects.

As aforementioned, culture have a significant effect on communication across countries. Many studies which explain styles of communication and national culture tend to differentiate the communication styles by using two major cross-cultural communication theories: Hall’s (1976) theory of high/low context communication cultures; and Lewis’ (2006) communication theory (Thovuttikul, Ohmoto & Nishida, 2018; Nishimura, Jack & Westwood, 2009; Nevgi & Tella, 2008; Gesteland, 2002). According to Hall (1976), the national cultures can be categorised by context, the

inextricable information surrounding an event and being bound up with the meaning of it, in order to perceive principal cultural differences in communication style or pattern (the ways of typical communicating or expressing one-self). The context in each culture can be identified as high and low contexts. In high context culture, real meaning is often delivered implicitly. Thus, it is up to the listener to interpret the meaning of what the sender really means. On the contrary, in low context culture, each word tends to have a direct meaning. The meaning is always explicitly communicated through the word. Accordingly, the listener would expect more explanations from the sender until nothing remains unclear (Hall, 1976).

Similarly, Lewis (2006) classifies communication culture into three types: linear-active, multi-active and reactive communication cultures. First, linear-active people are people who talk and listen equally, while multi-active and reactive people tend to prefer one over the other. The linear active people, thus, prefer to plan ahead methodically and communicate directly with others by using straightforward and non-ornate words. They think that the most effective way to do something is doing one thing at a time. Second, multi-active people who prefer talking while listening often perform many things at a time. They prefer to

talk in a roundabout and feel uncomfortable with silence and strictness. In other word, they are talkative and flexible. Therefore, the multi-active people tend to not prioritise the plan. They use their feeling as a main factor to decide to do something. Third, reactive people prefer listening first to know their own position in relation to the others. They pay attention to custom and respect. Sometimes, the reactive people seem slow to verbally react because they put a lot of thought on thinking before speaking.

According to Lewis (2006), Thais and Japanese belong to the group of reactive, or listening, communication culture. They can also be considered a high context culture (Hall & Hall, 1990). However, as will be shown later in empirical analysis, there are some differences between them.

For Thai communication culture, some key characteristics can be explained. Thai culture has high-power distance. Thai society is a society where inequalities are accepted. It is hierarchically arranged based on seniority which gives rise to top-down or paternalistic management (Thanasankit & Corbit, 2002; Komin, 1990; Hofstede Insights, n.d.). According to Rohitratana (1998, p.90), Thais commonly perceive the role of superior/manager as “a controller rather than a colleague.” The Thais, thus, tend to respect, conform, and obey their superiors/managers in order to be in return for

guidance and protection. In other words, the superior/manager has significant authority over his/her subordinates. Moreover, they also like to shift their responsibilities for decision making to their superiors/managers (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 2003). Communication pattern in Thailand is then shaped by seniority. The Thais tend to conform to their supervisor's opinions without doubt. This makes the foreigners think that it might be a barrier to work with the Thais.

Besides, there is the notion of 'saving face'. The Thai notion of 'face' does not mean a physical face as an organ, but mental facade. It is an abstract concept which represents personality, behaviour, social status, honour, and dignity, and may vary according to culture and surrounding environment. Someone's 'face' is lost because of his/her failure to meet social requirements (Ho, 1976). Consequently, he/she tends to be seen at a lower position in the eyes of his/her peers. The Thais, thus, tend to save or build their 'face' in order to feel accepted by their colleagues, especially in a managerial level. In other word, when they made a mistake, the Thais tends to talk indirectly, if not go silent, about it (Teeraputtigunchai, 2018). Teeraputtigunchai (2018) mentions that this 'saving face' culture is explicit even for foreigners. It is based on hierarchical relationship characterized by

seniority. The issue of ‘face’, therefore, is one of the factors that leads to conflicts between employees, especially in an international company where employees have cultural differences. Teeraputtigunchai (2018) also reveals that, compared with the Japanese, Thai people tend to consider ‘face’ more, be it their own ‘face’ or the other ‘face’. They thus tend to more compromise and find a mutual way that no one has a negative effect.

### ***Horenso*: A key Japanese business communication principle**

*Horenso*, an acronym from Japanese language, refers to the basis of business communication in Japanese corporate culture. It is a continual and collaborative process between superiors, subordinates, and colleagues over the course of an activity or a project (Kameda, 2013). *Horenso* is developed to create work environment in which all information can be delivered quickly and correctly and stressing the intense report (Susilo, 2015). *Horenso* is derived from three words and ideas: *houkoku* (reporting), *renraku* (informing), and *soudan* (consulting).

First, *houkoku* refers to exact, and perhaps immediate, reporting to superiors on the process, progress, changes, if any, problems, and result of one’s work. This means that

subordinates should always report to the superior; they don't have much authority to make business decision. Indeed, no one can make decisions as an individual even within the delegated authority. The decision is normally made by an organisation as a whole.

Second, *renraku* refers to informing facts or conveying useful information of one's own will to relevant parties and those who need it. Personal opinion or assumption must be avoided in informing. This informing can be initiated by anyone regardless of position, unlike reporting. Sometimes, to inform can be a practice to share information with relevant parties or to keep relevant parties updated.

Third, *sodan* refers to consultation and discussion with superiors or relevant parties over an issue needed to be solved. This idea recommends ones to ask for others' opinions and suggestions. Sometimes, making suggestions or running projects without consultation with superiors can be even considered offensive in Japanese culture.

Overall, *horenso* highlights collectivism in decision-making process in Japanese culture and allows no room for individual opinion and the functioning of the delegated authority (Miroshnik 2009). Communication using *horenso* value system may look simply, but it is a practice peculiar and fundamental to Japanese-affiliated companies and one

of the golden rules for business success in which considerable significance is posited upon cooperation within a group (Yamazaki, 2012; Kameda, 2013).

In the context of management, *horenso* is a communication practice which improves coordination and reduces the gap between managers, colleagues, and subordinates. Ponanake (2012), for example, observes the implementation of *horenso* which helps reduce manufacturing production process waste in Japanese industrial companies in Thailand. She found that *horenso* does not only help reduce the waste due to clear regular communication and quick cooperation, but also create an opportunity to build an employee relationship between managerial and operational levels. Moreover, she also mentions that *horenso* is considered as a fundamental concept for other Japanese corporate cultures which are usually use in Japanese MNE in Thailand such as Kaizen, the Japanese concept of continuous improvement.

“Nutsu” (45 years old, senior Japanese manager) affirmed that:

*Horenso* is a very important communication [and business] tool because communicating [reporting, informing] and consulting with our supervisors [and] our colleagues have made us work easier. *Horenso* kept me updated about

situations happening around me so I can proceed my work correctly and help my subordinate decide on what was consulted... I think *horenso* must be an immediate or real-time activity of everyone.

### **Thai and Japanese interpretation/application of *horenso***

The Japanese communication principle is not naively and directly transferred into the locals. The Thais interpret and sometimes integrate their own culture into the Japanese practice, resulting in a mix practice. The practice is thus variously applied by the locals to suit their own interests.

Arguably, derived from three different words, *horenso*, in practice, are not mutually exclusive. Interviews suggested that Thai people perform *horenso* as a series of connected activity: to report progress, update their current work, and then consult their work problems. Besides, they often merge one with another, which is found different from its original use by the Japanese.

For Thais, reporting is the starting point of *horenso*. In the company, two important reporting mechanisms are identified. First, reporting through the company's formal internal system. This report is recorded in the company's database which can be accessed by everyone. Second, reporting to the manager directly. This mechanism, rather

informally, allows personal interaction between employees and supervisors. It is this second kind of reporting that practically links *ho* with *ren* and *so*. When they are interacted face-to-face, Thai employees also inherently update their work and consult relevant work issues with their supervisors. They do not differentiate each practice from one another.

Interviews also revealed that Thai people have distinct behaviour regarding reporting. They perceive reporting and its rationale different from the Japanese. “Summer” (26 years old, Thai assistant manager) mentioned that:

Thai people find it necessary to report only when there is a problem with their work... On the contrary, the Japanese regularly report every single thing regardless whether there is a problem or not. The way the Japanese reports sometimes make us [the Thais] feel a bit uncomfortable. We then think of the Japanese as too demanding when they wanted us to report everything.

What Summer said reflects the conflation of *ho* and *so* used by Thais. Thai people are intended to avoid reporting if there are no problems needed consultation. This implies

the character of ‘saving face’ of Thai people. Thai people are not likely to state their problems which might arise from their errors. The character prevents Thai people to efficiently perform *horensō*.

On the contrary, the Japanese people believe that reporting ‘truth’ of what has happened, even it was a mistake or a problem, will greatly help the manager and the company to assess the situation and, in turn, handle the issues in time albeit possibly negatively affecting personal practitioners’ performance. The company has a guideline on reporting emphasising ‘plain truth’, a reporting method asking all employees to honestly and professionally report whatever happened to their superior and company.

It can be argued that Thais have short-term orientation while the Japanese have long-term orientation. Thai people consider what they did in the past as a matter at stake. They are focused more on their mistakes without considering development in the future. They report just in order to fix the problems emerged. On the contrary, Japanese people consider more of the future. They report because they desire to make plans and develop measures to prevent issues which might arise again. This is one of the reasons why Japan is more advanced than Thailand in terms of economic development because countries that are short-term oriented

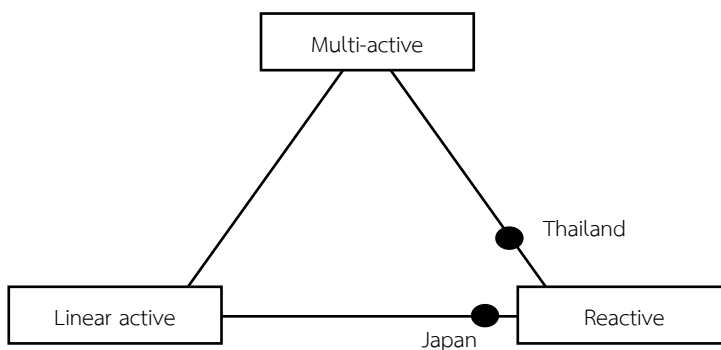
tend to have little economic development while long-term oriented countries continue to develop advanced economy (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

It is also reasonable to see that Thai people are more self-interest driven compared to Japanese people who are more collective (company)-interest driven. When reporting, Thai people are inclined to heavily focus on their individual performance. They avoid reporting because they would like to avoid saying their own faults. They barely think for the sake of the company. Yet, Japanese people are seen more committed to the company. They usually think of their own interest as the company's interest. In other words, the company is 'their' company because it is a 'Japanese company'. Japanese people have more employee loyalty to the company than Thai people in this sense.

The difference in reporting behaviour also reveals about the different character of communication culture between Thai people and Japanese. In general, Thai people and Japanese people are based in reactive kind of communication cultures (Lewis 2006). However, this research particularly found that Thai people are tended to be more of multi-active while Japanese people are inclined to linear-active. Although they place an emphasis on customs and respects, Thai people are more talkative, flexible, and multi-

tasking. They are less prioritized according to plans or regulations. Japanese people are more focused to plans and processes. They are people who favour single-tasking. Differences in communication culture are thus not a difference in types but in degree (see figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Communication culture of Thais and Japanese



Source: adapted from Lewis (2006)

In addition, from interviews, Thai style of reporting is seen superficial. “Haru” (28 years old, Japanese assistant manager) confirmed this point and even said that reports of Thais is not beneficial for making future decisions.

When a Japanese manager asked Thai sale staffs about customer visit, they commonly replied “good, they were interested in our

products, but they had no budget to buy it.” If the sales staff were Japanese, they would rather say more than that. They added: “it was because this year budget was already spent for buying other products or withdrawn by the headquarter”... the Japanese would report by adding information and a little bit more reason behind customer responses. Indeed, this is a valuable information which Thai people rarely give the company as it can help the manager understand more and accept customer why they don’t have money to buy the product. This also helps the manager and I predict the customer’s situation and knows what we should do next to make them buy our products.

Not only the Japanese hold this view, Thais also agree on this. “Autumn” (36 years old, Thai technical staff) insisted that report of Thais is lack of detail compared to that of the Japanese.

For the Japanese, a report contains factual information and numerical data. These are important information which is easy to

recognise, process and use for further planning. On the other hand, for Thais, a report often contains ideas or feelings rather than factual information. Thai reports are noted unsystematically... So, I think that the Japanese reports are more concise, comprehensive... and clearer in an organised format.

Nonetheless, Autumn also mentioned that Thai reporting is not strictly formatted thereby being more flexible. Thai people are uncomfortable in adapting themselves to the Japanese reporting system because, Thais like flexibility and *Horenso* is a process-based activity which generates orders of communication in business settings. Everyone must strictly follow the principle. Interestingly, flexibility, in effect, is not totally unproductive for *horenso*. Instead, it can be beneficial.

Interviews revealed that Thais pursue the outcomes of works without following the established processes. In other words, they have their own methods. “Spring” (30 years old, Thai assistant manager) especially confirmed this point. He gave a story of how he has used *Renraku* in his own way and claimed that his method was better than the Japanese.

Japanese manager often pushed their subordinates by pressuring with serious

conversation. They think that the pressures normally motivate people to work. So, they always notify or warn the subordinates directly with negative words. This might be good for them [the Japanese] but not for us [Thais]. Actually, Thais were discouraged by pressures... when I was told by my Japanese manger to inform my Thai subordinates, I've done it in a different way but still retained the original goal... I used positive words to convince them, and also to make good feeling which motivated them to work until a target is reached. I found that this way of informing has made them pursue the goals easier and better.

Through flexibility, Thais have managed to find their own use of *Horensō*, which is likely to suit with the Thai communication culture more. This makes *horensō* become something Thai people can live with. Currently, the company allows Thai people to inform the other Thais using their way of communication. It implies that the Japanese has also adapted itself to Thais.

Arguably, the idea that *horensō* brings orders in communication, as aforementioned, signifies the hierarchical

relationship where supervisors are placed on the top helping their subordinates to solve problems and make decisions for them. “Normally it is only the Japanese who run the company,” said “Aki” (41 years old, senior Japanese manager). The company drives Thais to conform with Japanese norms in the work environment. Thais are supposed to behave in accordance with the Japanese practices to get good performance.

A chain of command influences the way Thais use *horenso*. The higher rank the Thais, the closer they are with the Japanese. From interviews, Thai managers tend to directly communicate to and consult with their own Japanese supervisors because they realise that the final decision rests with the Japanese. Specifically, Spring mentions that:

In this company, all influencers who have a significant impact on decision making are Japanese... To solve problems, I prefer to directly talk and consult with my Japanese supervisors rather than Thai colleagues because I want to make a change and the final decision rests in their hand... Talking with Thai people is just for venting my problems.

On the contrary, Thai employees in an operational level tend to informally talk to or consult with their Thai colleagues. They are likely to avoid talking to their superiors especially the Japanese manager. “Winter” (26 years old, Thai technical engineer) said that:

I am more comfortable to consult any issues, be it business or personal, with my Thai colleagues who are around the same age as me or whom I trust and often talk to... I believe we share similar ideas and understanding. We tend to understand each other more. My Japanese manager, conversely, might not understand me in some issues, maybe because of his position which is much higher than me. Being a manager makes him have a different perspective... Besides, during working hours, I am always afraid of disturbing my manager. He is older and more mature. He works in a managerial position.

For Thais, there are barriers to use *horensō*, of which important are the superiority and seniority. This is different from the Japanese who are more comfortable to talk with their superiority. In fact, Japanese people heavily rely on their

supervisors to solve certain problems. Higher positions are closely associated with certain expertise. The Japanese operational staffs think that they do not have power and are not allowed to try fixing certain issues by themselves. Haru mentioned that:

I normally consulted with my manager before solving any problems... The current me cannot manage or deal with all issues. I don't have sufficient experience and expertise, compared with my manager. If I decide to solve the problem with my inexperience solution by myself first, it might not turn out good. Without the consultation, my solution might dishonour the company. I acknowledge that my manager is superior to me especially in terms of expertise. He is a manager because he has the quality.

For the Japanese, consultation is essential for problem solving. It is possibly the best way to find the optimum solution for certain problems because the supervisors can use their expertise to deal with the issues.

On the contrary, Thai people will only report when they are problems needed consultation. Consultation is only

for solving issues beyond their capacity. In other words, Thai people like to try fixing the issues by themselves first. From interviews, two important reasons are identified. First, some Thai people think that to solve the issues by themselves before getting help is to develop their skills of problem solving. Winter said that:

If we seek assistance from our Japanese supervisors immediately, it looks like we haven't tried solving the issues. Some issues have already been solved before by others and recorded in the company system. We should look at it first. I think we should try solving the issues first. It's like to improve ourselves by learning from problem. Facing problems provides a chance to learn.

Second, for some, consulting means they admitted defeat at solving the issues. As aforementioned, Thai people tend to be afraid of 'losing face'. It became clear from an interview with Summer who stated that:

The reason why Thai people don't report is that they want to save their own face or image. The Thais don't want others to know that there is a problem happening

during working. In other words, they want the others to see them working without problems.

It appears that the Thais do not want to lose their ‘face’ in front of their colleagues because it can mean they are unprofessional. Acting as a perfectly professional employee without any errors in the eyes of others, especially of their superiors, make the Thais proud of themselves.

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

*Horensō* is an essential business communication principle used in a Japanese setting. This article found Thais have employed *horensō* in their own ways which are different from how the native used. First, they consider *horensō* as an activity of reporting which is not mutually exclusive from informing and consulting. Second, when they report, Thais tend to think in terms of short-term orientation with a typical character of reactive/multi-active communicator. They are motivated by self-interest rather than collective (company)-interest. They like to try fixing or solving problems by themselves first to improve themselves and save their ‘face’. They report what is needed only when the problems appear out of their league. Reporting of Thai people is thus closely linked with problem solving mentality of Thai people.

Besides, Thai reporting style is seen as superficial, lacking factual detail by the Japanese. Thais favour flexibility which sometimes can benefit the application of *horensō* in the Thai employee community. The differences in application of *horensō* between Thais and the Japanese can be summarised in the table 1.

**Table 1.** Differences in application of *horensō* between Thais and the Japanese

	Thais	The Japanese
<b>Rationale</b>	Report mainly what is needed to be fixed or solved	Report everything for future planning
<b>Motivation</b>	Self-interest	Collective (company) interest
<b>Communication style</b>	Flexible	Strict
<b>Problem solving</b>	Try to fix problem by themselves first	Follow supervisors' instructions

	Thais	The Japanese
<b>Reported information</b>	Superficial, ideas and feeling	Detailed, factual data
<b>Communication culture</b>	Reactive/multi-active	Reactive/linear-active

Practically, the findings of the article recommend that a Japanese company should pay attention to cultural differences when communicating. To understand the differences in the way communication, *horensō*, is used would be benefit to Japanese businesses and help them globalise (localize a global concept) the use of *horensō* in a way that Thais would feel comfortable. For the Thais, they should learn to manipulate *horensō* so that they can take advantages from the practice to boost their effectiveness and efficiency in multi-cultural settings. In addition, the application of the use of *horensō* is not only recommended to top-down management but also bottom-up management. The employees can use *horensō* to gain their benefit and negotiate with their supervisors. *Horensō* would make good communication and well organisation.

Academically, this research has some limitations which leave suggestions for further research. First, conducted

online, the research might miss some signs and opportunities given by the participants. Further research should conduct face-to-face interviews to actively engage with the participants. Having face-to-face interviews would also allow further access to other prospective participants. This links to the second point, that is, further research should investigate the topic with a more diverse group of participations in a diversified setting or company. Third, interviewing the Japanese participants in English sometimes created a difficult moment in communication. Most of the Japanese participants were not equipped with well English language spoken skill. A significant degree of language interpretation was required. Interviewing the Thais in Thai had no such communication issue. Then, it would be interesting to conduct further research in their native language to get more inner perception without the language barrier.

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