



INVESTIGATION OF EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION IN INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

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Abstract: This research investigates the key motivating factors of Thai employees in international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The results show that both intrinsic ($\bar{x} = 3.02$) and extrinsic motivation ($\bar{x} = 2.50$) affect these employees (on a Likert scale of 1 to 4). Importantly, the charitable purpose of the NGO has a clear bearing on the motivation of employees, as reported by 94.7 % of respondents. The respondents' preferences for increasing knowledge ($\bar{x} = 3.57$), enjoyment ($\bar{x} = 3.52$), gaining new experience ($\bar{x} = 3.20$), and clarity in the workplace ($\bar{x} = 3.51$) are demonstrated to be deeply rooted in Thai culture, as is their aversion for competition ($\bar{x} = 1.79$), complex problem solving ($\bar{x} = 2.62$), and individual credit ($\bar{x} = 1.56$). Suggested areas of focus for NGO management are outlined in a 15-point recommendation list.

Keywords: Non-Governmental Organization, employee motivation, Chiang Mai, Thailand

1 Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been established in countries around the world to provide services in areas where government and formal institutions are unable to do them. Chiang Mai Province in Thailand is home to over 700 registered NGOs, commonly known as "foundations" in Thailand. Over 400 of those are located in Chiang Mai city. Approximately 150 of them have a western leadership team [28]. NGOs are established for a fundamentally different purpose than businesses. However, they retain similar qualities of functional organization and structures, with the ability to hire, fire, and manage employees, similar to a business.

The prosperity and survival of an organization are determined by how their human resources are treated [18]. A study by Gallup on general employee engagement in Thailand revealed that 88 % of Thai employees were either not engaged or actively disengaged and deliberately working against their employer [26]. This means that only 12 % of Thai employees are engaged in their work. Furthermore, this lack of engagement cost Thai companies an estimated 98.8 billion Baht [26].

Previous studies show that there are strong associations between work motivation, job involvement, and organizational commitment [19]. Indeed, optimal functioning in the workplace due to high motivation has been shown to result in better job performance, employee engagement, and employee retention [23]. A motivated workforce represents both a competitive advantage and a critical strategic asset in any work environment.

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Some research has already been done to investigate motivation among Thai national employees in the business environment [5, 10, 17]. However, research conducted with the purpose of examining Thai employees working with NGOs is virtually non-existent. This study addresses this gap by focusing on Thai employees of NGOs, not businesses.

As NGO's purposes revolve around cause-based issues, key motivating factors of employees may be uniquely affected by these causes, as opposed to what is common in a typical business setting [6]. Some good studies have focused on the motivation of NGO volunteers [8, 9]. This study, however, was established to discover to what extent an NGO's charitable purpose affects the motivation of its employees, not its volunteers.

Pelled and Hill found that differences in work values are *best* explained when examined through a cross-cultural lens [24]. Other researchers showed a strong relationship between organizational success and motivation in terms of the cross-cultural point of view of the employees [16]. These studies, however, did not focus on Thai culture. Hofstede [15] did some culture studies but did not emphasize Thai culture specifically, nor did he link his cultural dimensions of Thailand to motivation studies. This study did just that.

If motivation factors are indistinct, then implementation of motivation and rewards systems cannot be effective and this affects the retention of high performers in the workplace [7]. Understanding workplace motivation is the first step that management must take in order to establish a workplace that ensures an effective employee value proposition, including employee satisfaction and quality performance, and to ultimately survive in this modern-day competitive climate. The purpose of this research study was to investigate and determine the key motivational factors affecting national Thai employees of Western-led Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Significant contributions as a result of this study include new insights into the role of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, Thai culture, and the charitable purpose of the NGO on motivation, and the recommendation of tangible areas of focus for NGO management teams. As a result of this study, NGO management will:

- (1) Know the specific factors that are the most impactful towards motivating their employees, the factors that motivate their employees minimally, and the factors that do not motivate their employees at all. This weighted list may be different than what they previously thought and they will have a clearer understanding of the impact of the true motivation factors affecting their employees.
- (2) Become aware of any motivating factors that can be attributed to Thai culture and aware of any motivating factors that can be attributed to the charitable purpose of the NGO.
- (3) Be able to apply the research findings to establish better cross-cultural communications, a stronger management team, a more motivated staff force, higher staff retention, and a more understanding human resources department.

1.1 Motivation

Motivation has been defined as "a set of energetic forces that originates both within as well as beyond an individual's being, to initiate work-related behavior, and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration" [25, p. 12]. Motivating factors investigated in this research are based on the content theories of motivation of Malsow [21], Herzberg [13], Alderfer [1],

McClelland [22], and Deci & Ryan [12], which ultimately divide motivation into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation revolves around doing an activity for its own sake because one finds the activity inherently interesting and satisfying. Extrinsic motivation involves performing a given activity for a result that follows. Figure 1 shows a graphic representation of these combined theories, as adapted from Rod Baxter’s graphic representation [4].

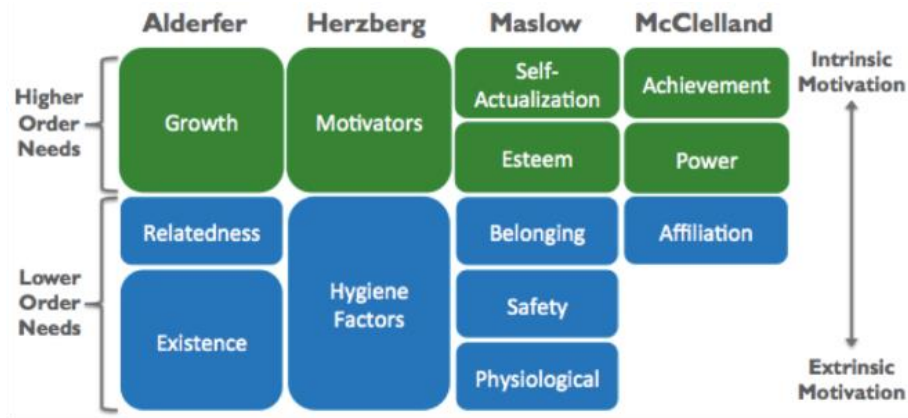


Figure 1. Content Need Theories Combined

Research on Thai employees has shown mixed results. Some believe intrinsic factors to be more important. One study showed that Thai employees will not leave a job for a 5 % higher salary, but they will quickly leave a job because of a poor experience that affected their enjoyment of the job [10]. Another study into socio-cultural systems and their impact on work values in Thailand supports those findings, reporting that social relationships, the intrinsic value of being part of a team, are the most important motivators among Thai workers [17]. However, other studies have shown that the most important employee motivators are extrinsic factors such as job security, work environment, and recognition. In a motivation study of front-line Thai employees working at department stores in Bangkok, it was found that pay satisfaction, an extrinsic factor, had a positive correlation to motivation [5].

1.2 The NGO’s Charitable Purpose

General findings show that NGO employees are more concerned with meeting the needs of the public than with obtaining extrinsic rewards. Employees tend to align with the core values of the NGO, which can include the desire for change, political ideals, caring for others, ethics, and serving God, among others [3]. NGO employees often have high levels of intrinsic motivation, feeling that the mission of the organization fits their own value system [11]. They also show very high levels of commitment to the philosophy, cause, and purpose of the organization [27].

Similar to NGO employees, NGO volunteers tend to be stirred on to action by a passion and hope to advocate for change in this world. The research of Clary et al. [8] is some of the most notable research revolving around NGO volunteers. They found three psychological functions to be the most influential: the *values function*, working for NGOs as an opportunity to help others, the *understanding function*, looking to explore their own strengths and expand their

understanding with a desire to learn new skills and to utilize knowledge, and the *enhancement function*, helping others to make themselves feel needed and important [9].

1.3 National Culture

Culture is a key resource for motivating and optimizing the productivity of the human capital [20]. According to Hofstede, culture is defined as “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others” [14]. Between 1967 and 1973, Hofstede conducted extensive research on how workplace values are influenced by culture and subsequently categorized six dimensions of national culture. According to Hofstede’s research, subjects from Thailand showed categorical responses in their cultural preferences, especially in terms of *power distance* (comfortable with hierarchy/inequality,) *collectivism* (prefer groups over individuality,) *femininity* (tendency towards enjoyment and aversion to competition,) and *uncertainty avoidance* (prefer certainty/stability). Figure 2 shows these cultural dimensions of Thailand compared with the United States [15].

The focus of this research survey was on obtaining data on employee motivation in regards to (1) intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, (2) motivation based on the charitable purpose of the foundation, and (3) motivation based on Thai cultural dimensions.

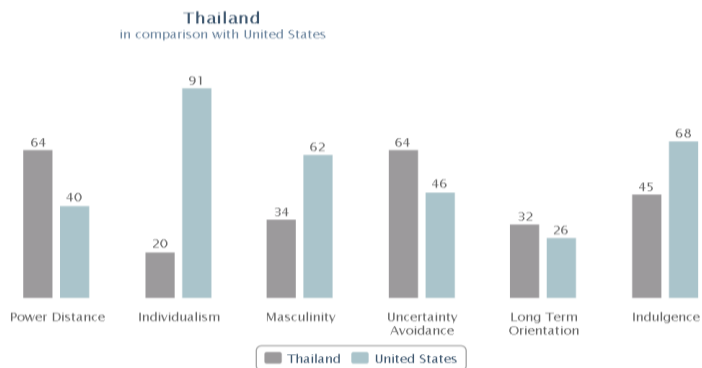


Figure 2. Cultural Dimensions of Thailand and the United States

2 Methodology

This research began by contacting 82 NGOs in Chiang Mai of which 33 NGOs participated. As for the remaining 49 NGOs, 12 declined to participate, 10 were willing but unable to participate due to time constraints, 9 did not qualify, and 18 never responded to inquiries. It took 52 days to arrange, administer, and receive results from a total of 237 respondents. All 33 participating NGOs were located in Chiang Mai city.

This research used a convenience sampling approach, including a two-part survey, translated into Thai and completed by Thai employees in the presence of either this researcher or the NGO manager. The first section of the survey questionnaire consists of 17 questions

focusing on respondent's demographic information and allowing space for the employee to write in opinions. The second section examines extrinsic and intrinsic factors according to the Work Preference Inventory (WPI), which uses a self-report approach to measuring motivation. Employees were asked to indicate on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (does not correspond at all) to 4 (corresponds exactly) the extent to which each of the 30 items represents their feelings about work. The intrinsic and extrinsic scales have Cronbach's Alpha scores of 0.79 and 0.78, respectively.

Data collected from the surveys was entered into the statistical analysis software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). General information from each NGO and general demographic information from each participant were coded and sorted by assigning each answer a number.

The score on each WPI scale was computed as the mean of each item on that scale. This data was analyzed by running descriptive statistics tests showing frequency, cross tabulation, and patterned responses for each answer. WPI results were also analyzed using primary scales of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and secondary scales of enjoyment, challenge, compensation, and outward [2]. They were also compared against the cultural dimensions [14] and the volunteer functions inventory [9] to examine the impact of national culture and the impact of the charitable purpose of the NGO on the employee's motivation. Write-in responses were translated from Thai to English and entered into an excel database. They were manually checked for frequency and patterned responses.

3 Results

3.1 Participant Characteristics

All 237 respondents were Thai citizens with 87 % Thai ethnicity and 13 % of an ethnic minority. The gender ratio was 69 % female and 31 % male. Most of the respondents, 92 %, worked full time for the foundation and the largest group of 41 % of the employees were 31–40 years old. From an education perspective, most of the respondents (61 %) fell in the middle-range of having received a bachelor's degree. The mode for monthly salary (27 %) was in the 7,000–10,999 Thai Baht range. Respondents averaged 4–6 years of employment at the same foundation. Figure 3 shows a graphical representation of these participants.

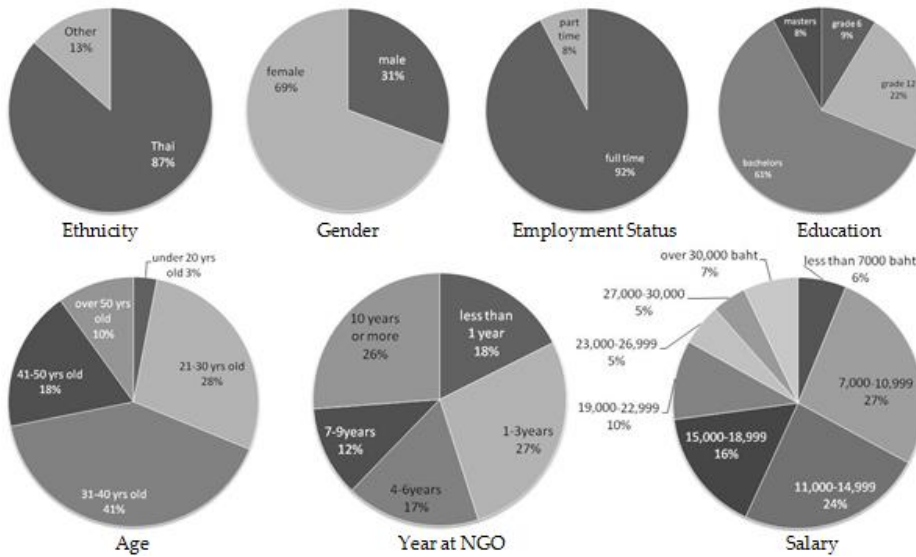


Figure 3. Participant demographics

3.2 Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation Results

Intrinsic factors outweighed extrinsic factors in terms of motivation potential among this population. Intrinsic factors averaged a score of $\bar{x} = 3.02$ and extrinsic factors averaged $\bar{x} = 2.50$ on a Likert scale of 1 to 4.

Within the intrinsic motivation category, “Increasing knowledge” was shown to be the most desirable motivation factor among the respondents ($\bar{x} = 3.57$), followed closely by doing “What I enjoy” ($\bar{x} = 3.52$) and “Enjoy what I do” ($\bar{x} = 3.51$). Among the extrinsic motivation factors, “Clearly specified work” was the most motivating ($\bar{x} = 3.51$), followed by “Income goals” ($\bar{x} = 3.12$) and “Clear set goals” ($\bar{x} = 3.02$). Figure 5 shows a graphic representation of the WPI results for intrinsic factors (black) and extrinsic factors (grey).

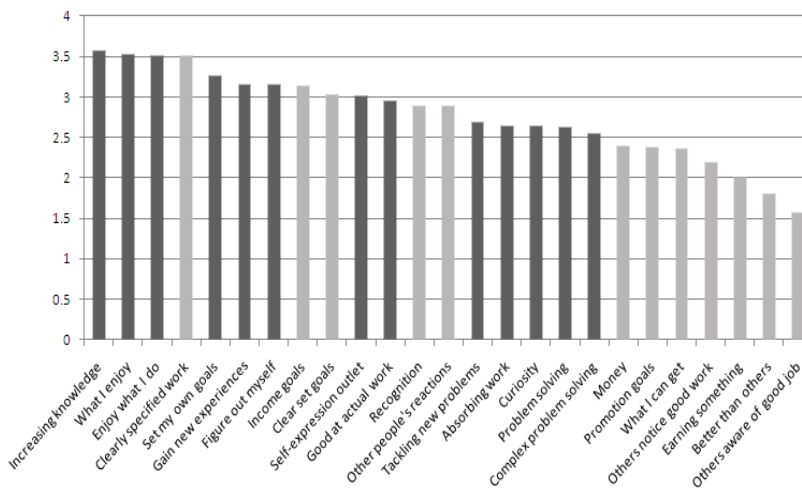


Figure 4. Work Preference Inventory (WPI) Results

3.3 The NGOs Charitable Purpose Results

A staggering 94.7 % reported feeling motivated because of the *values function* of helping others. In addition, when asked to give one suggestion to help them feel more motivated at work the greatest number of respondents suggested focusing on the charitable purpose.

Less than 5 % of the respondents reported feeling motivated because of the *enhancement function*, to make themselves feel needed and important.

The top scoring factor overall was “Increasing knowledge” ($\bar{x} = 3.57$). This demonstrates the importance of the *understanding function*, to explore, learn, and expand knowledge. In addition, “Gaining new experience” was the sixth highest scoring factor ($\bar{x} = 3.15$). However, the aspects of learning in a challenging work environment was not motivational, shown in the low scores for “Tackling new problems” ($\bar{x} = 2.68$) and “Complex problem solving” ($\bar{x} = 2.55$).

3.4 National Culture Results

Only 34.8 % of respondents thought that culture affected their motivation. However, actual responses showed motivation deeply rooted in Thai culture, especially in the categories of power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance.

Respondents showed a concern for recognition and respect in the workplace, as well as clear work and goals, as is typical of a high *power distance* culture. The “Recognition” factor ($\bar{x} = 2.89$) and “Other people’s reactions” ($\bar{x} = 2.88$) scored above average, and “Clearly specified work” was the fourth highest scoring factor ($\bar{x} = 3.51$). Thai *collectivist* culture supports social harmony, unity, and group fun. The enjoyment factor proved to be very important with high scores for doing “What I enjoy” ($\bar{x} = 3.52$) and “Enjoy what I do” ($\bar{x} = 3.51$).

As expected, because of Thailand’s low *masculinity* score, competition, promotions, and salary were among the least motivating factors. The “Better than others” category scored the second to lowest ($\bar{x} = 1.79$), and “Others notice good work” ($\bar{x} = 2.18$) and “Promotion goals” ($\bar{x} = 2.38$) scored low as well. The importance of a stable salary, as a motivator in high *uncertainty avoidance* cultures, remains ambiguous. The “Money” factor scored relatively low ($\bar{x} = 2.38$), however, “Income goals” scored higher ($\bar{x} = 3.12$).

3.5 Other Results

Three demographic factors impacted if the respondent felt that the charitable purpose of the NGO affected their motivation: if the employee had worked for the NGO for less than one year, if they were under 20 years old, or if they had minimum education, they were less likely to feel that the charitable purpose of the NGO affected their motivation

Results from this study also showed that feeling unmotivated may be linked to work load and responsibility: 67.5 % of respondents who stayed late at work reported feeling unmotivated as opposed to only 30.4 % who never stayed late at work.

Over half of the respondents (57.3 %) reported feeling unmotivated at work with the main reason being the job itself, followed by domestic issues, and fighting with co-workers. Below, Figure 5 shows the breakdown of reasons for feeling unmotivated.

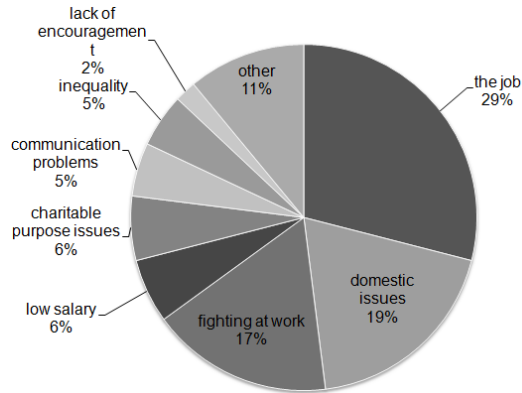


Figure 5. Reasons for Feeling Unmotivated at Work

Less than half of the respondents (42.7 %) reported never feeling unmotivated at work with the main reason being their focus on the charitable purpose of the NGO. This was followed by being encouraged by their co-workers and enjoying their work. Figure 6 shows the breakdown of reasons for feeling motivated in percentages.

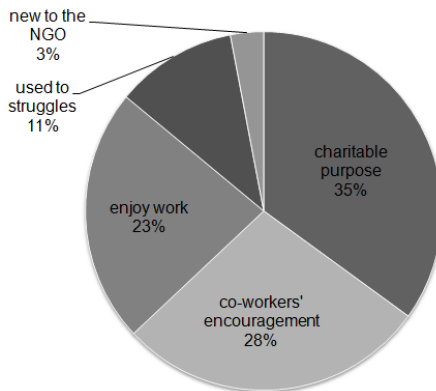


Figure 6. Reasons for Never Having Felt Unmotivated at Work

Finally, respondents were asked to give one suggestion or method that would help them feel more motivated in their work. A total of 183 respondents wrote in a suggestion with the greatest number of respondents (27 %) suggesting focusing on the purpose of the NGO, followed by suggesting to encourage each other more (25 %). Figure 7 shows all the respondents' suggestions in a pie chart form.

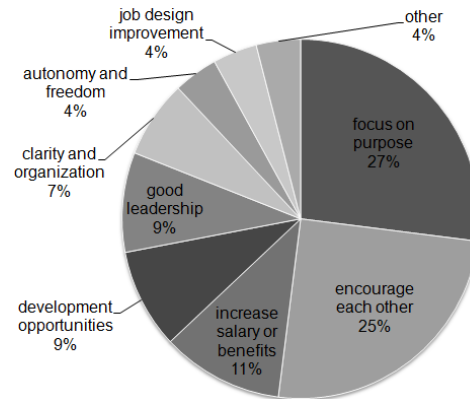


Figure 7. Employees' Suggestions to Increase Motivation at Work

4 Discussion

The research showed that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation affected Thai employees of NGOs with the intrinsic *enjoyment scale* being the most motivating and the extrinsic *outward scale* being the least motivating. It demonstrated that the charitable purpose of the NGO had a clear bearing on the motivation of employees with the *values function* of altruism being the most motivating. It identified areas where Thai culture affected motivation among Thai employees, especially in terms of the cultural dimensions of *power distance*, *collectivism*, and *femininity*. The following 15 recommendations for NGO management are the result of these research findings.

1. Do use the *values function* to further motivate Thai NGO employees. Focus on the charitable cause of the NGO. The most frequent responses of those who said they were never unmotivated at work were that remembering the charitable purpose of the NGO helped them remain positive. Do not hesitate to remind employees why they are there and how they are a part of a larger purpose.
2. Do employ the use of intrinsic motivators, especially the ones that have been shown to be the most important such as the *understanding function* of increasing knowledge and new experiences. Motivate employees by implementing growth and experience programs that increase knowledge but are also status-giving, fun, not too complicated or taxing, and can be done in groups.
3. Do not forget how important it is for Thai employees to enjoy what they are doing. Take care to place employees in a position where they are able to do the work well. The third most frequently reported reason why employees reported never feeling unmotivated at work was because they enjoyed their job. The most frequently reported reason why they felt unmotivated at work was because of some issue they had with the job itself.
4. Do check frequently to see if employees appear to be enjoying themselves among their co-workers. The third most reported reason for feeling unmotivated was because of fighting, disagreements, and lack of understanding with co-workers. However, the second most reported reason why workers never felt unmotivated was because their co-workers encouraged them.

5. Do use extrinsic motivating factors. The use of both financial and non-financial reward for individual work and teamwork should be considered. NGOs must compete with for-profit businesses more and more. Consider implementing standard pay scales for new hires, with regular opportunities for promotion and bonuses, and competitive workplace benefits. The third most frequent suggestion for how to motivate employees better was through an increased salary or more benefits. If it is truly not possible to do this, give honest hope that it may be possible in the future, explain why it is currently not possible to the employees, and re-direct to the charitable purpose for encouragement and motivation.
6. Do give as much clarity as possible in regard to work position, job description, responsibilities, and expectations. Do not ask wide and unclear open questions where the answers are not clear. Results show that Thai employees seek out and appreciate clarity in their work. Help do this so that they can avoid being blamed, shamed, or punished. Avoid giving complicated challenges and complex problems to employees unless they specifically indicate that they are excited by these types of problems. Results indicate that most Thai employees are not at all motivated by challenging complications.
7. Do give recognition to employees as is appropriate for their level of work and position. Show genuine and public appreciation for a job well-done but avoid putting employees in a position where they are singled out beyond what they are comfortable with them. Respondent results showed that recognition was acceptable but that pointing out how they were better than others or going over and beyond to make sure others knew about their good work was not acceptable.
8. Do check and see how often, how long, and for what purpose employees need to stay late at work. Brainstorm ways to work as a team to reduce these late night work sessions and therefore increase employee motivation. This could mean anything from hiring low-level staff to take on some of the responsibility, analyzing systems and workflow for efficiency improvements, or simply strict work hours.
9. Do remember that Thai people value collectivism over individualism. Encourage more teamwork, or empowerment of team members to decide among themselves how to accomplish the work. This will allow an acceptable level of autonomy while helping to tap the collectivist nature of the employees, giving opportunities for input, without singling out any one member of the team. It will also set the scene for bonding and friendship building among employees.
10. Do develop a workplace where a pseudo family structure is established, where fondness can be shown relative to their position of being older and younger, supervisor and supervisee, respectively. Results show that exact equality among workers is not as important as appropriately assigned roles, and where everyone is showing that they are pitching in as a member of the "family," and supporting the clan-culture-of-cohesive participative family-like workers, with a leader as a mentor or provider. The second most frequent suggestion for how motivation could be increased at the workplace was that co-workers encourage each other and support each other like a family.
11. Do establish some form of hierarchical environment awareness training for NGO management. The present hierarchical structure in Thailand is characterized by top-down communication in which the manager implements their decisions and influences

employees lower in the organizational hierarchy. Employees expect a hierarchical environment in the workplace and therefore do not necessarily value relaxation and friendly attitudes with management.

12. Do not ask too directly but learn to work within the established hierarchy to gather feedback from low level employees. The NGO could apply bottom-up communication feedback system which allows employees at lower levels to communicate their policy ideas and feelings to higher level decision makers in a safe and efficient manner.
13. Do respect the cultural dimension of *femininity*. Do not pit employees against each other in a competitive manner. Do not act assertive with employees. Results show that competition and assertive behavior is not motivating at all. Instead, focus on maintaining the motivation of enjoyment, or the collectivist ideal of teamwork.
14. Do ask questions and show a greater care about the employee besides simply showing interest in the work itself. The second most reported factor for feeling unmotivated was that the employee was dealing with a personal issue outside of the workplace.
15. Do build into employees to establish long-term employees, thereby building loyalty, tradition, and a relationship-based consciousness of unity among the employees. Results showed that the long-term employees were more likely to work harder, stay late at work, and more likely to identify and be motivated by the charitable purpose of the organization. Work to foster a long-term dedicated workforce.

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