A Report on Thai Women in Senior Management Positions in Thailand

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Abstract The significance of this study learns about the lived experiences of Thai female leaders in their successful career achievement focusing on executive positions in business in Thailand. In fully discovering the essence of the lived experiences, the phenomenological research methodology was selected to conduct this study by using in-depth interviewing method with 12 executive Thai female. The researcher developed the individual textual descriptions of the contributors using the methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis. The textual descriptions represented quotes obtained from each of the participation's interview transcripts. Overall, the responses given by all interviewees can be classified into 61 themes, 10 categories and 5 clusters emerged from the lived experiences of Thai female executives. The 10 distinguishing categories are as follows: (1) Business Acumen, (2) Experiences (3) Characters, (4) Sentimentalities, (5) Competency, (6) Human Resource Management (HRM) and Development (HRD), (7) Career Growth, (8) Education, (9) Remuneration and (10) Network. In conclusion, the research reported in this dissertation made a significant contribution to our knowledge and provide women with a roadmap and an equal opportunity to compete, sustain and handle obstacles if their goals are to advance into senior-level positions within any business organizations.

Key words: Qualitative Research, Phenomenology, Leadership, Gender, Education, Glass Ceiling, Skills

 Definitions:

 Top Management in this study refers to Chairman, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), President and Managing Director who hold the highest ranking of an organization.

 Co-researchers in this study refer to the research participant in this study who are Thai executive females who share their lived experiences in the past of their working involvement.

 Senior Management in this study refers to the high ranking level in business organizations such as Vice President, Assistant Managing Director and Director of an organization.

 Executive Females in this study refer to Thai females who work in business organizations which can be wholly owned by Thai people or any other type of corporation.

Introduction

The situation of Thailand business has changed rapidly and create an effect that top management in the companies to look at their current vision and strategies to keep their

businesses running smoothly. Leadership has been seriously considered as one of the most important aspects and it is clear that women are taking on leadership roles in greater numbers than ever before. However, most of Thai women still face the limited opportunities to act as leaders and the conditions that make it possible or difficult for them have access to leading positions are embedded within the following structures. Firstly, it relates to Economic Structure as there are female workers working in various types of industries and also play a significant role in the economic development (Picavet, 2005). The problem is that very few of them are in any leading positions. Secondly, it touches on Socio-cultural Structure which Thai culture of women seems to be bounded by two dimensions; mothers and wives (Col, Meksawan, & Sopchokchai, 2001; Yukongdi, 2005). Although women are often confronted by some obstacles preventing them from holding leadership ranks called the "glass ceiling". Thirdly, it relates to Political Structure which women may truly be regarded as politically active, however, the decision-making power and control of political levers still remain largely in the hands of men (Picavet, 2005).

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are firstly to explore the lived experience of Thai female executives in business organizations and secondly to study the problems and obstacles preventing them from achieving executive positions and thirdly, to investigate the elements that help Thai female executives to obtain and sustain their senior-management levels.

Literature Review

Women in Leadership Positions: Although women are often confronted by an invisible barrier or glass ceiling preventing their rise into leadership ranks, some studies indicated that women are increasingly inching through the glass ceiling that had previously prevented them from attaining leadership positions (Goodman, Fields, & Blum, 2003; Stroh, Langlands, & Simpson, 2004).

Opportunity for Female Leaders: Opportunities for managers capable of leading and being members of high performance teams or business units will increase. At the same time, there is evidence that the career aspirations of women reflect greater agency and empowerment in terms of assertiveness, dominance and power (Tweng, 2001).

Obstacles for Female Leaders in General: Some organizations established and enforced zero tolerance policies against discrimination. However, the shortage of women in the ranks of leadership position is still a reality of corporate life. The possession of stereotypical male qualities could explain why most upper-level managers are men because good management is considered manly business (Heilman, 2001).

History of the status of Thai women

Thai Women and Education: Thailand is considered an agricultural country that both men and women played important roles as 'farmers' who look after their family without discrimination. In terms of education, Boonto (2008) summarized that women in rural areas had less chance to enter to education and one reason for the paucity of Thai women leadership is lack of the "appropriate background" to be chosen as a candidate. Despite the fact that the educational level of women in Thailand has risen substantially in recent decades.

Thai Women, Gender and Leadership Role: Sodsangchan (2008) stated that more women have access to education, making them more powerful because they are literate

and their skills are developed. Women have been able to progress into upper levels of management through their expertise in specialty areas or through the educational process (Furlong, 2004).

In Table 1, it is a summary of Grant Thornton survey during 2009-2014 among key countries in Asia showed that Thailand had the first ranking at 45 percent compared with the global average at 24 percent in 2011. While Japan ranking has shown no improvement since 2009-2014 and it might be Japanese culture that women mostly are treated as housewives so they have less chance to work outside. The survey revealed that Thai Culture widely is open for female leader positions in various industries such as retail businesses, financial institutions and service industries.

Table 1: Summary Percentage of Women in Senior Leadership Position 2009, 2011 – 2014

Countries	2009	2011	2012	2013	2014
Global	24	20	21	24	24
China	31	34	25	51	38
India	15	9	13	19	14
Japan	7	8	5	7	9
Malaysia	31	31	28	26	25
Philippines	47	35	39	37	40
Singapore	28	30	23	27	23
Thailand	38	45	39	36	38
Vietnam	28	23	27	33	26

Source: Adjusted from Grant Thornton International Business Report 2009, 2011-2014 (Grant Thornton International, 2012; 2013; 2014; Grant Thornton Thailand, 2009; 2011)

Research Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative research strategy is employed as an inductive descriptive research approach which has been increasingly used in social science research (Morse, 1994). The concern is to shed light upon the meanings of human experiences, is particularly suitable for exploring the lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990), and have direct application and contribution to Human Resource Development as well (Gibson & Hanes, 2003). In this study, a purposive sample with 12 Thai female executives from various industries were selected and interviewed as the co-researchers. This research typically conducted about 60-90 minutes interview in Thai language to gather their experiences.

Finding and Discussion

This section provides the readers how the researcher approached all 12 females' executives and what their qualifications for the purposive sampling for an interview. The success of the researcher's interview was because of wide network connection and good relationship which helped the researcher capture all the valuable findings.

Table 2: Information of 12 Thai Females Executives

#	Age	Education	Position	Years of Service	Industry
1	48	Master Degree	Senior Vice president	25	Telecommunication
2	47	Master Degree	Deputy Managing Director	23	Pharmaceutical
3	52	Master Degree	Senior Director	28	Construction
4	49	Master Degree	Assistant Managing Director	19	Automotive
5	42	Master Degree	Vice President	18	Consumer Products
6	50	Master Degree	Senior Vice President	27	Banking
7	52	Master Degree	Senior Deputy Managing Director	20	Automotive
8	45	Master Degree	Senior Director	15	Hotel
9	47	Master Degree	Chief Information Officer (CIO)	18	Construction
10	55	Master Degree	Vice President	33	Hospital
11	47	Master Degree	Assistant Vice President	20	Event Organizer
12	52	Master Degree	Deputy Managing Director	25	Banking

After data analysis, the researcher summarizes themes, categories, and clusters as follows:

Meanings of Clusters, Categories, and Themes

1) Cluster: Abilities: Business Acumen and Experience

Business Acumen–This category describes a combination of nine themes namely 1) Ability to work 2) Passion in work 3) Accuracy of work 4) Analytical 5) Driving business results 6) Ideas to action 7) Decision making 8) Strategic planning and 9) Vision.

Thai female executive were assigned to do the work because of their ability and passion to perform their job with accuracy. Then the quality of work is mostly error free and they use their analytical skills with rationale to dig into details to make accurate decisions. They also know the competition and be aware of how to drive business result by having all actionable items to be executed. At time of high pressure, they make their decisions in a timely manner as they see things ahead clearly; can create competitive and breakthrough strategies and planning which in line with their company vision. Some quotes are shown as follow:

".....I was assigned as an operator taking care of the computing department. This is because of my know-how to support the business and I love my job."

"My intention is to gain more experiences on the business perspectives, get involved in company strategy & goals setting, driving business results and organizational development"

Experience–This category describes the lived situation of Thai female leaders and their past abilities in five themes namely 1) Respect 2) Experiences 3) Good Attitude 4) Think out of the box and 5) Outstanding.

Thai female leaders gained their success by respect from their subordinates with helps them to create the trust within the team and help running business smoothly. Both positive and negative experiences help these leaders learnt from their mistakes and try to avoid any repeating situation. They shared that many organizations use an attitude test when recruiting people in order to have good attitude people towards the job and the organization and stay with the company in the long term. Also, Thai female leaders convince their team to think outside the box and do not stick with the same way of doing their job. This way of positive

thinking happened to Thai female leaders who are exceptional than others and always be at the front line of people with their distinguish performances. Some quotes are shown as follow:

"I was promoted up to higher level because of my combined experience of 11 years as the leader of two large international accounting firms. The proof record that I have done is a key evidence for my good experience"

"As I said it depends on whether our skills and experiences are consistent with their requirements. It is not about being female or male."

2) Cluster: Personality: Characters and Sentimentalities

Characters –This category describes a combination of ten elements driven Thai females up to this high level specifically 1) Challenging 2) Alert and Active 3) Collaboration 4) Confidence 5) Detail oriented 6) Dedication 7) Discrimination 8) Empowerment 9) Responsibility and 10) Strengths.

Thai female leaders always face with challenging things both within and outside the organization thus they are always active due to the competition in the market is high and must be prepared for any actions to be implemented with internal and external collaboration. To perform the work properly, leaders must have confidence and are comprehensive in the details of the work and do not ignore very tiny piece of work as it might create an issue. Those female leaders are very much dedicated to their jobs and see discrimination element seriously and need to manage people equitably. Skilled female leaders clearly give empowerment to their team without micro manage and they have their responsibility in all aspects such as running the business to achieve the company objectives and sustainability. They use their strengths to coach their staffs, making good relationship and develop their people and this helps to shorten the time for human resources planning for the organization. One of a co-researcher mentioned that

"Confidence is a major factor. If one does not feel confident, not only does it affect customers but also our teamwork as well. Confidence leads to success."

Sentimentalities – This category describes a mixture of eight inner appeal which help driving Thai female leaders climbing up to this high level such as 1) Emotional Intelligence 2) Feminist 3) Flexibility 4) Listening 5) Open-minded 6) Patience 7) Positive thinking and 8) Relationships.

Thai female executives rarely distinguished between "Emotion or Feeling" and "Reasons" and many times there are difficulties in clearly illustrating the result. They are adaptable and flexible when facing tough situations by using their feminine character such as being a good listener and open their mind to hear people speak out and understand their team. Patience is a common element in every Thai female executive who has been facing with many difficult situations but they are not give in easily. Moreover, they think positively and build good relationship with other persons both inside and outside the company. One sample of the quotes is *"It is necessary to study each individual emotion because each person handles things differently. For some problems, speaking too directly may not be good, while being emotional does not solve the problem either."*

3) Cluster: Competency: Competency and HRM and HRD

Competency- This category describes ten core skill sets of leadership namely 1) Change management 2) Communication 3) Conflict management 4) Culture management 5) Foreign language proficiency 6) Leadership 7) Motivation 8) Presentation 9) Problem solving and 10) Time management.

Thai female leaders can effectively cope with change and uncertainty and have their effective communication styles to convey the right message to the right group of people. Sometimes, they step up to conflicts and deal with all issues without allowing the problems to fester. They also have an open door culture which is effective way of management style and to purely understand other colleagues or their team. As leadership, they are good at foreign language proficiency are well-organized and also use their presentation skill to motivate their team to get the things done together. They solve the problem with effective solutions without wasting time and resources. One co-researcher said; *"Leadership is a critical role which could lead the organization to be either success or failure. People in organization are driving business in the directions from leaders."*

Human Resource Management (HRM) and Development (HRD) – This category describes skill of managing and develop people in different ways namely 1) Coaching 2) People management 3) People development 4) Support 5) Teamwork and 6) Training.

Thai female leaders provides frequent coaching discussions and personal way to manage their team and it is a company responsibility to develop people. They require support in forms of information and manpower including support from their families to do the job properly. They blend people and create strong morale and share victories to build up a feeling of ownership and provide them training courses both within domestic or international organizations. One co-researcher said; *"One of an executive's responsibilities is to develop people within the organization in order to be a successor."*

4) Cluster: Opportunity: Career Growth / Education / Remuneration
Career Growth– This category describes eight themes namely 1) Role Model 2) Self-learning 3) Self-adjustment 4) Opportunity 5) Career Ambition 6) Recognition 7) Reward 8) Representation

Thai female leaders develop themselves to be role model and dedicate their time in working as they are self-learning persons by joining their team at lunch time or after working hours for dinner to learn many things from their teams. They use this period to adjust themselves to new environment and once there is an opportunity open then it is good to seek for their own ambition and make things happen successfully. It is a recognition to let people know that they are capable and can bring the company go forwards. They got promotion as a reward for the success they brought to the organization and they are proud to be representatives for their company image. One co-researcher shared her thought that *"Thailand has a lot of opportunities in various fields including politics, the economy, and society. There are a lot of female leaders and women become more independent, talented and dare to make decisions."*

Education–This category describes two themes of upgrading their knowledge and career positions specifically 1) Education and 2) Self-development.

Thai female leaders have their plans for their future education as they have common thoughts that education is one of the most important elements helping them to reach higher positions regardless of any type of education. Also, it helps to develop themselves and understand that different situations and levels may call for different skills set and approaches.

Remuneration –This describes a mix of two themes in return at the time of their achievement namely 1) Monetary and 2) Non-monetary.

Some Thai female executives mentioned that when considered remuneration in return, they get high salary and step up to higher level due to their good performance which reflect their capabilities at work. However, some Thai female leaders pointed out that higher income is not purely significant due to money cannot buy everything. It is good to get more income

but not so necessary. They love their jobs and are proud of their career achievement rather than money alone.

5) Cluster: Network: Connection

Connection - Thai female executives share that having good network and connection is a good opportunity to do any type of work and reach the objectives. They indicated that they have a good relationship with other people in the organization both in Thailand and oversea.

Implications

Individual level

All 12 Thai female leaders real lived experiences are worthwhile to be shared its beneficial as an exploration of knowledge for continuous improvement in their career achievements. Those true stories had both advantages and disadvantages of information and are very good sources of practical self-development. Only one part or single element will not be enough to succeed at a higher level, it needs a combination of all aspects together in order to make it happen. However, it does not mean that once any Thai female tries to explore those results that they will be automatically promoted to a high level in their organization. Each person has their own circumstances and it also depends on the company strategy of human resource management or human resource development.

Organization level

Currently there are a lot of talented and capable females in many organizations. Thus, it gives the chances to those females who will be utilizing their unique characteristics and competency to perform a good job not different from men. They can handle with pressure and use their capability for any important decision making. Top management should be open-minded and consider to give a chance to any females who have proper qualifications to lead the company. This tool can also lead to motivate females who are at a middle-management level to stay longer to see an open door for them and help the company to secure level in human resources.

Limitations of this study

This phenomenological research study is on Thai executive female leaders and the purpose is to investigate what are their lived experiences of working in business organizations in Thailand. Therefore, the researcher did not include non-Thai nationalities females in this study as it is to find out Thai female leaders' perceptions of being executive leaders, the circumstance and thoughts about the occurrences, and the overall essence of executive leadership.

Recommendations for future research

The researcher proposed four major recommendations for future research. Firstly, to look at government sectors, non-profit organizations, SMEs and entrepreneurs because there will be very useful findings due to various differences in terms of key element between the private sectors and government sectors or non-profit organizations or SMEs and entrepreneurs such as those at a senior level, education, benefits, positions available and career paths etc. Secondly, the researcher suggests to look at any non-Thai nationalities female executives who work in Thailand. The study might be separated between government sector, non-

profit organizations, SMEs and entrepreneur and then compare those findings of non-Thai nationalities together. There may not be non-Thai nationalities working in government sectors except in an education institute. Thirdly, it will be good to find out in details of those 5 key cluster findings of Abilities, Personality, Competency, Opportunity and Network or any relations among each theme under those categories. Finally, it will be very interesting to see any Thai female executives who work outside Thailand and learn what are the qualifications or skills they possess. How do they drive business organization in other countries by using all 5 clusters and there might be unknown elements that will be useful for HRD area.

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