**GOING NATIVE**

5 UNIQUELY MALAYSIAN ASPECTS OF THE BUSINESS CULTURE

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As a foreigner who’s worked in multiple countries in Asia, it’s always interesting and amusing (in a good way) to compare the business cultures in different places and compare them to see where the quirks lie.

Here is a list of “Malaysian-isms” that you might not even realise are unique to this diverse country!

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**WORKS WELL IN:**

**JAPAN**

Natural Malaysian humility will take you very far in Japan, where humility is held in very high regard.

Stopping to think about a question before responding, getting back to someone later, and only promising to do your best will all win you points in the land of the rising sun.

**WOULD SHOCK PEOPLE IN:**

**AMERICA**

In western cultures, bosses want to hear “Yes, I will do this” rather than “I’ll do my best”.

They’ll expect people to work out the challenges and overcome them, sourcing their own support, so you may find American bosses raising their eyebrows if you offer to do your best.

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**SHOWING UP LATE FOR MEETINGS**

In Malaysia, meetings don’t have start times. They have “people will start thinking about when they will go and look for this meeting” times.

A 2pm meeting only starts at 2pm if someone goes around and gathers everybody first, corralling them towards the meeting space.

**WORKS WELL IN:**

**INDIA**

In India, there’s no such thing as a mandatory meeting. Meeting requests are treated like invitations to attend a concert for an artist you haven’t really heard of. By the way you may have to play one of the instruments. Meetings will often start 15–20 minutes late and then run over-time, as once they start all participants will be sure to have their say and contribute meaningfully.

**WOULD SHOCK PEOPLE IN:**

**SINGAPORE**

In Singapore, there’s a national outcry if the trains run two minutes late. In Kuala Lumpur, the light rail transit recently caught fire and I didn’t even see it in the news!

Walking into a meeting late in Singapore is like organising your own birthday party and then not showing up.

It’s worth your time to be a few minutes early and already seated when the organiser arrives.

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**THE SACRED LUNCH HOUR**

Shortly after my arrival in Malaysia, I innocently asked my team to take a short lunch one day as we had something urgent to finish. The shocked looks on their faces haunt me to this day.

When I asked why the team couldn’t do this, their response was simply “because we work hard”. I learnt a valuable lesson from this, of course!

**WORKS WELL IN:**

**KOREA**

Many South Korean organisations schedule lunch time for employees to ensure they get an hour away from their desks. In some offices they even turn the lights off during lunch time! While the South Korean tie to the lunch hour isn’t as emotionally-based as the Malaysian version, any Malaysian would appreciate knowing their break from work is literally documented in the procedures.

**WOULD SHOCK PEOPLE IN:**

**AUSTRALIA**

Australians like leaving on time, which in that country is 5pm. Unfortunately, there’s all this pesky work to take care of. Accordingly, Aussies will very often come to work early (it’s not uncommon to see people start between 7:30am and 8am) and eat lunch quickly at their desks before going back to work so they can make that 5pm deadline.

In many Australian offices, if you’re still around at 5pm you’d better know how to turn the lights off!

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**WRAPPING UP**

Every country has its unique culture and in an increasingly global environment, it’s always important—and fun!—to be aware of them and to always be able to adapt to the circumstances around you.

Always take note of cultural differences, especially if you’re visiting or planning to work in another country, to avoid those little missteps that can derail a whole trip.

Christopher Moore is an Australian finance professional who can eat spicy food. He is living and working in Malaysia, with plans to stay. If you are interested to get in touch with Christopher, email editor@leaderonomics.com

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**BOSS AND MAAM**

Malaysia is a country which has what we call “high power distance”, meaning there is a perceived gap between bosses and workers.

This means we tend to defer to bosses and always do your best will all win you points in the land of the rising sun.

**WORKS WELL IN:**

**HIGH POWER DISTANCE COUNTRIES (I.E. SINGAPORE, INDIA OR JAPAN)**

Some bosses like the trappings of power, and having people defer to you while you sit in your office corner can feel pretty good! Obviously, mutual respect is there and these people don’t become the boss without merit, but the gap can also lead to a situation where the emperor isn’t wearing any clothes and doesn’t even realise it.

**WOULD SHOCK PEOPLE IN:**

**LOW POWER DISTANCE COUNTRIES (I.E. AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)**

In Australia, if you aren’t questioning the boss’s decisions and making sure they’re sound, you aren’t doing your job! Voicing your opinions and having a voice is very important in low power distance cultures. Calling someone “sir” or “ma’am” is considered too formal, even if they are very senior to you.

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**“YES, ANYTHING?”**

Many of the common English phrases used in Malaysia have direct translations from the Malay language. Some examples are “Yes, anything?”, “Can or not?” and “True or not?”.

There’s nothing wrong with this, of course, but it may come as a surprise to people from other countries where the spoken language is a little more descriptive.

**WORKS WELL IN:**

**MUMBAI, INDIA**

In Mumbai specifically, when you walk up to someone in the office you will likely hear them say, “Hein bolu” (normally pronounced Haahn Bol). This translates into English as “Yes, tell me”, so if you ever hear a colleague from India say “Yes, tell me”, you know they are speaking the English translation of their language similar to “Boleh tak” in Malay. This very direct style translates well between the two cultures.

**WOULD SHOCK PEOPLE IN:**

**THE PHILIPPINES**

In the Philippines, people tend to take a softer approach and the local equivalent of “Yes, what do you want?” could surprise someone from there and leave you feeling you must not like them very much!

Asking them how they are or how their weekend was will help them feel the human connection before you get down to business.

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**“I’LL DO MY BEST”**

Whenever I ask anyone in Malaysia (it doesn’t matter whether I work with them) to do something for me, the answer is always the same: “I’ll do my best.”

It doesn’t matter whether you are asking them to build a third Petronas Twin Tower or just to make your coffee a little kurang panas, the response is always the same.

**WORKS WELL IN:**

**INDONESIA**

In Indonesia, you don’t need to worry about the gap. You will likely hear them say, “Boleh tak” in Malay. This very direct style translates well between the two cultures.

**WOULD SHOCK PEOPLE IN:**

**AMERICA**

In western cultures, bosses want to hear “Yes, I will do this” rather than “I’ll do my best”.

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