

EXECUTIVE SECRETARIES & PERSONAL ASSISTANTS

by

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for

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LYMAN'S RULES FOR SECRETARIES, ASSISTANTS AND BOSSES

on

HOW TO ACHIEVE A SUCCESSFUL WORKING PARTNERSHIP

Good Morning.

1. Understand what the boss expects of you.

To understand your boss you must first understand yourself. You must understand that you are a professional, you have skills, knowledge, experience, education, training. You have several lives – one an office life and another a personal and private life – with responsibility and rewards in each. You have good days and bad days, you have a personality, character, dignity, self-respect and values. You have capabilities and limits. You can do a lot but not everything. You have desires and needs in a work environment and these must be met if you are to enjoy job satisfaction. If you cannot get that doing what your boss expects of you, then either change bosses or change jobs. You cannot be effective in your job for your boss and yourself if you are dissatisfied with what you are doing.

So first you must look inward and analyze yourself. Once satisfied you can then start with the task of understanding your boss and meeting his/her expectations.

Obviously, different bosses have different expectations of those who work with them based on the nature of their own jobs, their personalities, characters, work habits, capabilities, experience, understanding of themselves, frustrations and rewards. So do you.

For you I have consolidated and condensed my life and professional experiences as a boss into a few short succinct rules or laws. Years ago I did something similar for the lawyers in my law firm and LYMAN'S LAWS FOR LAWYERS are attached. Study them for many of LYMAN'S LAWS are applicable to you as professionals as well.

For secretaries and assistants I have conceived three simple RULES which I hope will help you develop professionally and work harmoniously and effectively with your boss.

LYMAN'S FIRST RULE to understanding what your boss expects of you and what you can expect from your boss is simple: **“Look. Listen. Ask.”**

Remember, there is no such thing as a dumb question, there are only dumb mistakes. What is dumb is to keep quiet when you need to know something in order to do your job. Almost any question asked is far better than a dumb mistake being made.

2. Do you know your boss' style? Recognizing different leadership styles can solve communications or team problems.

No two bosses are alike, just as no two secretaries or assistants are alike.

My first key rule to learning your boss' style, his character, his personality, strengths and weaknesses, his biases, his abilities, his attitudes, again is to **“Look. Listen. Ask.”**

“Look” – means to see both the details and the big picture. READ thoroughly whatever you are dealing with.

“Listen” – means to hear, analyze, understand and remember what is said, as well as what is not said.

“Ask” – means to open your mouth to get the clarification you need to understand at least enough to do the task assigned.

For instance, ask yourself - how do I know or learn what my boss expects of me, when he does expect it, how, and in what form? What writing style does he want for his letters, memos, reports, etc. There may be a corporate form manual – if so, then study it, and follow it.

On an individual level, **“Look. Listen. Ask.”** What hours will your boss keep – What hours can you keep? Can you work OT? Do you have to work OT? How often? How long? You do have a private life. Is your boss organized and neat, or cluttered or disorganized? What is his/her personality and character? Is he a team player or does he work alone? What kind of person is he? Is he a person who inspires confidence? Is he fair, open-minded, a listener? How does he handle his mistakes? Your mistakes? Is he courteous, respectful, accepting, compromising, demanding, strict, a stickler for details? Does he shout? Is he moody, short tempered or even tempered? Does he have a sense of humor? Is he a people person (sociable) or a loner; decisive or avoids decisions? Is he a doer or a procrastinator, a delegator or must he do everything himself, a micro manager or a big picture guy, an entrepreneur and starter but leaves details and follow up to others? Is he protective and supportive? Is he an effective leader or is he not a leader?

Success or failure in his/her personal life and health affect a boss' performance in the office, just as it does yours. Is he single or married (or some of each), gay or straight, religious or not, outdoors adventurer or quiet? Care about his health, fitness and appearances? Good family person?

“Look. Listen. Ask.”

3. Working for expatriates – How to overcome cross-cultural barriers and what to do and what not to do.

When a boss is of one nationality or upbringing in one culture and the secretary or assistant is of another, there are ALWAYS cross-cultural barriers – to challenge and cross those barriers you can not be afraid to recognize a cross-cultural situation for what it is nor be hesitant to try to find a way to treat it so you can accept the solution. That can take a lot of understanding, diplomacy and patience. Since you reached the level of Executive Secretary or Personal Assistant you should already have the experience and judgement necessary to handle most of these situations.

But so too must your boss have patience, understanding and diplomacy to handle the delicacies of a cross-cultural challenge – and not all expats are the same – Chinese of Singapore are different from Chinese of Hong Kong. Koreans are different from Japanese. Indians are different from Malaysians. British are different from French. Australians are different from Americans – and all are different from Thais.

The following observations are from an extract from a 1994 study by Worcester Polytechnic Institute of the USA on Cross-Culture Management in Multinational Corporations in Thailand. You've probably heard all this before but these observations are so important to success in today's globalization and business worlds that they bear repeating.

Recommendations to Thai Nationals in Multinational Companies

To fully understand their expatriate co-workers, a Thai national working in a multinational corporation must learn several key issues. The first and most important issue is that Westerners value their freedom above all other things: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and equality among all people. These values are the driving force behind their history. Achievement and competition is stressed as an individual aspiration, and therefore, western individuals are very open and direct. The highly structured American society results in expatriates being very systematic which is completely different from the more social Thai society.

Expatriates may sometimes appear very assertive and outspoken which may be seen as a problem to the Thai employee. This American trait is due to the influence of the culture which encourages every person to express their opinions. Sometimes, these direct actions may include criticism directed towards the Thai nationals. However, the criticism is meant to be constructive, and therefore, should not be taken to heart. In the western business style, a clear distinction is made

between personal and business relations. Therefore, the expatriate may not understand that his/her comment was taken personally.

However difficult it may be, Thai nationals must comprehend that they are not expected to be polite at all times. Saying “yes” or nodding means full comprehension and agreement to a Westerner. Thais must also learn to say “no” when they do not understand. The research demonstrates that saying “yes” and meaning “no” is the main communication problem, and in the eyes of the expatriates, communication and understanding is essential in doing business.

Most evaluation methods in multinational corporations are based on the western personal merit system. The merit system is a quantitative analysis of the employees performance. Therefore, Thai nationals must realize that contacts and personal favors have no direct bearing on their climb up corporate ladder.

The other side of this cross-cultural equation is that to be effective in Thailand, the foreign boss will have to learn about many Thai traits and characteristics, for example – Thai politeness, the Thai smile, humbleness, saving face, hiding emotions, avoidance of conflicts, the value of compromise, Thai time, the Thai way, the role of contacts and relationships, “Kreng-Jai”, “Sanuk”, status, age, respect, “jai yen”, “hai naa”, Thai moralities, the Thai social structure, the close knit family structure, and the Thai reverence of the monarchy and religion.

4. Keeping up with your boss’ changing roles and responsibilities.

These days little in the business world is static, i.e. doesn’t move or doesn’t change, it’s very dynamic and fast paced. In today’s world of computers, IT, cyberspace, e-mail, internet, dot com, e-commerce, EDI, cellular telecommunications, nextgen, GPS, biotechnology, sustainable development, cloning, alternative forms of energy, alternative medicine and today corporate and government scandals on a major scale – the technology advances so fast that business must respond and react to changes in the business environment almost on a daily basis. For example, did you know that for the past 15 years or so every 18 months the number of transistors on a computer chip of a fixed size doubles? The flip side is that the same number of transistors fit on the same chip in half the space. Globalization, financial crises, and restructuring, the computer age, desk top video conferencing, digital images and sounds, satellite/cable TV, financial crisis, corruption, corporate failures and scandals, threats of war are with us daily. Yet, ten years ago they were little known or talked about.

So, LYMAN’S SECOND RULE – **“If you don’t keep up, you will be left behind – it is that simple.”** In this very competitive world in which we live and work and learn, being left behind can mean failure. Look around you – business failures are all too common since 1997.

How to keep up – read; ask for and attend training courses – self-help, in-house and outside; get colleagues to teach you. Use your imagination to find ways to stay ahead and not fall behind.

5. Establish trust and develop trustworthiness

The nature of a secretary-boss relationship is that they are a team. A team requires mutual trust. The better the mutual understanding, respect, cooperation, patience, time spent working together, the more effective the team, the better the results, the fewer the mistakes. Mistakes will be made – don't be afraid to make mistakes – you learn from what you do wrong, not from what you do right. But please, don't make the same mistake over and over again.

With teamwork comes confidence building in the other's performance, knowledge, reliability and judgement. That's called trust. If your boss has to check all your work all the time, then the team is not functioning up to par and trust can't exist. Check yourself – did you “Look. Listen. Ask.”? Did you “keep up”? If you did and the trust doesn't build, then go to your boss, tell him or her of your concern and discuss how to create that trust which is lacking. That's not the Thai way but for mutual success it must be done.

If you still don't have your boss' trust then either (1) you don't have the needed ability, (2) you are not paying attention, (3) your boss is just a micro manager or (4) he doesn't know how to use a secretary and so you must either teach him – or (5) as a final option, you may have to find a new boss!

6. Staying ahead of your boss – what the boss wants you to do to help him/her keep things on track.

From the standpoint of a boss – an efficient, competent, friendly, dependable, skillful, intelligent, honest, confident, organized, detailed, right thinking secretary or assistant who knows her job, her abilities and her limitations, who can take responsibility, and who freely communicates with her boss, to her boss, **is a gift from God.**

A smooth working secretary–boss team can perform wonders. But a poor working relationship is a misery for both the secretary and the boss and neither can work at anywhere near their potential. *The good team doesn't just happen. It takes work, work, and more work plus practice, practice and more practice by both secretary and boss to make it work* – each must teach the other, and each must learn from the other. The boss who also doesn't “**Look. Listen. Ask**” or keep up with the changing world is foolish, disrespectful of his secretary, a poor team player and doomed to failure. He is cheating himself and his secretary of the ability to work at their full potentials and their employer is ultimately the loser. What to do ? – get rid of him or her!

In Thailand there is usually a language barrier between the expat boss and his/her Thai secretary. Like it or not, English is the generally accepted common language today between different nationalities in the globalized business world. Therefore, to succeed in a multinational multicultural business environment, whether or not English is your native language, it is imperative that secretaries and assistants learn more and more English, how to use it properly and practice using it. If the boss is capable of it, make your boss correct your use of the language. English is probably not your first

language; foreign ways are still foreign, but these barriers are not valid excuses to avoid learning and correctly using the English language for business communications and in the international worlds of trade, media, science, academic, government, culture and civil society. Keep up with what's happening in the worlds around you.

Correspondingly, the expat boss should try to learn some Thai. If your boss learns and uses impolite Thai, don't be embarrassed or offended. BUT TELL HIM so he can correct his use of the language. In any event, to avoid miscommunications in the multicultural environment, he must be very patient to insure his instructions, desires and needs are very clearly expressed in English and are understood in full by his secretary or assistant. An American friend working in Hong Kong once told me when I asked him if he was learning Cantonese, said, "No. But I am learning English as a second language."

I leave you with LYMAN'S THIRD RULE for secretaries and personal assistants. The rule is: **"You have a brain. Use it."** Use it to think. Use it to organize. Use it to plan. Use it to question. Use it to learn how to act. Use it to anticipate. Use it to learn. Use it to apply what you have learned. Use it to remember. Use it to visualize how your job can be done better. Use it to improve your knowledge and your skills. Use it to help you stay ahead of your boss.

Use it to : **Look**
Listen
Ask

Use it to : **Keep up**

Use it : **All the time!**

Good luck – you can make your own luck if you follow LYMAN'S simple RULES!

Attachment : [LYMAN'S LAWS for Lawyers. Parts I and II.](#)