WORK IN LAOS - SOME IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS

by

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Most people who come to Laos, no matter how well they are prepared, are not prepared well enough. Vientiane, the capital, is probably the smallest capital city in the world. It is not a beautiful city, but is a very interesting one. It will take time to adjust to the city's speed, but it can prove to be a real adventure. Most of the buildings are unkempt, as are the streets. A public water system has recently been completed, and there is electricity. Most of the USAID housing is excellent; water, electricity, and maintenance are furnished. However, it is important to remember that no matter where you are, all water must be boiled.

Entertainment is almost nil. There are a couple of good restaurants in the downtown area, and there are a couple of movie houses, but, by and large, that's it. The American Community has several facilities: swimming pool, tennis courts, movie theater, dining room, and a bar. Most of the housing in the field does not compare to the standards of Vientiane, nor are there any recreation facilities.

Most of the major cities have large markets where it is possible to purchase meats and vegetables. Furthermore, the commissary can supply you with almost anything you feel that you need. There are a number of souvenirs available, but you have to search for them.

I must say something about the Lao people. They are great. They are fine, considerate, and understanding. I have never heard disparaging remarks, although I have sometimes expected them because of the behavior patterns of some Americans. Above all, they are patient, extremely so.

The Lao language is not very difficult, and if you can learn 100 words, you can make your job not only easier, but you can win a lot of friends. French is generally understood, and can be used to communicate with high officials, or educated people. The problem is that most people are neither officials nor educated.

I would now like to briefly outline some of the major problems you will encounter while working in Laos. Probably the most constant cause of failure in human relations, as far as Americans are concerned in South East Asia, is the inability to understand the Asian idea of Face. To an Asian this is probably the one most important evidence of position, ability, authority, and education; therefore, any threat, however slight, to these images is a severe threat to the individual. Don't ever put yourself in the position of a possible threat to your counterpart's

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authority. Don't ever tell him how to do something, even when it is obvious. Be very cautious, and suggest in the most humble terms your idea for a solution. After a while you will be able to assert yourself more so.

In Laos major problems sometimes arise in working with Lao officials who have had an education. We must pause here and describe what education in Laos means. Generally it means any education at all. Most of the Lao ministers have been educated in France, or at least abroad and therefore share an idea in common with most westerners as far as education is concerned. The real problem comes in dealing with most of the lesser officials, because the range in years of formal education is very meager. Any man with six years of education is considered educated. The other problem concerned with education, simply put, is that by definition an educated man knows everything. No matter what his experience, degree, or major field, a man who is educated, as defined above, knows everything, and he will try to prove it to you. No matter what the problem is, whether simple or complex, in his field or out, he knows how to solve it. Just ask him, but don't hold your breath.

Supposing that you are an engineer working with a counterpart on a road in one of the provinces of Laos. The chances are that your counterpart does not have much more than six years of training. But he is the boss, and chances are that he is older than you. When any problems arise, he will say that he can solve them, and so you wait for him to proceed. When nothing is done, you question him, and he will tell you that it was raining too hard, or that he ran out of fuel, or that the payroll did not come and the men will not work, or that the equipment broke down, or that he became ill and could not work. Of course, you, not understanding what was really wrong, would accept these excuses and try to solve them, not for a moment realizing what was really wrong. This system of excuses could continue for week after week and there would be no progress. You would become frustrated, and eventually suspect that there was a real problem. You are absolutely right! Your counterpart did not know how to solve the problem he originally had, and therefore, he had to make up excuses. I have seen one particular dirtroad project of 26 kms take three years to complete simply because the American counterpart was not aware of this Lao cultural trait.

This was on the provincial level, and all that was endangered was the relations between two men. But supposing that this was on the national level, and your counterpart was the Minister of Public Works. This could really create problems.

Generally in the small villages, the problem of face-saving connected with education is nonexistant. The country Lao will admit frankly that he does not know, and you can believe him when he says he says he can. However, the problem of face still exists.
In one small village of northern Laos a technician was working with a village that requested a well. He told the villagers to start digging the well, and when it was dug, he would come back with the cement and other materials. When he came back a week later, nothing had been done. Being experienced, he suspected that the villagers did not dig the well because they did not know where to put it. So, he explained and picked a spot where to put it. So, he explained and picked a spot where he thought the well should go, and said that he would come back in another week to see how they were doing. The villagers thought that was fine and said that it would be done. One week later when the technician returned, there was still no well. Fortunately, this technician had been in Laos for a while, and realized that there was some problem. He thought for moment, picked up the shovel and pick, and began to dig. In no time at all, the villagers were working and the technician left, saying that he would return in another week to see how they were doing. The next morning a rummer from the village came to the technician's home to report that the well was dug. Unbelieving he drove to the village. It was dug alright, 15 meters deep, 1.50 meters in diameter, and all done in twenty-four hours. It was a record! The problem was, that even though the villagers had seen wells, they had never seen one dug, and were not quite sure how to proceed, and rather than lose face by making a mistake, they chose to do nothing until they were sure that they would proceed correctly.

I have seen similar problems when villagers agreed to build schools on a self-help basis. Everything the villagers knew how to do would be done. This usually meant the roof was put up. No other work was attempted. Why? Because they did not know how. Not because they did not want the school, but because they did not know how to mix cement or how to read the plans. As soon as a technician was made available, the school was completed in a very short time. At one time these school skeletons dotted the Lao country side, simply because the Americans responsible did not understand the problem. The Lao, rather than make a mistake, did nothing. The problem here could have been easily solved by asking the villagers if they could do the work, because country side Lao will tell the truth. But when dealing with city Lao, you would have had to assume that they did not know, because whether they understood or not, they would say that they did.

Another difficult problem to handle in Laos is the problem of firmness. For some reason most technicians are afraid to be firm in their decisions. Certainly allowances must be made for each circumstance, but there is a general tendency to be afraid to say no. Villagers, especially, will ask for just about anything; tools, extra cement, extra roofing, or projects that serve no real purpose. It is surprising to me how many Americans actually concede to them these requests, for fear of damaging their relations with the people. In one village in which I was working, we were building a self-help school, and the village participation was 100%. It was the ideal in self-help participation. We were ready to pour the floor. Sand and gravel, cement, and the tools were all ready, and we came to set the day which was most convenient for the villagers.
While talking with the village leader, I was requested to furnish a water truck to haul water for the cement work. I was somewhat surprised by his request and I asked him about the several wells near the construction site. "Were they dry?" "No, they were not dry," he replied. "Then why do you need the water truck?" He replied rather shamefacedly, "I was just asking." I know some technicians who, without thinking would have furnished the water truck, thinking that there was a real need. To a Lao there is no harm in asking. But there is a real harm in conceding a request like this, because the next one will be a lulu. The Lao will respect firmness and frankness, but will walk all over a person who is wishy-washy.

I would now like to caution those who will be working mostly with Lao officials in government. It is important for Americans to realize that the Lao government is highly centralized, and is political. Hardly anything is done without consultation. You may be the sponsor of the greatest project in the country, but before your counterpart can act, he had to sound out others, and this takes time, much time. There is also the bureaucracy to contend with. It is much less efficient than what you would expect from ours. Simply put, any decision of importance is not made alone, and is not made in a hurry. This requires that you take it easy, work on other things, study the Lao language, or take a walk. Here again, there is a big difference in comparing the central government with the local government of the villages. Probably the most democratic institution in the world is the Lao village. Each leader is elected by members of the village, and all decisions of importance are made jointly, after discussion, by the villagers, and expressed by the village leader. I have sat in many of these village counsel meetings, and respect them. All decisions of these meetings were worked out in a give-and-take process, that much resembles our own system. It takes time and patience but it is worth it. Once the decision is made, there is unity and cooperation, and the villager becomes obligated by their joint decision. In other words, they will try to keep their end of the bargain.

The problem of supervision is a perplexing one. The simplest and, in fact, the best way to get a project under way and completed is to discover who is competent and give him the responsibility to do the work. Constant supervision tends to irritate, therefore, slowing the work down. If the man you pick is not the right man, you will know soon enough, and can replace him. But give him a chance. Explain what you want, and suggest to him how to do it, and when you feel he has it, leave. He will work best if you are not around. Because, if you are around, he is obligated to come to you for all decisions, no matter how small. Not only this, you leaving gives him prestige or face with the other workers. Remember, however, that this man does not have any degree, and you cannot expect him to do things compared to you. But when led properly, he learns extremely fast.
One last bit of advice. Sometimes, because of poor planning, mistaken goals, and poor communications, you become involved in a project that does not seem to go, though you have checked and have considered all of the problems we have already mentioned; slow down, take it easy. If you can find out what the problem is, resolve it, then continue; but if it cannot be resolved, back out. I have seen several technicians lose their cool over projects that were not going well. They were not wanted. Forcing a village to work on a project is about the worst thing you can do. Pull out and use the materials in a village which really wants the project.