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An Adventure in Amazing Thailand: From CEO-coaching to Cross-cultural Team-building

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CEOs appointed in unfamiliar countries are usually in for surprises and quite an adventure. With pitfalls abound, understanding the dynamics of their team takes time and getting and giving effective feedback across cultures is a challenge, as with unleashing the potential of their team. The author relates the case of an Indian CEO assigned to lead a large business in Thailand and shares how executive coaching accelerated his learning and helped him take his team towards the next level of achievement and fulfillment. Practical exercises and tools are reviewed, and the article highlights the importance of building trust, enabling productive conflicts and strengthening accountability in the multi-cultural executive team.

The Amazingly Smooth Start of a New CEO's Adventure...

"What's the most important topic we should discuss today?" I asked Rajesh, as we met in his spacious office at Nariman Point, Mumbai, for another serene conversation, despite the incessant honking from the busy street below.

"Guess what?" he replied, beaming with excitement. "I have just been promoted to head our operations in Thailand". "Hey! Congratulations! Thrilling! How do you feel about it?" I questioned.

"Well, honoured, first. Thailand is the flagship of our business in South-East Asia. And exhilarated by the opportunity!" "And...?" I pulled. "Hmm, a bit scared I suppose... but then who wouldn't? I guess fear comes with the responsibility, hey? What do you think?"

As I remained silent, Rajesh elaborated, "The situation is our business in Thailand has been growing at an unbelievable 20% per annum over the last five years and it may be a tough act for me to follow. It's like a make-or-break career opportunity." "What is your vision of success, five years from now?" I questioned. We pursued our conversation, gradually zooming from a five-year horizon down to the first three months, until Rajesh defined a robust action plan for the first 90 days in his new job.

Two months later, we met again, in Bangkok, for a "celebration-dinner" in a beautiful Thai restaurant alongside the Chao-Praya river, with sumptuous views of golden temples and... the crackling noise of long-tail boats racing by. Rajesh is all smiles. "Achchaa! I could not imagine a better first month into the job. My Thai employees extended the warmest welcome I ever had anywhere and they go all the way to accommodate my needs, even before I realise them. Thais have just so much empathy, it is amazing. And they are hardworking too. Yet the best is, I have world-class executives: six Thai and three foreign directors – American, British, and Singaporean. Awesome go-getters, all of them, with splendid experience. And my family is settling down smoothly; the kids are happy with their new school and have made new friends already." "Did you get any feedback on yourself yet?" I prompted. "Sure did, and it's rather positive, I must say. My assistant told me I am perceived as sharp, energetic, easily approachable, ambitious, and kind." "Anything else?" I asked. "I guess you are probing for negative feedback; sorry I did not get any, although I pushed for it." Rajesh said.

First Challenge: Getting Comprehensive Feedback Across Cultures

We then discussed possible obstacles to getting feedback on "areas for improvement" in an Asian context for a boss, and explored Geert Hofstede's

“cultural dimensions”¹ (refer to APPENDIX I) for India and Thailand. Both countries scored high on “power distance”, with India at 77, being way above the world average of 55. Hofstede defined “power distance” as “the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede 28). We then compared India and Thailand’s scores on “masculinity”, associated to assertiveness (“feminine” behaviour being more related to “caring”, according to Hofstede). While Thailand had the lowest “masculinity” ranking amongst Asian countries surveyed, India had a “masculinity” rate of 56, the world average being just slightly lower at 51. The last dimension we considered was “individualism”, for which Thailand scored a rather low 20, hinting at a predominantly collectivist society. In contrast, India scored around 50, 10 points above the world average.

“Hey, I did not really expect that much of a cultural shock in a neighbouring country!” commented Rajesh. “It seems that getting comprehensive feedback from my Thai subordinates is going to be an uphill battle!”. We then brainstormed on ways to get such feedback and Rajesh decided on several actions, one was to launch a 360-survey two months later.

Rajesh was a firm believer of 360-surveys, reminding me of Eric Schmidt, Google CEO,

“Hey, I did not really expect that much of a cultural shock in a neighbouring country!”

who shared the “best advice ever” he received, which was simply to “get a coach”. Said Schmidt, “Every famous athlete, every famous performer has somebody who is a coach, somebody who can watch what they are doing and say, ‘Is that what you really meant?’ And give them perspective, for something people are never good at: seeing themselves as others see them. A coach really, really helps!”²

Second Challenge: Pitfalls in the “Amazing” Thai Workplace

In “Amazing Thailand”, the first 90 days can be quite a maze for expatriates; their learning curve to excel there is rather sharp.

In 2009, we conducted a large survey – with the Chambers of Commerce – on cross-cultural management in Thailand³, involving 120 companies. When the Thais were asked to rate expatriates on several management skills, they gave low scores on “motivation skills”, “emotional control”, “listening”, “conflict management”, and – more surprisingly – “decision making” and “problem solving”. A drill-down into the survey results identified insufficient consultation and ineffective communication as the root-causes of the negative perceptions on foreigners’ ability at “decision making” and “problem solving”. I discussed this with Rajesh and shared with him some of the main pitfalls for new expatriates in the Thai workplace as identified by our survey:

- Rush to change things before understanding the situation
- Ignore Thai cultural values
- Misinterpret a “Yes” or a smile
- Be impolitely too direct
- Lose self-control
- Publicly blame or express disagreement with a Thai colleague
- Compare Thailand with other countries
- Rely on monetary motivation alone
- Be perceived as arrogant / underestimate Thais’ capability
- Lack flexibility

We also reflected on some of the “pearls of wisdom” I gleaned for newcomers from conversations with senior executives in Bangkok, such as:

- “When you start your new job here, have one-on-one sessions with your direct reports, not so much on work, but rather to understand each of the persons, what is their background, what they like, what they don’t like, what they find interesting in their job, what they think the company should do; after a week, you will understand much more about your team and your priorities for the first 100 days.” (Mr Makjumroen, Chairman and CEO of Philips)
- “Pay a lot of attention to building confidence and trust in you as a leader; Thais will accept you as a boss and try to please

you from the beginning, but to get real trust, it will take at least 6 months. (...) If you think you can leapfrog that period, it will cause a lot of trouble later on." (Mr Swinkels, Vice-President for Finance of Unilever)

- High-achiever, self-reliant profiles are most at risk of failure. "A lot of high-flyers who have achieved a lot elsewhere in the West come here with a different attitude: 'let's-get-things-done-fast' and then they find they hit a wall." (Mr Sethi, President and CEO of ING Life)
- "In Thailand, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." (Mr Yongvanich, Managing Director of SAP for Thailand, clearly inspired by Peter Drucker)
- "One of the most common mistakes foreigners make is to assume that if there are no questions, then everybody understands what they are saying." (Mr. Sethi)
- "Sometimes, when Thais say yes, it will not be exactly the 'yes' that you (foreigner) understand, so you need to pay more attention to whether what you mean is really understood or not." (Dr Pisit, former Deputy Finance Minister)
- "When you deal with Thai people, you have to work like a friend; if you can buy their heart, they will work for you for a lifetime." (Mr Tarab, ING Funds Managing Director)

Rajesh decided to intensify his networking efforts and we scheduled a few meetings with fellow leaders in Bangkok. In his conclusion, Rajesh evoked this picture: Better adopt the flexible strength of the bamboo than the rigid strength of an *oak*... to avoid burn-out.

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Third Challenge: Enhancing Executive-team Engagement

"Sri Lankan pepper crabs and drunken prawns at East Coast, 8pm." We agreed to get our hands dirty after an impromptu phone call from Rajesh, an afternoon when we coincidentally both worked in Singapore. Our dinner started with sharing our fond memories of living in Singapore. Then I asked Rajesh for permission for a direct feedback. Permission granted. "Rajesh, you do look tired to me tonight. Are you?" "Well, it's just been another gruesome day with the regional guys, ever so demanding and always adding complexity to our operations." "What exactly is bothering you, Rajesh?" "I am just not in the mood to take on more weight on my shoulders." "Tell me more." "I have been in the job for close to three months now, launched a number of initiatives with my executive team, we just have our plate full! Just like us here and now." Rajesh sparked with a smile. "Is everyone in the team getting their hands as dirty as we do, here and now?" "Funny you ask that, I just have a feeling that... maybe not." As I let Rajesh reflect on his words, he took a moment to scan the vast sea-panorama, lit with hundreds of super-tankers and other boats' night lights, from North to South and slowly retracing his view. Rajesh then decided, "Time for our first 360, definitely."

Reality-check: 360-survey Interviews and Their Insights on the Team Dynamics

Two weeks later, I was conducting a 360-survey interview with Pramet, the talented Marketing Director. As always, we went through the positive comments first, "Rajesh is the most impressive CEO we have had since I worked here. He diagnosed our business strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within four weeks of his arrival. Spot on. He has so much ambition and drive, he thinks so fast, comes up with new ideas all the time – he's larger than life; plus, he really cares about people too." A while later, I changed the interview course:

Jean: *Kbun Pramet, let's now step back and consider your executive team. What do you see as its heaviest burden this year?*

Pramet: *Easy! We have too many goals, it feels like everything is important and urgent.*

Jean: *How come you have so many priorities?*

Pramet: *Well, we've made history in our business here, we want to succeed going forward, maybe that's the price we have to pay*

Jean: *You said 'maybe'?*

Pramet: *Can we achieve more by doing less?*

We explored that question for a while, then came back to the “too many goals” statement with a candid question:

Jean: *Khun Pramet, have you discussed the issue with the number of priorities in an Executive Committee meeting?*

Pramet: *No.*

Jean: *Why not?*

Pramet: *Hmm... It would be awkward.*

Jean: *Like how?*

Pramet: *If I bring up the issue, what will others think? It's like showing weakness. And Rajesh would not appreciate this, as he is the one adding new priorities... almost on a weekly basis!*

As we probed those statements in depth, I started to distinguish beyond Rajesh's 360-survey, the executive-team interactions' shade taking shape.

Yu Ming – the Supply Chain Director from Singapore – greeted me with mooncakes the next morning. It's Mid-Autumn Festival time and his sister has just sent him a mouth-watering assortment of mooncakes. “Your choice of ‘mung beans with mango’, ‘chestnut lotus with custard’ or ‘low sugar red beans with champagne truffle’” he offered. It was a “definite temptation”, as labelled on the box and a great start to the day! We went through the 360-survey interview and then expanded:

Jean: *Yu Ming, it's Lantern festival, if you had a lantern to shed light on the weakest point of the executive team, what would I see?*

Yu Ming: *Jia-lat man! OK, no talk. I mean we don't really talk, we don't really discuss issues. We avoid conflict.*

Jean: *So what?*

Yu Ming: *So we go for half-good ideas, too many of them.*

Jean: *One example?*

Yu Ming: *Our below-the-line marketing! Promotion after promotion after promotion. We discount way too much for the sake of growing market share. I just wonder when we'll throw a 'buy-one-get-TEN-free' campaign!*

Jean: *u Ming, whose responsibility is it to start a debate on this issue at the Executive Committee?*

Yu Ming frowned, obviously disliking my question, then replied:

Yu Ming: *Hey, it's a team-thing!*

Jean: *What could be one good reason why it would not start with you?*

Yu Ming: *I don't want to corner a colleague in a tough spot.*

Jean: *Why is that?*

Yu Ming: *Because 'never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself'.*

Jean: *Yu Ming, I fully respect Confucius' words of wisdom. At the same time, you hinted about negative consequences for the business. Do we have a situation here?*

Yu Ming: *Sure.*

Jean: *Do you have the same at home with your family?*

Yu Ming: *No way.*

Jean: *Why?*

Yu Ming: *Because we know each other, we trust each other... AHA. OK, got it, we have a trust issue in the executive team.*

Jean: *Yu Ming, just how much do you know about your colleagues?*

Yu Ming: *Well, the basic stuff, family, some hobbies, where they live...*

Jean: *That's it?*

Yu Ming: *Kind of.*

Jean: *How come so little?*

Yu Ming: *Five years ago, we had a great trip with all the Executive Committee members with families, to Halong Bay in North Vietnam. Five days on a Chinese-style junk. We cooked, bathed, and ventured around together. Wow, that was real team-building. I can tell you, when we came back, we almost knew each other like brothers and sisters. Since then, zip, nil, nada, niente. Just the yearly run-of-the-mill away-day in a five-star beach resort in Phuket or in the hills around Chiang Mai. Come to think about it, we experienced such a fantastic thrust out of that junk-thing... (we laughed) And we did work superbly together the next three years, basically until some of us left the company and our team spirit gradually vanished.*

A Team-meeting Reveals So Much About the Dynamics At Play

The next day, I silently observed an Executive Committee session dedicated to "Performance Plans", the newest head-office initiative about raising the bar for performance company-wide and formalising highly complex improvement plans.

In the meeting, a number of good practices are at play: all participants are focused – no computer or BlackBerry distractions; they seek clarity, have good laughs regularly, write down their actions, make decisions... And when Rajesh questioned those who don't say much, they provided valuable opinions.

On the negative side, the meeting dragged on and on, well beyond the time allocated, with many more exchanges on form than on substance. As if it was more important to do the exercise to perfection in the headquarters colleagues' view rather than completing it in the best interest of the local business.

Another issue: Rajesh spoke 40% of the time, two other executives about 15% of the time, while the rest hardly contributed, unless prompted. Most strikingly, there was no real group discussion and no confrontation of different opinions. Most of the exchanges were guarded and one-to-one.

Rajesh concluded, "I know this is creating a lot of extra work for all of us, please let me know if it isn't humanly possible to do it within the deadlines." No one said anything. But the silence weighed heavily.

The good news is: you have a brilliant collection of dedicated executives. The bad news is: you don't have a team

"Rajesh, may I give you candid feedback on this meeting and your executive committee, now?" I asked. "Please shoot!" "The good news is: you have a brilliant collection of dedicated executives. The bad news is: you don't have a team. Your guys' degree of interpersonal trust seems low. They don't engage in healthy group discussions. They don't talk about the elephants in the room (for example: the growing number of priorities and the quest for perfection). However, I believe you can overturn the situation quite fast." Rajesh requested me to elaborate and then decided to embark on a team-building exercise focused on trust, productive conflict, and accountability.

Exploring the "Five Dysfunctions of a Team" and Preferred Conflict Modes

We chose to leverage Patrick Lencioni's approach in his book "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team"⁴, using five steps to build a highly effective team. First, establish trust amongst members, the kind of trust which makes people comfortable to disclose their weaknesses and ask for help. The second step was to engage in unfiltered, productive conflict, rather than preserve artificial harmony within the group. This suppresses ambiguity and generates healthy decisions, to which people can genuinely commit (third step). The fourth step invited team members to be accountable to each other for their performance and "call

their peers on actions and behaviours that seem counterproductive to the good of the team" (Lencioni, 189). The final step – "attention to results" – requested team members to place the collective goals of their peers-team above their own interest or their subordinates' team benefit.

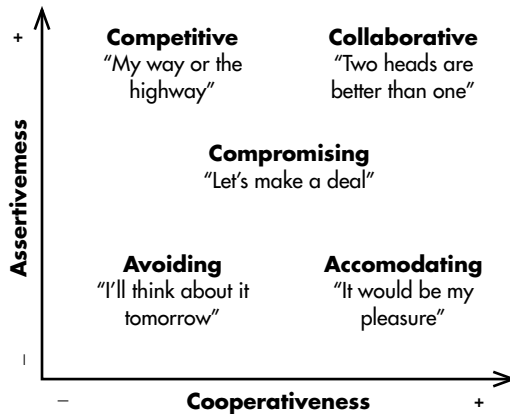


Figure 5-1: Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument

Rajesh and his executives read Lencioni's book and completed its team assessment questionnaire. Unsurprisingly, the team scored low on two particular points:

- Team members know about one another's personal lives and are comfortable discussing them;
- Team members call out one another's unproductive behaviours.

Another assessment the executive team undertook is the Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument (TKI)⁵, which categorises people's approach to conflict along two dimensions: assertiveness (the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy his/her own concerns) and cooperativeness (the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns (Figure 5-1)).

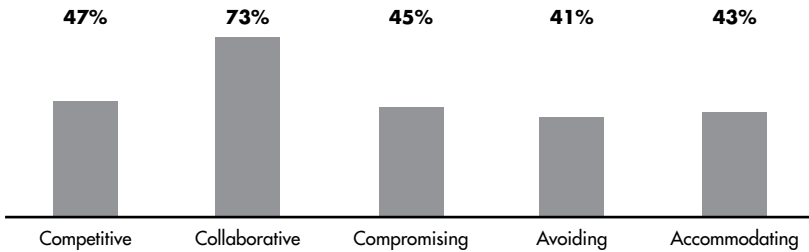


Figure 5-2: The team's compounded TKI profile

Rajesh's executive team members had very different TKI profiles. Some often resort to "avoiding" or "accommodating" behaviours whilst others primarily use the "competing" mode.

The good news is that the team's TKI compounded profile (Figure 5-2) showed "collaborative" as the overall preferred approach to conflict. Typically, a "collaborative" person explores a disagreement with a view to learn from each other's insights or/and try to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

The Core Challenge: Embracing Trust and Personal Vulnerability

Team building time came. The 10 members of the Executive Team were enjoying breakfast by the beach under a giant banyan tree. It's a peaceful and sunny Friday morning in the South of Thailand. The sea was mirror-like, just slightly wrinkled by the wakes of colourful fishing boats cruising towards the nearby harbour, after a night of hard work.

We gently embarked on our own hard work, with a music video from Heather Small⁶ who questioned, "What will you do today to make you feel proud?" I reminded all about what we wanted to achieve by the end of the day regarding inter-personal trust, productive conflict, and accountability, and presented the

team's scores of the "five dysfunctions" assessment. Strikingly low for *"team-members know about one another's personal lives and are comfortable discussing them"* and *"team-members call out one another's unproductive behaviors"*.

The first dive was for everyone to share "three outstanding and unique things about her/him... that no one else knows in the executive team, good and/or not so good!" (participants had been invited to prepare this sharing a few days before so it came as no surprise). Rajesh had shared with me his own three points ahead of time and was ready to go for authentic disclosure first. Yet – surprise, surprise – Apinya, the most guarded executive, raised her hand first and spoke out. In summary, this was what she shared about herself: outstanding academic awards, dedication to family, and adventurous moments abroad. She seemed relieved after her statement, oblivious that she just wasted her opportunity to genuinely open up to her peers.

I probably failed more times than anyone here!

I was about to "activate" Rajesh to "lead by example" and get everyone into the real "disclosure" zone when Panupong, the charismatic manufacturing director, volunteered with his usual self-confident grin. "First, I probably failed more times than anyone here! I had a headstart with low grades at school and had much more fun with outdoors activities. As a freshman at university, I continued to do just enough to pass exams, as life was so good to enjoy. Until my father died suddenly. It was a devastating shock. I felt I was reborn overnight as a man with responsibility (...)"

Now we were getting the right spin. Jantima, the glamorous, ambitious, and distant sales director, followed suit, "You don't know that I come from a poor family, I mean really poor. My mother ran a small laundry shop and my father left when I was 4. So I developed a sense for survival early and money quickly became important. My first job was cleaning my relatives' houses when I was 9. I will always remember the moment when I got my first 5 Thai Bahts salary! (...)"

This sharing exercise worked out very well – with proper preparation from participants and clear expectations upfront, simply because everyone benefited from more trust amongst team members.

The next activity had everyone writing down the one thing he/she appreciated the most about each of his/her peers, on their individual “Certificate of Appreciation”. It’s a simple yet positive activity! Many people actually kept that certificate preciously on their desk.

Then we raised the bar and everyone had to share candidly (A) her/his greatest value-added to the team, in just one word, and (B) the one thing she/he wants to improve, to be a better contributor to the team. Our harvest was again rich: “clarity”, “assurance”, “positive energy”, “understanding”, “vision”, and “consistency”, amongst others, were listed on the value-added side. On the self-improvement side: “more empathy in interactions with you” (said Jantima), “more systematic thinking”, “more listening”, “ask for help”, stop “*krengjai*” (which is an important Thai trait, roughly translated as “being considerate to others at your own expense”).

Engaging in Productive Conversations in a Team-building Across Cultures

In the same spirit, we spent the afternoon working on productive conflict, role-play after role-play, and that’s actually when we laughed the most. It helped push inhibitions aside. We also took a look at the team’s TKI profile and the variety of (un-named) individual profiles. Pramet asked, “Why don’t you show our names beside the individual profiles?” “Because that is personal information I can’t share, unless everyone here asked me to.” I replied. “We could interact with each other a lot better if we’d know!” supported Robert, the British IT Director. Everyone agreed in an outburst of “yes!” Another milestone was along our way!

Then we practiced Susan Scott’s “Confrontation Model” from her remarkable book “*Fierce Conversations*”⁷⁷ where “fierce”, she says, stands for “robust, intense, strong, powerful, passionate, eager, unbridled”, not for “aggressive” or “threatening”. Her

“confrontation model” helped team members engage in genuine conversations on tough issues and drive effectively to resolution:

1. Name the issue
2. Illustrate with one or two specific example(s)
3. Describe your emotions about this issue
4. Clarify what is at stake
5. Identify your contribution to this problem
6. Indicate your wish to resolve this issue
7. Invite your partner to respond
8. Inquire into your partner’s views
9. Identify conditions for resolution
10. Make a new agreement and determine how you will hold each other accountable for keeping it (Scott 254)

As a “treat”, team members got to walk on the beach, two-by-two, to hold two such “fierce conversations” on the two most important issues they shared. They returned invigorated and all smiles.

Our work on “accountability-to-the-team” ended with one more personal disclosure: everyone asked others to keep him/her accountable for something new he/she wanted to do. Apinya, who had wasted her opportunity to open up to others that morning, didn’t miss her second chance as she came out with the shortest amongst statements:

be me. Panupong, the charismatic, volunteered, “I propose to be the team’s ‘conflict-miner’ (i.e. in charge of extracting buried disagreements within the team).” Jantima, the distant sales director, threw in, “I’ll start building empathy into all interactions.” Rajesh went for, “Focus strictly on what matters most and talk less!”

I still can’t believe what happened; that was the toughest day in my career so far, and the very best one.

The next day was dedicated to “practicing” productive team conversations on the most important issues and started by agreeing on a shortlist of the “elephants” in the room. Rajesh was in for a number of surprises... Panupong excelled in his role of conflict-miner and reminded all – at three tense moments – that “this hurts a bit, but it’s better we go all the way”.

That evening, as Rajesh was about to dive in the swimming pool, he smiled. “I still can’t believe what happened; that was the toughest day in my career so far, and the very best one.”

Conclusion

At year end, Rajesh shared with me:

*You know what made us happiest and proudest
as a team when we looked back at this past year?*

I noticed Rajesh had relinquished the “me” for the “we”. He pursued, “It’s not that we surpassed our 20% growth target, it’s why: we discussed the un-discuss-ables and every single time we gained strength as a team.”

“I am delighted to hear that, Rajesh! Thanks for sharing. Now tell me, what’s the next frontier? ”

Endnote

- ¹ Gerard Hofstede is an organisational sociologist, who studied the interactions between national cultures and organisational cultures, and wrote several books including *Cultures and Organizations* <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php>.
- ² Eric Schmidt’s interview on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so1jCsH3Cb4>.
- ³ Download results of our survey on cross-cultural management in Thailand from www.1-2-win.net “Free download page”.
- ⁴ More information on “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team” by Patrick Lencioni can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_Lencioni and www.tablegroup.com.
- ⁵ Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument: <http://kilmanniagnostics.com/taketki.html>.
- ⁶ Heather Small’s “Proud” video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkysd9mQho>
- ⁷ More information about Susan Scott’s “Fierce Conversations” can be found at <http://www.fierceinc.com/>.

Reflection Questions

1. Which easy steps could you take to get (even) more comprehensive feedback from your co-workers on your behaviour?
2. Which actions could you realistically take, to foster greater trust between your team-members?
3. What is the one change in your team's dynamic which would help the team's performance improve the most?

"Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending."

Maria Robinson