

Training better supervisors means better business for Cambodia's factories

Studies have shown that autocratic managerial styles and aggressive techniques do not result in productive workers. What motivates workers is a working environment where those who supervise them work with them; give them clear instructions, full support and encouragement. This is what the ILO in Cambodia is working to achieve, as Maeve Galvin, Communication and Advocacy Officer and Ying Bun, Better Factories, ILO Cambodia, report.

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (ILO Online) – ‘Man’ is the principle syllable in ‘management’ yet the world of work is full of poor management practices that do not take the needs of the staff under supervision into account.

Now in its fifth year of operation, the Supervisory Skills Programme offered by the [ILO's Better Factories Programme](#) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) plays a crucial role in creating firm, fair and effective leaders and supervisors in Cambodia's garment industry, which accounts for US\$2.5 billion of the country's annual GDP. It aims to address both specific issues – such as the number of working days lost through disputes – and to bring about an overall improvement in the relationship between workers and managers.

A fast-paced working environment full of targets, quotas and deadlines, where a supervisor's success is measured by the precision and speed of their staff, would be a stress-inducing environment for even the most experienced of supervisors. However, this stress is multiplied if you don't have the skills to manage and motivate your workers in a positive way. So, as part of the programme, participants are trained to avoid both passive and authoritarian styles of leadership and to strike a fair balance between the interests of the company and those of staff.

Poeu Sampors, a 31-year-old mother of one, supervises 102 workers at the Roohsing Cambodia Garment Factory. She took part in the supervisory skills training two years ago. “After attending the training I become more patient. Importantly, I learned about human behaviour and effective communication. When I guide and advise the workers they very often listen and follow because I give them logical reasons and clear instructions. My line supervisor has appreciated that I have worked effectively and closely with the workers and gives me encouragement.”

The training consists of two two-day sessions, with a four to six week break between them. This break enables participants to put their newly-acquired skills into practice and see how well the techniques work. The second two-day block of training includes an opportunity for participants to share what they have learned in their on-the-job experience. The training sessions also include video-taped practice of newly-acquired supervisory skills that allows participants to assess how well they are doing.

Improving leadership skills

Human Resources' Managers report that the supervisors' problem-solving skills are significantly better, and 97 per cent of supervisors who did the training say they gained new knowledge and skills, 29 year-old Sovann Naysas, is one of those who feels the course improved her leadership skills. She also works at the Roohsing Cambodia Garment Factory, supervising 102 workers.

“I joined the training a few months after I had been promoted,” she said. “Before that I was not able to manage the workers well and to instruct them clearly. Also, I was very impatient and blamed them when their work did not meet my expectations. Now I could communicate with them so well. Importantly I can understand their minds and work. Through bearing and applying the concepts from the training, my day-to-day work goes smoother. Obviously, my workers [subordinates] have solidarity and work so hard. They listen to my advice. As a result, I can achieve the set goal that my line supervisor set me to complete.”

“Joining the training was very beneficial for me because I can manage and lead my group efficiently and effectively. I always solve any problem in a peaceful manner. I give them support, advice, and guidance, and care about them. Through my good leadership and visible results, my line supervisor plans to send other workers to attend the training so that they can apply it in their working life and improve productivity.”

Other effects of the training have included an increase in factory productivity, an improvement in output quality (such as a fall in the number of sub-standard garments produced) and a decline in staff absenteeism. In the participating factories staff morale and the overall working environment have also been positively affected; on average the number of warnings given to staff has decreased by 12 per cent since the training was introduced. Workers also rated their supervisors better. The staff supervised by course graduates rated their supervisors seven to ten per cent higher than staff working with untrained supervisors in non-participating factories.

"It's clear that the encouragement of good management practices has delivered strong results and helped the Cambodian garment industry appeal to international buyers in the face of increasing competition," said Catherine Vaillancourt-Laflamme, Training Specialist at the ILO's Better Factories Cambodia programme.

"Cambodia's good labour practices are often cited by international buyers as one of the main reasons to source garments from Cambodia. The Cambodian garment industry depends on its reputation for good labour standards, so the good management practices introduced through this initiative will play a huge role in securing its future," she added.

The International Labour Office is the permanent secretariat of the International Labour Organization.