

## ▶ Improving labour relations through better communication: Empowering supervisors to thrive in their essential role

**Recognizing supervisors' essential role in the establishment of sound industrial relations at the workplace, the ILO-Garment Industry Project (ILO-GIP) introduced the ILO Better Work Supervisor Skills Training programme (SST) to Myanmar. By hosting SST training of trainers (ToT) sessions for local services providers, piloting the SST and delivering it to some 600 supervisors in selected factories, the ILO-GIP brought in essential knowledge, skills and attitudes with the goal of contributing to the professional development of thousands of local supervisors needed to sustain the industry's growth.**

Garment factory supervisors – those responsible for directly overseeing the work of thousands of garment workers – act as the essential link between workers and management. They often face high levels of stress due to demanding production targets, but are paradoxically rarely equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to perform their essential role. They are often promoted within a day from being a worker into a supervisory role, and as a result are often ill-prepared to prevent or resolve the type of factory-floor disputes that routinely occur in any large factory.

The Better Work programme is a partnership between the International Labour Organization and the International Finance Corporation. The programme currently operates in nine garment-producing countries. It delivers assessments, training and advisory services catering to the needs of the garment industry. In 2005, the ILO Better Work programme launched a specific training curriculum for supervisors (SST). The programme is designed to be highly interactive and to teach supervisors about their roles and responsibilities, professional behaviors at work, communicating effectively with workers, and improving worker performance. The programme aims to improve outcomes in three areas: supervisors' abilities and confidence at work, their relationships with workers and productivity. The SST is ILO Better Work's most popular training product.

In Myanmar, the SST training brought about by the ILO-GIP covered topics such as:

- ▶ Identification of supervisors roles and responsibilities
- ▶ Understanding of different supervisory styles
- ▶ Essentials of time management
- ▶ Positive relationship building
- ▶ Effective assignment of work

The ILO-GIP relied on the expertise of the two master trainers from ILO Better Work programmes in Cambodia and Vietnam. In May 2019, these master trainers delivered a three-day ToT course to thirteen participants from two pre-selected local training services providers: Capacity Building Initiative (CBI) and Brilliant Innovative Solutions (BIS). In order to increase the future dissemination of the SST training programme, the ILO-GIP also teamed up with the Aung Myhn Hmu Training Center (AMH) to deliver this ToT course.<sup>1</sup> AMH is now the custodian of the ILO Better Work SST training and continues to offer it as one of its training offerings.

Under the supervision of the two ILO Better Work master trainers, the thirteen trainers delivered three days of SST training to supervisors operating in the ILO-GIP participating factories – with immediate positive results. This case study is based on feedback collected from eight of the supervisors who received the SST training.

"I learned how to communicate with workers after this training. At first, I didn't know how to share information with workers or how to manage them. Since the training, I now know how to teach the workers and help them understand what is required in their jobs. Before the training, I worried about whether the workers would listen to me or not. Now I believe in myself."

<sup>1</sup> A second ToT session was scheduled for February 2020, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it had to be cancelled.



## ► Learning insights

Supervisors who benefited from the SST training said the training helped them learn how to teach and manage their workers better. They learned the importance of keeping workers motivated using best practice leadership skills and active listening techniques.

"Communication improved when I started using friendly language and a polite manner. When I talked rudely to workers, communication with them was antagonistic and they were not inclined to listen to me. We no longer had a mutual understanding."

The supervisors said the training also helped them understand different leadership styles, which they described as follows:

**Dominant:** A supervisor who is dominant never looks for the facts when a problem occurs, thinks of herself as always right, makes decisions according to her feelings and does not listen to others.

**Hesitant:** The hesitant supervisor worries about telling the truth. She worries the workers will hate her and she does not believe in herself.

**Skillful:** The skillful supervisor stands fairly between workers and management and listens to the workers. She always looks for the facts when a problem occurs. A skillful supervisor behaves fairly and equitably, as a good leader, without any bias. Workers will not respect a supervisor who treats them unfairly.

"At first, I could see in myself all three leadership styles. I sometimes used to hesitate or dominate. But I did not know whether my actions were right or wrong. After the training, I learned for sure what is the best approach. Now I am trying to be a skillful leader. I am no longer a hesitant or a dominant supervisor."



## Changes in attitudes and practices



Supervisors said that their communication and leadership styles have changed for the better since attending SST training. They have become more patient in communicating with their workers. By adapting their leadership styles and listening to the feedback and concerns of workers, their relationships with the workers have improved significantly.

"We realised the benefit of listening to workers after playing an active listening game during the training. We understand now that the workers have personal needs and family matters to deal with and it is important to listen to them. We learned to stand in their shoes and develop empathy and understanding. Before the training, we did not listen to their feelings. We used to say, 'leave your family matters at home'. Our work has become easier since we started listening to them. The communication between us has improved and they respect us more."

Following the SST training, supervisors said they have found it has become easier to perform their responsibilities in the workplace because of their improved relationships with workers. They have found many practical ways in which they can now apply what they learned to improve productivity and efficiency in their factories.

"As a line supervisor, I am able to start solving the problems in my line by myself. The work in the line has become smoother and there are fewer problems. The management of my factory and my subordinates have voted me to be an 'all-super' (head of supervisors) in my factory. So, after the training, I found I had more opportunities to develop my career!"

Some supervisors claimed the training has resulted in reduced absenteeism and turnover rates in their factories. Reducing the rates of absenteeism and turnover is important for Myanmar's garment factories to remain competitive in terms of cost of production and to attract foreign buyers and investment.

"At work, the workers I supervise now work better. There is no need to shout any more. They work with their own motivation. I am also more able to convince older workers not to leave the job. My workers take fewer absent days. This is because I try to understand them more."

## More changes in attitudes and practices



Retaining older workers means a factory has the opportunity to leverage valuable skills and experience for a longer period. This helps the factory create a competitive advantage. In another example of this, one supervisor explained that the training has helped her to develop better relationships with older workers and that this has resulted in positive outcomes for both these workers and the factory.

“In my line, there are a lot of older workers. I was able to improve the quality of the line because of their skills. In return, I helped them increase their salaries. I encourage them and they support me. Both the factory and the workers will be benefit when workers are happy in the workplace.”

It appears the skills provided in the SST training have also been put to good use in the supervisors’ family environment and in wider social settings.

“My communication at home has changed significantly too. I used to shout when I talked to my husband and I was not patient with my children if I felt tired after finishing work. Now, I am more aware of the way I talk and think. I make sure to remain calm when I have to solve a problem according to what I learned in the training. Our family has become peaceful as a result.”

## Perceived strengths of the project

- ▶ Because the training is offered in the Myanmar language, participants said it was effective and easy to understand.
- ▶ Supervisors said the training content was very relevant and well targeted to address their needs. Because of this, they said it was easy to apply what they learned to situations in their factories.
- ▶ Participants said the trainers were very patient and explained anything they did not understand with clear examples.
- ▶ During the training, the content was delivered with a good variety of activities and games, and supervisors said this made the training interesting and memorable.
- ▶ The certificate provided after completing the SST training was highly valued by the supervisors. Many said they did not often have the chance to improve their professional skills in a formal setting and receive accreditation for this.

“For us, we have no time to join an external management course. We are grateful for this chance to attend training. We value the certificate provided from this training.”

## Perceived gaps in the project

- ▶ Some supervisors noted that poor literacy levels may act as a barrier to absorbing the training content. They explained that even experienced supervisors may not necessarily have strong literacy skills, even in the Myanmar language.
- ▶ Supervisors conceded that some of their peers could not always provide answers during the training due to their lack of understanding of the question or terminology being used. When this occurred, the trainers, even if Myanmar national themselves, would repeat the question, presuming the trainees were not paying attention. This left some trainees feeling demotivated.
- ▶ The supervisors recommended trainers should be made aware of the literacy issue and approach it with more sensitivity in future training.
- ▶ Although supervisors expressed a desire to share the knowledge they gained during the SST training with other supervisors and workers, some said it has been difficult to do this. They say there is often a language or cultural barrier in asking for permission to train other workers, because the top management in many factories are foreigners. Without permission from top management, they cannot share their knowledge with the other workers. This means the benefits of the training are not being shared as widely as they would like.

## Looking to the future

### Improving productivity

The supervisors who attended the SST training said they have big dreams for the future. They want to implement changes in the way they supervise workers, not only to please themselves but also to benefit their factories and the garment sector as a whole. They want to try hard to improve productivity by being better leaders. And they want to bring up other workers to be good leaders in the future.

### Careers in the garment sector

Supervisors want to share their experiences and help other supervisors and garment workers to improve their careers by sharing what they learned during the SST training. They said they want to encourage other people to see sewing as a strong and useful skill that can provide future work and career opportunities to many more people.

### Sharing knowledge and skills

Supervisors appeared enthusiastic about passing on what they have learned through the SST to other workers and fellow supervisors. They hope that in the future they might be able to access another ToT type course so they can easily share more new skills with a wide group of people.

“Since I attended the training, my confidence level has increased. I am now looking for a new factory to apply my new skills and knowledge. I am not looking for a new factory for the position or the income, but rather for the opportunity to share the knowledge and skills I have with more people. That's why I am looking for a new factory. I am ready to share my knowledge if other supervisors would like to be trained and if top management allows it.”



“Improving labour relations for decent work and sustainable development in the Myanmar garment industry” project (ILO-GIP). The ILO-GIP aimed to reduce poverty and empower women in Myanmar by improving labour relations, social dialogue and gender equality in the garment industry. The project received funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), H&M and Marks and Spencer. The project ran from July 2016 to May 2020. For more information, please visit <http://bit.ly/ilo-gip>