The Better Work Academy:
approach and impact in Gap Inc. factories.

International Labour Organization

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BetterWork.

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Launched in 2016, the Workplace Cooperation Program (WPC) is a pilot partnership between Better Work and Gap Inc. Subsequently scaled up into the Better Work Academy, it aims to train workers and managers in Better Work techniques to more effectively address and resolve workplace issues and to broaden in-factory cooperation.

The approach

Better Work's impact evaluation showed that the mix of its integrated factory services – compliance assessments, advisory built on bipartite committees, and capacity building through learning services – is critical in achieving sustainable impact on workers' wellbeing and factory performance. To this end, the key focus of WPC training is worker/management (bipartite) committees, to expand Gap Inc. staff's roles beyond one of traditional auditors towards one of trainers and coaches. Members of these committees are trained in eight modules essential to improving workplace relations, namely: communication; problem solving; grievance mechanisms; risk assessment; health and safety; bipartite committee roles and responsibilities; industrial relations; and negotiations.

By the end of 2019, Better Work had conducted five in-person training sessions to Gap Inc. staff on the modules and on needed soft skills to be able to shift the role from auditor to advisory. They, in turn, had delivered training to 182 factories across Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam with 116 factories completing all eight modules. Understanding the impact of the WPC, especially in factories and countries where Better Work is not directly operating, is critical to demonstrate the potential of the Better Work Academy to scale up the positive impacts of the Better Work model.

Results

A recent evaluation of the impact of the WPC by York University focused on questions of whether training has translated into improvements in the workplace, and how those improvements were evident. Through interviews and focus groups of managers, worker representatives and workers, the study found progress in three areas:

1. Communication and cooperative work relationships

"The most talked theme is in relationship with production. Workers are communicating, we feel closer with them after two years."

– MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVE, GUATEMALA

Workers and management reported that the training on communication had the biggest impact in the workplace, and was linked with improvements in worker-management relationships and worker confidence. Barriers between workers and management started to break down, trust developed, confidence boosted, and channels of communication opened up. This, in turn, was linked to more productive problem solving, functional grievance channels, and proactive risk assessment.

Improvements in communication are at the core of WPC impacts on the shop floor.

Communication

▼

Cooperative Work Relationships

- Confidence
- Open Mindedness
- Agency, Trust, Ownership
- Challenge Cultural Norms

▼

Enabled to Better Address Workplace Concerns

- Productive Problem Solving
- Functional Grievance Channels
- Proactive Risk Assessment

▼

↑ Motivation   ↑ Productivity

↓ Absenteeism   ↑ Product Quality

↓ Turnover

2. Enabling managers and workers to better address workplace concerns

"In the past, we found some problems, we solved it. But now we are doing some preparation in the early stage, to prevent that happen..."

– COMMITTEE MANAGER REPRESENTATIVE, CHINA

Open communication channels allowed for prompt feedback to workers on the shop floor, whether it was a question about production, meeting quotas, or other problems for which they had to spend time engaging in root cause analysis together. With a stronger sense of trust and confidence, workers started to take a greater role in identifying and seeking to resolve issues on the shop floor.

3. The business case for workplace cooperation.

Workers and managers both said workers were being more productive since WPC training. Workers felt more motivated – relationships with managers and coworkers improved, the work environment is safer, they feel happier coming to work, listened to, and that they have a voice or say in decisions in the factory.

"When you're working...if there's a problem in the production, it's easy for us to talk to the line leaders, the supervisors. They became more open. We are happy. We work with a smile. More productive."

– BIPARTITE COMMITTEE WORKER, PHILIPPINES.

Conclusions and next steps

All participants in the surveys and focus groups reported progress with the strongest support coming from those countries where workers had been empowered to contribute to decision-making, highlight areas in which they believed changes could lead to greater efficiencies, and voice concerns and have them addressed immediately.

While workers and managers are enthusiastic about changes in workplace relationships, given the relative newness of the programme the report suggests two key recommendations to ensure progress is sustainable:

- ◆ **Include an "Elect, Represent, Protect, Empower"** framework as a new WPC training module. This framework requires that workers in bipartite committees be elected by the workers themselves in a fair and open process, free from interference. These workers should also have time and resources allocated to prepare for meetings and disseminate results. And, representatives must be protected from retaliation and empowered to speak up and have their voice heard in meetings.
- ◆ **Add a "Knowledge Dissemination"** strand to the Roles and Responsibilities module to ensure that representatives have access and time to hear inputs from workers and disseminate the choices and decisions being made by the committee.