



ASSESSING WHETHER BEHAVIOR CHANGE TRAINING CAN IMPROVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SUPERVISORS AND WORKERS

December 2020

This is a case study of how **Best Buy** assessed the effectiveness of a factory training program designed to address certain behaviors of supervisors that were impeding good quality relationships with workers. Specifically, the program sought to improve how supervisors, among other things, managed conflict with workers, listened to them, and dealt with workplace stress. Companies often use knowledge tests to assess training activities. However, measuring how the newly-acquired knowledge affects the everyday practices and behaviors of participants requires more innovative and deliberate techniques. In this case, the company:

- used a **randomized controlled trial (RCT)** to evidence whether any improvements in supervisor awareness and behavior could be attributed to the training program; and
- built in **worker voice** – in the form of worker surveys and interviews – to measure the change in how supervisors interacted with workers.

Having robust evidence about the success and challenges of the training program has allowed Best Buy to communicate the outcomes of its efforts to its stakeholders in a balanced way, and to identify improvements that can be put in place before scaling the program in other locations.

QUICK FACTS:



SECTOR:
ELECTRONICS



COMPANY:
BEST BUY



COUNTRY:
CHINA



TIME FRAME:
MAY 2018 - JANUARY 2019



DESIGNING SUPERVISORS' TRAINING FOR GREATER WORKER WELLBEING

In line with its commitment to operate consistently with the **UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights** (UNGPs), Best Buy, the largest consumer electronics retailer in the United States, set itself an ambitious goal to engage directly with workers in its supply chain in China. The objective was to hear about workers' satisfaction and their experiences from the factory floor, which would go beyond data reported through audits. The Workers Survey ➡➡

Program was first launched in 2016 and focused on eight key areas, including wages, working and living conditions, work-related pressure and grievances. To gain in-depth insights, both workers and supervisors answered questionnaires anonymously. By sharing results with the factory management team, each one of the six participating factories could decide which area of workers' satisfaction they wanted to improve and, with the support of Best Buy, design their own tailored action plan.

Some of the common areas of concern identified across the factories using the surveys were workers' objections to the behavior of their supervisors, and a lack of trust that prevented workers from raising concerns and grievances. As a response, Best Buy, in collaboration with **Verité**, a global fair labor expert organization, created a new Workers Empowerment Program. The Program, consisting of a series of training courses for supervisors, aims to improve their management skills, leading to better communication and relationships between line supervisors and workers. Four training modules were designed, reflecting the biggest gaps in workers' wellbeing identified in the Workers Survey Program:

- ① **Conflict management and effective communication:** encouraging supervisors to communicate with respect, to listen, praise and collaborate with workers rather than focus on being "right";
- ② **Situational leadership:** such that supervisors can adapt their leadership style to the needs of workers;
- ③ **Stress management:** such that supervisors can effectively address pressures they and workers face and how to communicate about stress to promote a healthy workplace;

- ④ **Self-awareness and leadership:** integrating the content of previous sessions, this module encourages supervisors not to simply imitate management techniques they might have observed in their superiors, but to understand which leadership and communication skills they can put into practice in what situations and why.

The Program was piloted with 48 supervisors in two factories in China, collectively employing 1449 workers. The same content and the same evaluative techniques were applied in both factories. This case study focuses on the evaluation of the Program in one factory, which participated in the training between June and September 2018.

MEASURING IMPACT USING A RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL AND WORKER VOICE

In order to capture impacts of the training on supervisors' behaviors, Best Buy and Verité, with the support of Dr. Raymond Robertson, Chair in Economics and Government in the Department of International Affairs at Texas A&M University, designed a randomized controlled trial that incorporated data collection using insights from supervisors and workers they supervised through surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

In general, a randomized controlled trial is used to measure changes among one group of people who participates in a program against a second group that does not. The method compares the changes in the two groups to identify whether, and to what extent, the Program has had an impact. As the two groups are broadly similar in their make-up, all observed differences can be attributed to the Program. ➡➡

HOW RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIALS WORK:

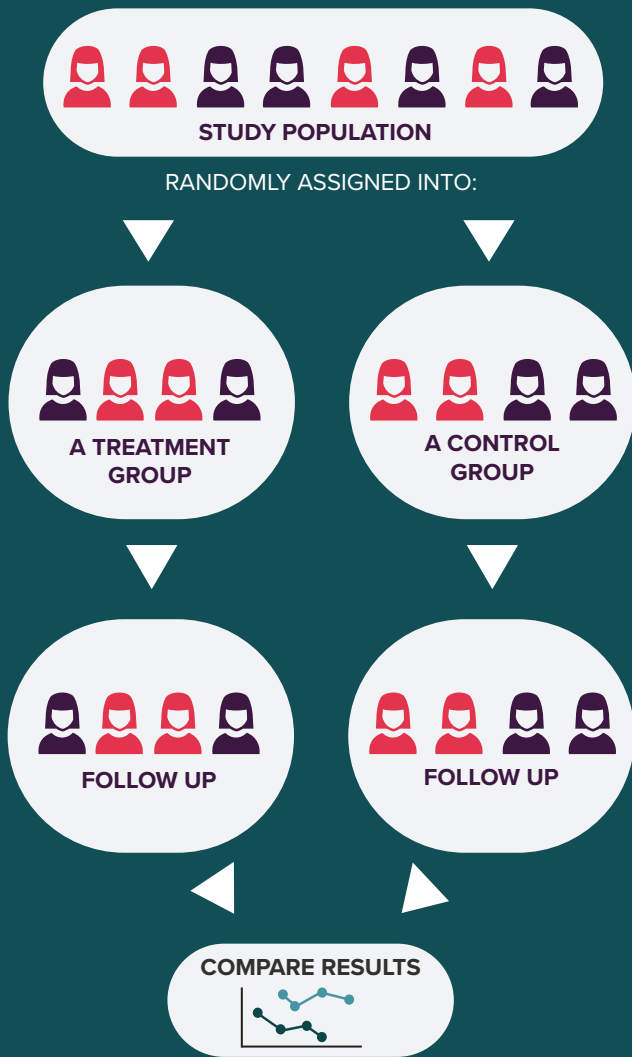


Diagram 1. Randomized control trial

Designing the trial

Supervisors were divided into two groups: 1) an experimental group, which underwent the training, and 2) a control group, which did not. Before starting the training, all supervisors took a knowledge test to assess their grasp of good management practices. Verité also conducted worker surveys to evaluate supervisors' behavior. Workers answered a 22-question survey rating

their supervisors' skills and behaviors on a five-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Workers were asked to respond to statements such as: "My supervisor encourages us to raise issues, questions, and suggestions," "My supervisor gives clear instructions when s/he assigns tasks" and "My supervisor knows his/her responsibility well and doesn't blame workers for his/her mistakes." Workers' responses were then translated into "scores" for supervisors (the maximum score being 110), which were also used to measure the effectiveness of the training in changing supervisors' behavior.

The results of the supervisor knowledge test and the worker survey were then used to select the experimental and control groups of supervisors. In order to be able to compare progress of the experimental group against the control group, the two groups were made as similar as possible: in term of the pre-training average scores (88.48 for the experimental group and 87.74 for the control group); the numbers of workers they supervised; and supervisor demographics such as gender, age, years of experience and placement on the factory floor (assembly, packaging, warehouse etc.) Diagram 2 shows the design and the timeline of the randomized controlled experiment.

From measuring knowledge to measuring change in behaviors

The effectiveness of the training was measured at two levels: first, assessing what knowledge supervisors gained from the training and second, assessing changes in supervisors' behavior. The former was measured through a knowledge test that was administered after each training session. After completing all four sessions, training participants were also interviewed to gain more granular feedback on the training content and methods. Behavior change was measured through ➡➡

worker surveys and interviews. In particular, a couple of months after the training, the 22-question worker survey was completed by both groups of workers – those whose supervisors were in the experimental group and in the control group.

KEY FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS

This section outlines key findings from the evaluation. As the training program and its assessment were pilots, the number of supervisors and workers who were a part of the trial was limited. Out of 110 workers who took part in the trial in this factory at the beginning, 66 remained

in their positions at the time of post-training evaluation.¹ Some workers left the factory, others were promoted or changed teams or managers. 58 workers, in the end, participated in the post-training evaluation, including worker surveys and interviews.

Nevertheless, given the fact that the sample size of the participating workers was still representative of the workforce, the evaluation revealed some clear patterns and its findings remain relevant and valuable for drawing lessons which could be applied in other part of the company's supply chain. ➡➡

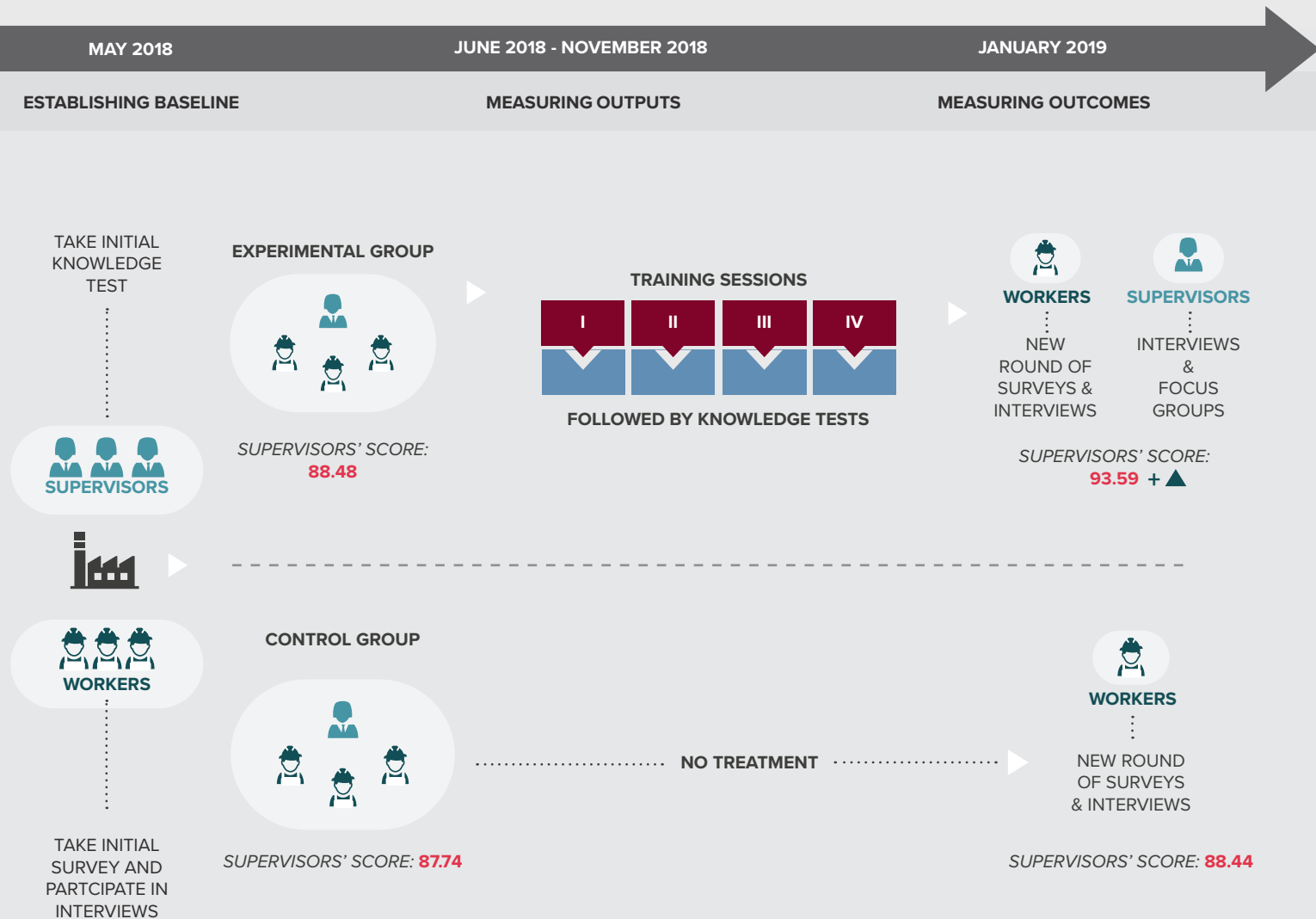


Diagram 2. Design and timeline of the experiment

THE BEHAVIOR OF SUPERVISORS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE TRAINING, AS AGAINST THE CONTROL GROUP, IMPROVED NOTICEABLY

IMPROVEMENT IN SUPERVISORS' BEHAVIOR BY QUESTION

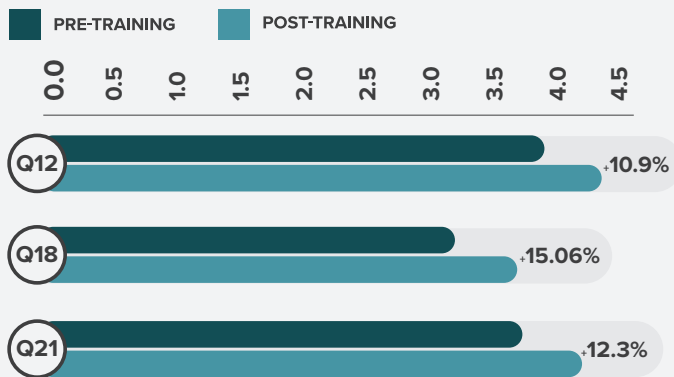


Chart 1. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Training Survey Results for the supervisors who participated in the training (the Experimental Group)

Workers noticed a significant improvement in their supervisors' behavior after they attended the training. Chart 1 shows supervisors' scores before and after the training as rated by workers in the surveys. Each question was rated between 1 and 5, with 5 being a maximum score reflecting that the worker strongly agreed with the statement. Notable areas of improvement were observed in relation to:

- Supervisors involving workers in problem-solving.** Prior to the training 64.6% of workers strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "My supervisor often involves me in discussing issues and finding solutions" (Question 21). On the other hand, in the post-training survey, this percentage increased to 95.5%.
- Supervisors being attentive to worker emotions.** In Question 12, which stated "My supervisor pays attention to workers' emotions when s/he criticizes workers", 75.4% of workers strongly agreed or agreed with the statement prior to the training, compared to 100% of workers in the post-training survey.

- Supervisors' ability to manage stress at the workplace.** The biggest change in supervisors' scores was observed in relation to workers' experience of reduced pressure at work, measured by Question 18: "I feel little pressure at work." While in the pre-training survey, only 49.2% of workers strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, this percentage increased to 77.3% after the training. These results together with follow up interviews with supervisors and workers suggested that training participants put the knowledge from the Stress Management session about different sources of pressure into practice and were able to more effectively alleviate their own and workers' stress.

Interestingly despite the improvement in the score, the supervisors' score in this question remained the lowest rated question in the survey, suggesting that even though workers experienced relief in the pressure they experienced at the workplace, the reduction might not be sufficient. This is in line with a broader understanding of how production pressures impact on working conditions and point to more structural issues highlighted by industry experts. Best Buy continues to engage with peer companies and industry associations to better understand these additional sources of stress. ➡➡

"The training course on stress management had the greatest impact on me. Before this session started, we were working to meet an urgent delivery date. We were under significant pressure at work ...Attending the stress management course at that time helped me greatly. I used methods introduced in the training to release stress for myself and my team members so that we could get past the most stressful period."

- PARTICIPANT

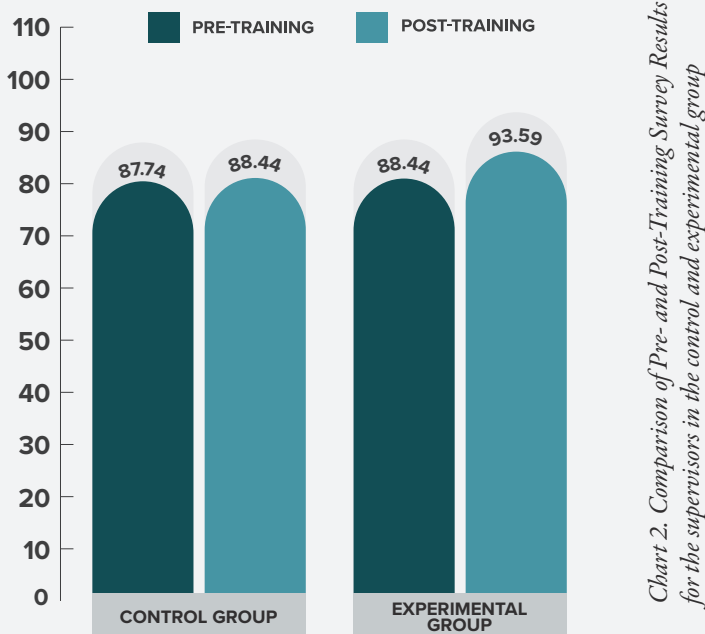
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APPLYING THE RCT METHOD HELPED TO ESTABLISH EVIDENCE THAT IMPROVEMENT IN SUPERVISOR BEHAVIORS COULD BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE TRAINING PROGRAM, RATHER THAN OTHER FACTORS

The experimental group was found to **outperform the control group in every question** on the 22-question post training survey. As Chart 2 shows, the overall score given to those supervisors who participated in the training by workers grew from 88.48 to 93.59. By contrast, the scores of the control group remained mostly unchanged. As the two groups had comparable knowledge and skill levels and received a similar score from workers before the training, this suggests that the change in supervisors' behavior can be attributed to the training.

response to Question 5: "My supervisor respects me" 95.5% of workers in the experimental group either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement compare to 91.7% of workers in the control group. With regards to communication, 90.9% of workers in the experimental group agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "My supervisor responds to the issues, problems and suggestions we raise actively and handles them well" (Question 7) compare to 86.1% of workers in the control group.

IMPROVEMENT IN SUPERVISORS' SURVEY RESULTS

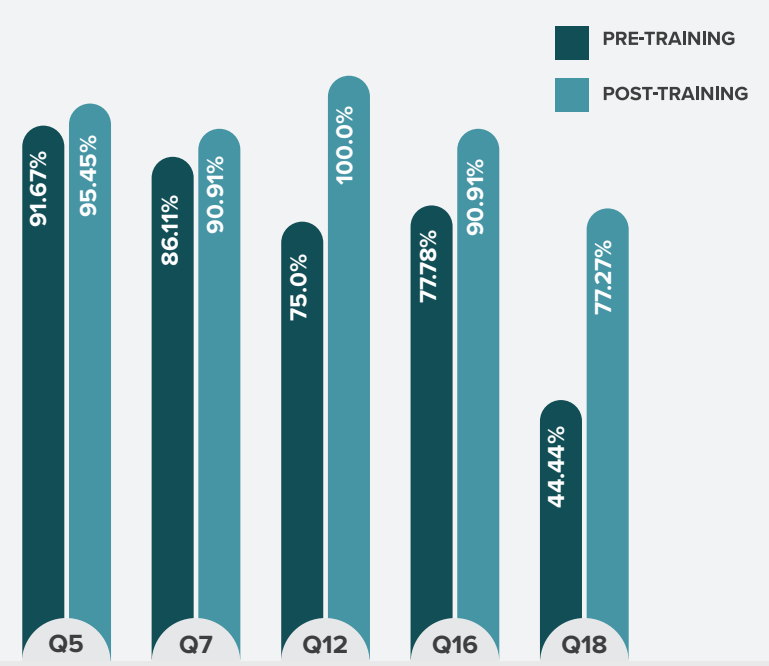


The methodology allowed the company to look at specific changes in different aspects of relationships, which included:

- **Respect and open communication.** Post-training survey revealed small improvements in the way supervisors who undertook the training treated workers in this respect. In

- **Empathy.** In Question 12, all the workers in the experimental group agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "My supervisor pays attention to workers' emotions when s/he criticizes workers," compared to 75% of workers in the control group.
- **Fair treatment.** In Question 16: "My supervisor is just and fair and applies a consistent standard of rewarding and punishing," where 90.9% of workers in the experimental group agreed or strongly agreed with the statement compared to 77.8% of workers in the control group.
- **Stress in the workplace.** The biggest differences in the performance of the two supervisor groups in the post-training worker survey were observed once again in relation to Question 18 "I feel little pressure at work," for which 77.2% of workers in the experimental group expressed agreement, compared to 44.4% of workers in the control group. ➡➡

Chart 3. Comparison of Post- Training Survey Results for the control group and the experimental group



QUESTIONS KEY

QUESTION 5: My supervisor respects me.

QUESTION 7: My supervisor responds to the issues, problems and suggestions we raise actively and handles them well.

QUESTION 12: My supervisor pays attention to workers' emotions when s/he criticizes workers.

QUESTION 16: My supervisor is just and fair and applies a consistent standard of rewarding and punishing.

QUESTION 18: I feel little pressure at work.

Note: The graph depicts the percentage of workers who replied "strongly agree" or "agree" in response to the statement in a selected question.

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INCORPORATING INSIGHTS FROM WORKER AND SUPERVISOR INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS ALLOWED FOR A MORE IN-DEPTH UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRAINING OUTCOMES.

Building a variety of participative methods into the evaluation, including group and one-on-one interviews, allowed Best Buy and Verité to gain a meaningful understanding of how the knowledge supervisors gained in the training translated into their practices and behaviors both within and outside of the workplace. Insights were of two types:

- ⦿ **First, insights that add detail and nuance to the data gathered via the worker survey.** For example, with regards to the open communication finding, dialogue with workers revealed that supervisors were now using a more comforting and respectful tone when talking to workers, and displaying more patience when explaining problems to workers and when looking for solutions. With regards to the findings about greater empathy supervisors showed much more care and consideration for workers'

wellbeing, including inquiring about workers' problems at home.

- ⦿ **Second, insights about unexpected positive changes which the survey was not designed to capture.** Specifically, that workers' behavior towards each other and in their personal lives improved. Both workers and supervisors reported that supervisors who attended the training openly shared their learnings with their colleagues and workers. Some shared techniques they learned in meetings before starting their shift; others circulated the learning materials and homework. Workers shared that seeing supervisors' enthusiasm and improved behavior had motivated them to take more initiative and help each other more. One worker also shared that her supervisor's focus on praising workers had inspired her to apply the same approach towards her partner in her personal life. ➡➡

“Aligning Best Buy’s strategy to the UN Guiding Principles meant that we wanted to engage with workers directly. This required a shift in the team’s mindset about the purpose of our work and the importance of worker voice in evaluating outcomes.”

- HAMLIN METZGER, SR. DIRECTOR, HUMAN RIGHTS, BEST BUY

NEXT STEPS

This work has given Best Buy the confidence that a training program that overtly targets supervisors’ behaviors can improve the quality of relationships between workers and supervisors.

Since the pilot and RCT, the Program was expanded to three more factories. Building on the learnings from the original two pilots, the Program continued to deliver the training in two sets of sessions with a month’s break in between to give participants time to put the knowledge into practice.

Best Buy’s Corporate Responsibility Team was part of the Program from the beginning and observed the training sessions in person. This not only allowed the team to learn from the content but also to create a stronger partnership with the sourcing factories. The team has recently been trained in conducting pre- and post-training surveys themselves, allowing Verité to focus on delivering the training. This has helped the company to reduce the cost of the Program per factory and to create conditions for scaling it up further in the next two years. Having an evidence-

based assessment of the Program’s strengths has increased factories’ interest in the Program.



This case study is the first of three focusing on quality of relationships developed by Shift as part of the Valuing Respect project. To access other resources of this series, visit valuingrespect.org.

ENDNOTES

¹ The factory employed 126 workers and 33 managers, including base level supervisors. Out of 126 workers, 110 workers participated in the pre-training survey out of which 107 submitted valid questionnaires. 65 of workers were under management of 11 supervisors in the experimental group and remaining 42 were supervised by 11 supervisors in the control group. Out of 58 workers who participated in the post-training survey, 22 were in the experimental group and 36 were in the control group. A closer look into survey data did not suggest any bias, meaning that there is no evidence that responses of those workers who remained in the factory after the training diverged from the responses of those who participated in the survey before the training.

ABOUT SHIFT

Shift is the leading center of expertise on the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Shift's global team of experts works across all continents and sectors to challenge assumptions, push boundaries and redefine corporate practice in order to build a world where business gets done with respect for people's dignity. We are a non-profit, mission-driven organization headquartered in New York City.

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ABOUT VALUING RESPECT PROJECT

Valuing Respect Project is a global collaborative platform, led by Shift, to research and co-create better ways of evaluating business respect for human rights. Our aim is to develop tools and insights that can help both companies and their stakeholders focus their resources on actions that effectively improve outcomes for people. Valuing Respect is generously funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Finland, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Norges Bank Investment Management.

 [valuingrespect.org](https://www.valuingrespect.org)