

Worker – Management Communication in China



Management participate in workshop at supplier factory in China.

‘Freedom to associate’ involves workers’ representatives, employers and unions freely discussing issues at work to reach agreements that are acceptable for everyone.

Over the last seven years, Pentland’s Corporate Responsibility team has worked with major suppliers in China to improve worker-management communication in factories. Participatory techniques have been used to build trust and open up dialogue. This enables both workers and employers to understand each other’s problems better and find ways to resolve them.

A typical project involves a team of specialist consultants working with managers, supervisors and workers over several days to

identify common interests. Together they identify problems in the factory, which may include too much overtime, high turnover of workers, or food waste in the canteen. The consultants work with the factory to improve communication skills and develop structures to tackle these problems. Local resources in mainland China to support these sorts of initiatives, however, remains scarce.

The strength of participatory techniques (such as films, games and role play) is that they help

people to open up and talk. The sessions are designed to be fun. Laughter often helps break down the barriers that stop people communicating well. They also provide opportunities for constructive, rather than confrontational, discussion.

To be fully effective, this type of project must work in the interests of both workers and management so all participants see the need and potential value. It should also be aligned with the current political and social situation in a country. For example, structural changes (particularly in South China) have impacted negatively on many factories. Unless management develops tools to manage these situations, their business may not survive. Under China’s 2008 Labour Contract Law, management are required to consult with worker representatives on issues that affect workers, such as working practices, pay and hours, benefits, health and safety.

We also realise that these projects are unlikely to have lasting effects if they are not supported by local and national governments, industry infrastructure, local and international human rights organisations.

What does success look like? It is when workers find a voice and a forum for airing their concerns and continuing the dialogue. As their confidence grows, leaders emerge to help keep the process dynamic and ongoing.