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BANTAI Industries: People-centred policies in the textile industry

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Case 2: BANTAI Industries: People-centred policies in the textiles industry ¹

BANTAI Industries Private Limited is a Bangladeshi company that manufactures baseball caps for the US market at its factory in Kalyanpur, Dhaka. Twelve production line supervisors oversee 370 machine operators and operator assistants. Ninety-two per cent of the employees are women.

The CEO of the company, Mr. Muhammad Saidur Rahman, has over two decades of experience working for relief and development agencies in Bangladesh, including the Red Cross and Oxfam. Mr. Saidur and his management team believe that the basic rights of workers to a safe and healthy work environment, as well as a fair wage and freedom from exploitation, are as important as corporate productivity and profitability. They also believe business should take responsibility for providing social services for workers such as basic health care and family planning, and education for children. BANTAI emphasizes human empowerment and the right of all people to fulfil their potential. It creates a workforce with high self-esteem.

Most BANTAI workers come from rural areas. In order to prevent accidents, these young women are given several days' orientation in the use of sewing machines before they start their in-house training programme. A female doctor from Dhaka Community Hospital visits the factory at least once a week to provide treatment, guidance and advice to the workers. An NGO called *Concerned Women for Family Planning* provides advice and contraception. There is a day-care centre for infants and a non-formal primary school for 90 children. Through discussion meetings and individual counselling, BANTAI raises workers' awareness of important social issues affecting women such as dowry, marriage and divorce.

BANTAI is a successful company, and its management believes that increased productivity and profitability is due to the company's welfare and social development programmes. Staff turnover is very low, and absenteeism is less than 1 per cent. The workers have a sense of full participation, ownership and organizational commitment. There has never been a strike, unrest or agitation in the company since it was formed in 1990. Product quality is exceptionally high, with a rejection rate of less than 0.15 per cent, compared with the industry average of 2.5 per cent.

BANTAI and its workers are doing their best to sustain their success. But they want to do more. They feel that as a member of society they have to promote their experience and corporate values. First, BANTAI management is trying to promote people-oriented practices, including women's health practices, within the country's business community. Mr. Saidur was able to convince managers to follow BANTAI's example by providing evidence to support the business case for social management programmes. There are now 40 to 50 factories with health programmes and about 20 factories with day-care centres in Bangladesh. Second, BANTAI is promoting its success through national television and the press. Third, Mr. Saidur is sharing his experience in international conferences and workshops. One of them, held in Dhaka in May 2000, was attended by 70 garment factory owners and managers, as well as representatives from MNEs such as Nike, Reebok and Sears. After Mr. Saidur's presentation, some MNEs expressed their willingness to have their subcontractors replicate many BANTAI practices, and during

¹ Source: Choudhury, 2001.

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this workshop the *Social Standards Working Group* was established by 12 companies to share ideas and experience in social management. Mr. Saidur currently coordinates the group and one of its first tasks was the publication of *Guidelines for Welfare and Development Programmes for Factory Workers*. The publication was co-financed by ILO.

BANTAI's management approach has had a positive impact not only on the firm and its employees, but also in defining the standard for others to follow. Our last case illustrates how a company can take proactive measures to ensure that its suppliers follow people-centred policies.