

Be the opportunity: the heart and soul of corporate social responsibility

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Motthida Chin is a corporate social responsibility (CSR) expert with twenty years' experience setting up remediation programmes for major international sportswear and luxury brands in ten countries. She has also worked with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) including the United Nations' International Labour Organization (ILO) on the ground in Cambodia to help improve working conditions for factory workers.

Abstract

Companies engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a way to strengthen their business objectives and demonstrate their commitment towards ethical labour practices, safe working conditions and equitable trade. There are many methods to achieve these objectives, and success is often expressed quantitatively. Throughout my twenty years of CSR practice and counsel, however, I have found that while the quantitative success is important for all parties involved to co-operate willingly, to meet objectives, the heart and soul of effective CSR is essentially about relationship building that fuels opportunities for workers, in particular for women and girls in the workplace and in their communities.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility (CSR); ethical labour practices; equitable trade; working conditions

My Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Beginnings: Corporations to Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs)

My trajectory with CSR is one of personal passion and a professional devotion to helping vulnerable people around the world experience improved working conditions. I am fortunate to have witnessed CSR from the perspectives of both corporations and NGOs.

My first lesson in CSR was working at Nike in 1996 at a time when high-profile labour issues such as sweatshops and child labour were just starting to emerge, prompting many companies to act to improve labour working conditions around the world.

This exposure to managing complex labour issues helped prepare me for my next post, which was also in a highly volatile climate.

A haunted past: surviving the Khmer Rouge

I was born in Cambodia and lived through the harsh reality of a genocide that took the lives of my parents, family members and friends. I struggled to survive at an early age. During this time, I worked alongside my mother planting rice all day without breaks, but the rice was not for us. I survived only because of my mother's daily food ration, which was comprised of mainly water and a few grains of rice. After only a short period, the rice soup could not sustain both of us, so my mother sent me away to friends in a village nearby. I never saw my mother again. I was four years old, living on the street and scavenging through trash for food. All I could think about was how to survive.

When the war in my country ended in 1979, I reconnected with remaining family who had emigrated to the United States. It was because of them that I got a second chance at life, and educational opportunities that led to a career dear to my heart.

Meeting the workers: becoming their opportunity

My childhood experience helped shaped how I practise CSR in countless ways.

When I see a child or young person working, it takes me back to the four-year-old me living on the street scavenging in garbage for food.

When I see a worker being yelled at by a supervisor, I imagine the scared little four-year-old me, alone, trying to survive on the street in a war zone. I can continue about all the labour issues I see, but my objective has always been about how to give these workers the same opportunities that I have had: to be heard, to escape being vulnerable to abuse and to find a way towards a better life.

The work that I do helps provide their opportunity.

My second position hit home for me. In 2002, I returned to Cambodia to work as the first Project Manager of the United Nations' International Labour Organization (ILO) Garment Sector Project, now known as Better Factories Cambodia (BFC). Cambodia and the United States entered into a Bilateral Textile Agreement that linked export quotas with potential annual increases for substantially improving working conditions and respect for basic workers' rights. The ILO was commissioned to oversee its execution.

The BFC and its remediation programme were the first of their kind to be implemented by the ILO, which combined monitoring with training aimed at improving working conditions, quality and productivity through management and worker training in relevant skills.

During this time, I met numerous garment factory workers. It was impossible not to see my younger self reflected in these women and girls, and I passionately wanted them to have the same opportunities of education and advancement that had been given to me.

An 'Aha' moment: fixing issues and relationship building

Shortly after the programme started, my team realised that remediation was not just about fixing the issues. To get sustainable results, it also required a lot of hand-holding, patience and persistence, combined with clear communication over many on-site visits with management and workers.

Success in CSR can be distilled down to one key factor: relationship building. I was constantly occupied with training my team of local staff, international factory managers and workers, in addition to interacting with the subject matter experts (buying brands, government officials, United Nations representatives, NGOs, unions and business associations) who were all new to the concept of corporate social responsibility and remediating workplace conditions.

Throughout this role, I negotiated with and leveraged stakeholders to improve working conditions for the workers in complex multicultural environments. I was their voice and their opportunity.

Many challenges came from all corners: the international experts preaching theoretical concepts in a country struggling with its education system, ILO headquarters questioning my experiences in CSR, government officials not listening to me when I spoke Khmer (probably because I was a Cambodian woman advising them on best practices) and factory management intentionally serving me tea in the office so I would not have the opportunity to roam around the factory. As a result, it took quite a bit of time before my team of local staff became comfortable coming to me for help or to ask questions. As for the workers, they looked up to me with a glimpse of a smile . . . a sign of hope . . . and we understood what it meant.

Negotiating For Improved Work Conditions: Factories

Relationships in unexpected times and places: getting to know factory managers at teatime and over lunch

While these circumstances seemed like obstacles, they became opportunities for me to strengthen my negotiation skills. For example, teatime became a critical time for information gathering from management. This is, by far, one of the most challenging aspects of any CSR programme. As I teach auditors today, management is the gatekeeper. If that gate is not open, you will not get what you need.

Getting accurate information from management requires skills to understand their business, their motivation and background. Taking a break from the busy schedule to have tea is invaluable in many cultures. Not knowing about this is a missed opportunity to build relationships with management.

During teatime, I heard about where the tea came from, along with which country or province the factory manager's family came from.

This conversation could be an hour's diversion from the objective of the visit. You might ask, 'What does this have to do with CSR?' The answer is, the time spent having tea with management provided me with critical insights for future communication and interaction on subjects such as where the manager was from (usually another country), details about his family and his business approach, all of which lent themselves to building the relationship.

Most importantly, it built an environment of trust. It was not long before I began looking forward to teatime.

On subsequent factory visits, I always found something unique about that particular factory as a way to connect.

At lunchtime, I overheard the factory owner saying that he liked to cook and makes his own lunch, so I asked to join him.

While we prepared our lunch, we talked about the types of food we like, ingredients and preparation techniques, until lunch was ready.

As we ate, something prompted him to talk about his factory situation, how a brand customer had reduced orders and, as a result, decreased business in that sector. He explained that managers and supervisors lack the skills to make all the changes that my team requested and that the buyers are constantly asking how many issues have been fixed.

I listened until lunch was finished and, while walking back to the conference room, I asked him if he would like to participate in our next training.

The factory owner did come to the training with his human resources manager, a line leader, a worker and the country buyer representative.

The original programme process did not call for equal participation by management and workers or for any participation from buyers. However, I took a chance at this approach after observing how much interaction was needed between the two parties, with the goal of creating a collaborative environment for management, workers and buyers to discuss workplace conditions.

I now realised I was creating a committee to work on a workplace improvement programme and a forum for buyers to share CSR practices.

These examples also clarified something essential about CSR work: to establish trust, you need to build relationships, and those relationships can be found at unexpected times and unexpected places.

The buy-in: simple fix, big impact

One time, as we toured a production area, I noticed an elderly woman collecting garbage from each of the workstations and emptying it into a heavy cardboard box that she manually pushed and pulled from one workstation to another.

I estimated that this box was five times her size and almost full. I could tell it was not easy for her to move the box. I asked my team what they were seeing. One eagerly commented, 'This is good, the factory is collecting garbage regularly'. Then I asked the same question of the factory owner and line leader, and they said that this particular worker has been working for them for many years and that she does her job very well.

I asked everyone again, more specifically, about what they thought of the cardboard box she was pushing along the production line. They said it was a sturdy box that works very well. I asked the worker representative to ask the worker about the cardboard box, and if she had anything to say about the box.

She said that her back hurt from pushing the heavy box, and she was tired at the end of the day. The factory owner moved in closer to listen. Then I asked another question. What can we do with the cardboard box to

make her work much easier? I asked everyone to pretend for a moment that this was their daughter, son or another family member doing the job: 'What would you do to make this better?'

My team suggested using a smaller cardboard box. The factory owner turned to me and asked if I had any recommendations, particularly anything I had seen during other factory visits. I made a suggestion to build a cart with wheels.

The next time I visited the factory, I could not immediately understand why the factory owner looked so excited. He said he had something to show me. He took me back to the production line, and the woman who was collecting trash was there.

She was pushing a cart with wheels! She had a smile on her face. She turned over to me and said 'Arkoun bong' ('Thank you, big sister' in Khmer). I told her to thank the factory owner, not me.

After this visit, my team began to draft 'good practice' sheets from the notes and photos they had taken, so other factories could learn from each other.

Persistence: check and recheck

I replicate this concept every time I am on a factory walkthrough.

When I see fire extinguishers, I point them out to my team, management and workers, and then ask, 'What can we do better here?' When I see a fire evacuation map, I ask the workers: 'What is this? If you hear a fire alarm ringing, please explain and then show me what you would do.'

I also ask about the team's current location on the map in relation to nearby exit doors. We attempt to open the emergency exit doors, which I have learned are often locked. 'The supervisor has the key', someone usually says. And my usual reply is, 'Let's go get the key'.

Once, we backtracked our way through the warehouse and production lines, even taking a short cut in the elevator. It took twenty minutes to reach our destination, only to find the supervisor not in his office, with the door closed and locked.

At the closing meeting, we made sure the supervisor was present. His reply was what I expected: 'We lock this door to prevent people that don't work here from coming in and out and, most importantly, to protect the finished products.'

I made a suggestion. I remembered a picture of a door with a push bar on the inside that, when pushed, opens immediately, while always remaining locked from the outside. I explained to the supervisor that I would follow up right away when I got back to the office with a picture of this door and any other materials that might be helpful in planning an appropriate evacuation route.

I sent the supervisor the materials and followed up with a short phone call the next day. The supervisor informed me that it would take a few weeks for the parts to come in, but he would be sure to keep the emergency exit door unlocked in the meantime and station a guard by the door. 'OK', I replied, 'let's talk again when you get the parts in'. A week passed and I called him again. He informed me that the parts had come and that he would have the maintenance person work on it soon. 'Great, please send me photos of progress this afternoon.'

As you can see from this example, CSR is a continuous learning process of checking and rechecking – frequently and consistently. It means checking every bathroom stall, shaking the soap container to see if there is any soap inside, washing your hands to see if the water is hot or cold, opening the emergency exit doors, opening the first aid kit and scanning for any expired dates.

At each factory visit or follow-up phone call, check on it again, ask for progress and if the issues keep happening, try something different. Give the factory a template, or ask the factory to send the template back to you for review weekly, monthly or by some definitive timeline. Or take it a step further and create resource materials, like the Occupational Safety and Health Manual available in three languages.

Conflicting morals: the culturally bound practice of child labour

While my team continued with their routines of visiting and advising the factories, I had to face an issue that conflicted within my heart and the two worlds I live in.

We know this today as child labour, forced labour, slavery . . . but as a child, I knew it as my reality and the only world I knew at the time. It is a practice dictated by a culturally bound tradition of employing children involuntarily.

When the war in Cambodia ended in 1979, my childhood vulnerability continued. I was living with my aunt-in-law in the southern part of Cambodia while she was busy working out-of-town. I was five years old. At 5 a.m., I was up mixing waffle batter to cook and sell at a food stall near the town school.

I would do this until 10 a.m. before meeting up with a group of villagers going to the mountain to collect firewood for cooking. This mountain was infamous for its hidden land mines. I was afraid of stepping on the mines, so I was never able to collect enough firewood, plus I was too small to carry very much, and that was not all I had on my agenda for the day.

At 2 p.m., I headed out to collect water for washing and preparing the food. I grabbed empty buckets tied to a long bamboo stick and slung them over my right shoulder. Under the hot sun, I went to a water well – a journey of about an hour each way. I filled the buckets and walked back. With no lids, the water spilled with every step I took. By the time I got home, two hours later, both buckets were nearly empty.

With water and firewood, it was now time to prepare dinner for grandma, her two daughters and a niece my age living with us. With the money I had made from selling the waffles, they brought home a live chicken from the market for me to prepare. I had no other choices. My aunt was far away in another town. I had no way to contact her to tell her that I was being overworked. I did not even know if she would have cared.

By 9 p.m., I would crawl into bed, a hard bamboo floor in a corner of a hut. This routine repeated over two years, rotating between selling waffles, roasted peanuts, shaved ice, rice and fish . . . 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. was work time.

There was no time for school, books, pencils or teachers. Playtime for me meant climbing the coconut trees, harvesting rice and playing with clay . . . making chalk. Somehow, I had a school uniform (blue skirt and white shirt) that I wore every day because that was the only clothing I had, plus a pair of flip-flops.

Now, as an adult, during a factory walkthrough, I spotted a few younger workers in the corner of the warehouse, sitting on the floor. I asked human resources for their personnel files and requested that my team check their name badges against the records. I asked human resources why they did not call this out, why they do not see what I saw.

'Bong,' ('big sister' in Khmer) 'if we call it out every time, there would not be many workers left in the factory and you know better what life is like in the villages. It's easy to get a document that shows how old you are. This job means a lot to them, it's their freedom. They are the primary caregivers for their entire family. They feel valuable to their family when they can contribute like this.'

Their answer had me teary-eyed as I reflect back to the five-year-old me living in the village with grandma. We had to report it. 'But the factory can't just send them back home', I thought, even though it would be an easy compliance check-off.

Over the next few days, my boss and I went to visit some schools near the factory provinces. As a result, a process of child labour remediation was put in place. It was a good plan – it involved the buyers, factory, schools and parents supporting their children to go back to school and to be rehired when they reached the legal working age.

Sharing good practice: reward programme

I had many things to learn while I was explaining an employee-of-the-month reward programme to a factory manager.

As I talked, the factory manager looked increasingly disinterested. 'We have work to do, there is no time for things like this.' I wanted to continue with more questions, but I listened instead and continued to walk behind him as we wrapped up the factory tour. I did not have any substantial proof to show him how the reward programme would work for his factory.

When we got back to the office, I had a discussion with the audit team manager. I asked him if he was aware of any reward programmes in his experience auditing factories: 'Yes. We were just at a factory last week, a nice factory. The general manager is from Europe. Near the canteen, we saw a few photos of workers on a board labelled "Employee of the Month" in English and Khmer language.'

The next day, we visited the factory. The European general manager greeted us at the security gate. We received our brand new 'VIP VISITOR' badges, as we typically would. Then one of my colleagues whispered, 'From our training on quality, I remember the expert said that quality starts from the moment you enter the factory gate. I think this will be a very good factory'.

My colleague was right – the factory was quite good and we saw great quality right away. It is no different from having the entrance of your house look nice. I use this analogy often. A visitor to a factory is another set of eyes. Imagine your house. You live in it for so long that you do not see things the same as a visitor would. Similarly, if you work there every day, you get used to certain routines. When you visit someone else's home, you respect their rules. If the house has a no shoes policy, take your shoes off. If the factory wants you to wear earplugs in a noisy restricted area and you do not like the ones they provide, then bring your own. Respect each business as you would respect your home. Offer feedback respectfully.

The general manager asked us what we wanted to see first: 'We appreciate you coming. How can we help you?' By the tone of his message, I felt at home right away. I told him that we were there to learn and that I wanted to show my team an example of an excellent factory.

He showed us the employee handbook and training records. Then, we walked over to the employee-of-the-month area. I asked if we could take a photo of the relevant pages as documentation of good practices, to which he kindly agreed.

As a follow-up, I sent the general manager a thank you email. His reply was, 'You're welcome. Please let me know if you need anything else and I am open to welcoming visits by other factories'.

Measurable results: production efficiency

We were excited to share all the good practices we learned, except that we had something new coming our way – production efficiency. The productivity module taught us that time study, workflows, lean manufacturing and avoidance of bottlenecks, if all properly executed, could potentially yield higher productivity.

One particular factory had many health and safety issues to manage. Right away, we noticed the rusty 'VIP VISITOR' badge clip and my colleague whispered, 'We have a lot of work ahead of us. Don't expect quality here'.

We parked inside the factory gate. Three workers that had come to our trainings, one of which was a woman lead worker, greeted us. The woman was quiet yet outspoken – we connected right away.

The workers took us to the warehouse first, which we entered wearing dust masks. Then to the production trimming area, where they proudly highlighted three red plastic stools that had been added because several workers complained about their tired, achey feet.

I walked around the tables a few times, surveying how the workers were resting their feet, and noticed another issue. There were no footrests. I called the team over to explain the situation:

See here, she is using a cardboard box to rest her feet because her feet get tired from standing for too many hours. She is also standing on a hard cement floor and her flip-flops are worn out. Can we get shorter stools? I bet these would also be of great use as footrests. Maybe the maintenance person could add a footrest bar around the table? What about the leftover fabric you have, does it go in the garbage? Why don't we use it to make cushions for the workers' feet, or do we know where we can order rubber fatigue mats for everyone? I remember seeing fatigue mats at a factory earlier.

I moved closer to the lead worker: 'Please use your current production template to monitor, separately, the one table with the added stools and foot support versus the tables with no changes. We want to do a time study, for a month.' Her eyes lit up.

Strangely, we had visited this factory many times but had not met with management. I called the country buyer representative to let her know about the situation and to explain that we needed her support to escalate and expedite some of the remediation efforts.

A week later, we went back to the factory and were greeted by the same three workers. However, we were surprised when the team leader said, 'We will start our meeting in our manager's office. Our manager wants to explain something to you'.

We followed the team leader to a corner cubicle office with a view of the production floor. The buyer representative with whom I had spoken earlier in the week was also there. As the manager talked, the buyer representative translated between Chinese and English. My team then translated from English to Khmer, so the workers could understand. The manager showed us some documents – the production records we had talked about earlier. He said:

Over a period of a week, my team lead tracked some changes in output as your team recommended. We provided workers with foot supports and stools to sit when they feel tired from standing, and it showed that they were able to produce 15% more. We want to try to monitor this for a few more weeks, and extend this monitoring to all the tables in her area. Also, we want to have the correct foot support. Can you help us to find out where we can get the fatigue mats? We need a lot of them as they would be useful for other work areas like cutting and quality control, too.

The factory manager invited our team and the buyer representative to his factory again. I was pleasantly surprised to see that the rusty visitor badge had been replaced and was brand new. The manager greeted us and then let us go on to do the factory tour with the workers. He also made sure that we checked in before leaving the factory.

Most importantly, his factory was able to show a further 15% increase in productivity, representing a 30% total increase in productivity in less than a month. I reported this to my manager, and as I reviewed the records of all the factories in the programme, only this one had quantified the impacts.

I invited this factory manager to speak at our last training module on continuous improvement. We received many expressions of interest. Between the 30% increase in productivity and the European-run factory that had many good practices to share, we had everyone in the room listening, particularly the buyers, sponsors and our programme review team. The project was noted as successful, with measurable results in production efficiency.

Negotiating for Improved Work Conditions: Headquarters

Another important stakeholder: relationship building with corporate buyers

After my time in Cambodia, I was assigned to cover company headquarters. Factory visits were less frequent, and there were fewer face-to-face interactions with factory managers and workers. This may sound like I had moved on from helping workers, but in actuality, I discovered another layer of relationship building and trust to amend.

Engagement with the sourcing team is necessary at headquarters. If there are workplace issues or general requests to visit factories, they need to be communicated to the sourcing team. I had to rethink how to work together in the new team environment that extends beyond headquarters to the liaison offices in many countries. How would my voice be heard and how would the workers' voices be heard?

Then, I remembered the conversations with the buyer representative (sourcing and quality manager) with whom I had spoken with in Cambodia. I realised how important a role they play in bridging company and factory CSR agendas. When I started to share information about workplace improvements and production efficiency, she became much more interested and involved.

I began sharing information about CSR with the sourcing team: this factory did great with their last audit; management was very co-operative and showed us everything.

One factory even invested money in a local school and contributed money for a hospital to expand services to accommodate more patients, so more workers could go there when they got sick.

Another factory was over capacity because orders came in late, which caused a production backlog meaning that workers had to work overtime every day to meet delivery times.

All of a sudden, there was a connection, a linkage between what we all do. We were on the same team all this time:

Hey, you will be going to the factory and I can't this time – please take this visual checklist with you. It's a simple five-minute task. Use it while you are there checking the production status. Let me know how the factory is doing when you get back.

Oh, you are going to the factory that week – I will schedule my visit at the same time. Hopefully while you negotiate the pricing I can meet up with their CSR team and we can all have a closing meeting together. And one last thing, I need your support to have a conversation with the general manager about overtime . . .

I started to speak their language, and they started to speak mine. As a result, we developed a scorecard that took a holistic view of a factory's quality, pricing, delivery, CSR, overall co-operation and transparency.

A no-win situation: exiting a factory

A factory had had an audit earlier in the month.

When we got there, it was clear that the factory had not been visited by anyone from the client or CSR. I would not have enough paper in my notebook to note all the health and safety issues found, and that was just what was visible.

Most importantly, I noticed small size shoes, but we did not see any kids working. We asked the factory manager about the kids' shoes, but he said that they were just from the day care centre nearby. He said the kids must have forgotten about their shoes when they came to see their mothers at lunchtime.

I informed headquarters of the situation right away. The sourcing team and CSR talked together with the factory manager, and we got the same answer. Clearly, the factory manager had something more to tell us but chose not to. Clearly, he did not care about the working conditions at the factory he subcontracted to.

As we walked through the factory, I pointed out a few of the most urgent issues, such as blocked aisles and bundles piled high everywhere to the point that I could barely see the workers, let alone any kids.

The factory manager seemed disinterested and had multiple side conversations. I did not even make it to the closing meeting. That night, I called my manager, who talked with the sourcing lead, and then we all talked with the factory.

I drafted an urgent action plan to give to the factory. It stated, under weekly and monthly deadlines, the tasks that needed to be completed urgently.

At the end of the week, there was no movement from the factory. I called to follow up. My team in the liaison office called to follow up. Nothing. In the end, we had no choice but to exit the factory. All I could think about was the workers inside the factory. I had not made their voices heard. I was devastated. I could not apply the child labour plan or the health and safety plan there. Instead, I focused on improving policies for onboarding factories. If the contract comes incomplete or if factory information is not listed correctly, do not place orders!

The Greater Community: Beyond the Factory Gate

Giving back: trash to shirts

I have talked a lot about what goes on inside the factory gate and in the offices, but I have not touched on the work that goes on outside the factory gate – among the greater community of the workers.

While we were visiting a factory, one of the local CSR specialists noticed several bundles of unused fabric that the factory would usually discard. He had a conversation with the factory manager as we finished the factory tour.

Several months later, I visited the factory again with the CSR specialist.

We went straight to a production line, and he grabbed a few shirts right away to show me. I asked him what was so special about the shirts, and then I started to remember the leftover fabric from our last trip. 'These must be for the workers', I commented. The factory manager replied:

No, they are for kids living in an orphanage. The workers have been staying an hour after their shift to get these shirts sewed. It was actually their idea. One of the workers here lives near an orphanage and she suggested this idea to me after overhearing our conversation about the leftover fabric.

We packed up the shirts and headed to the orphanage. I insisted that the worker that suggested the idea came with us.

When we got there, the kids were standing waiting for us on the dirt floor with no shoes. Some had shirts, but they were soiled and stained. Others, especially the younger ones, did not have shirts, just shorts. There were about twenty-five children at the orphanage.

I was reminded again of my years spent living in the village in Cambodia during and after the war. We passed out the shirts to each of the children. In my heart, I wished there was more to give. I did not have anything else with me at the time. I looked in my purse and found some money, which I gave to the orphanage. The factory owner who came with us also donated some money. He said that he would continue to support the orphanage in whatever way he could. He also has children.

Continuous Improvement: Sustainability

A shared responsibility: be their opportunity

We are all part of the CSR community. From the workers on the factory floor or in the field to the factory managers, government officials, corporate heads, CSR experts, NGOs and ultimately as consumers, we all have a role to play in ensuring that the products we consume have been ethically and fairly sourced.

We also all have a story. I have shared a little of my story, and some of the stories of all the people who gave me opportunities that took me from my impoverished childhood to a position in which I am empowered to provide women and girls who may find themselves in similar desperate circumstances with the opportunity for safe and fair working conditions, and ultimately a better life.

Whatever your story, we all understand that no one achieves success in a vacuum. We are where we are not only through our own dedication and hard work, but because, somewhere along the line, someone gave us an opportunity – a job, a promotion, a fresh start or just an ear to listen to our ideas and encourage us to move forward with them.

The heart and soul of effective CSR is about being that opportunity.