

The Greek Chorus- second variation

Children are children

Shame on you shame

On the backs of children

You have no business

Doing business there

Where profiteers

Or worse and worse

Run rampant

Shame on you shame shame

It's amazing to me how simple it may seem, how quick to judgement you people are, how to the casual observer, it looks like we are callous, unfeeling, and without ethical boundaries of our own. That's the real issue you see - it would be much easier if we were without ethics, and just flat out mercenary, but we are not. It is ironic that we of all companies are even in this position. If it didn't hurt so much it would be laughable.

What did you expect

A polite thank you

They are foreigners

For God's sake

You are naïve

God I wish you people would cease and desist with these stupid comments. It only confuses and exacerbates a complex situation. This is the background:

We came late into the soccer ball business in the '90s and by that time the industry was pretty much centered in the Sialkal region of Pakistan. The same fingers that can weave rugs turned out to be just right for stitching soccer balls. In fact, the stitching tradition goes back to when the British horse saddle manufactures in the mid-1800s were established in this very same region.

Ah ha

Corporate kingdom

One kind of imperialism

Just like another

Admit it admit it

I admit nothing but that we wanted to do business there only if we could do so under terms consistent with the values and protocols we had established around the world. I thought we had done that but what happened in those villages caught us unawares. I agree it shouldn't have, but it did. It was embarrassing for the company, and let me tell you after 20 years of putting my all into this work; it was very, very discouraging - although this was hardly the first time.

It didn't surprise us

We told you so

They will cheat

They will steal

They will lie

You should have known

All right, enough already! I'm proud that we were the first major Footwear Company to focus on human rights and labor issues, especially child labor, and have been out front ever since. In fact it is not an exaggeration to say that it was our company's leadership, never mind my own two million airplane miles, that made it happen. I was the one who did the leg work. I was the one who spent months away from home. I was the one who spent endless hours wringing concessions from reluctant, and smart, partners who didn't want to go there. I was the one who brought this to the attention of the other major players in the industry. We had a lot to do with educating the buying public that there were these unacceptable situations out there. At the end of the day, it was the shift in the marketplace that carried the day. Increasingly, customers do not want to buy clothing, sneakers, or soccer balls, made under conditions that are truly unjust or abusive. The tide turned when the moral imperative of human rights joined with the economic imperative of market demand and expectations. When the UN Compact, introduced in 2001 by the UN Secretary General was drawn up, I was part of the team that pushed hard for the inclusion of the human rights provision and the prohibition against the use of child labor. There are now more than 500 corporate signatories to the Compact.

We can't even imagine

What kind of parents

What kind of parents

Work their children

Barbaric, disgusting

Un- American

To say the least

To say the least, that oversimplifies things. None of this is tidy and neat and each choice and decision has a trade-off. Listen for a minute, just this once - try and have an open mind.

The relationships with our local manufacturing partners are not unique. While we do not own any of the factories, we are often the sole customer, and in fact provide the capital to obtain the needed equipment and occasionally the financing to build the facility. In many deals with larger manufacturers we are just one of a number of customers. The work conditions 20 years ago in these factories make the term 'sweatshop' look benign. From the very beginning of the offshore manufacturing cycle, which really took off in the 70s, the American companies knew there were going to be problems. Every time the question of improving workplace conditions was raised, our partners would smile, and say - "if you want to pay the difference, do you want to pay the difference?" I would be hard pressed to say that our local partners had no sensitivity at all to these issues. It was, however, simply not a high priority for them and unless one pushed, they somehow never got any attention. That's what we did- push and push.

Who are you kidding

They don't care

It's all about money

Money money money

No question the price competition in the Footwear industry is brutal, and child labor cost is 20% less than adult cost. That I was part of changing these ways of doing business is something I am proud of. Sometimes, like right now, I wonder.

No good deed goes unpunished

If this was a good deed

How do we even know

The way you know is through compliance, and it is complicated and expensive. Other parts of the world have been really tough. Many factories in China still keep two sets of books, one for the inspectors and one that is real. It has forced us along the way to become more sophisticated, which is what we have done.

We'll believe it when

We see it

If you can't trust partners

Who can you trust

When the New York Times broke the news in January that soccer balls we labeled as "guaranteed not made with child labor," were in fact manufactured by young children, I was angry and frustrated. We had worked on the new protocols for more than two years. It was not easy to get the US industry to agree. I remember a tough meeting in Chicago with all the major players when the vote was only 4 to 3 to establish what became The Atlantic Partnership that included the manufacturers, the Sialkal Chamber of Commerce, and ultimately Save the Children.

I had inspected those very factories just six months ago. The issues are broader than child labor and include air quality, harassment, and safety. The managers had agreed to abide by the terms and reassured me that they would remain in compliance, especially with the use of underage labor.

You should have known

If you did your job

You should have known

Right is right wrong is wrong

And what kind of parent

Lives off the sweat of children

You do not really care

It's all about money market share

It is always about market share but you guys are still wrong on all counts. This is not the first time I have been caught in the paradox of the child labor issue. In many cultures including this one, children are part of the work force at a very early age. Work rules that prevent children from earning hit many very poor families hard. Thus the end run around these rules was not so surprising; it was the scale of what really was a conspiracy that was outrageous.

Disgusting

Have they no values

No love for their children

All for money

That's the point, it is not just money, there are cultural norms that have an even bigger influence. These may be poor people but they are also wise. What is the point of educating children if there are no jobs for them? Why raise expectations when they will never be realized? There is an added concern about girls. Some families worry that an educated girl may have problems with her life, even to the extent of finding a husband. This has been the reality in many parts of the world, and it is a huge obstacle to those societies, never mind to our business. The promulgation by UNICEF and others of universal primary education for all children is slowly changing those attitudes. Meanwhile the practical obstacles are huge. There are 50 million school age children who are not in school in India alone. This region of Pakistan has similar numbers.

You act like that is right

Or fair to those girls

Ignorance breeds ignorance

Where is your moral center

Are you gutless

One's moral center has to be seen through the eyes of an indigenous culture. The line between these cultural norms and a family's economic need for income is hard to separate, especially in the harsh light of limited educational opportunities for children. I agree that when you add in the profit motive, you have quite a mix of things with which to deal. And I still have a major public relations and marketing disaster on my hands. It turned out to be even worse than an accidental violation. The work in question was being done at home by kids and on a regular basis. This was a true conspiracy with multiple factory managers involved. There may even have been some kickbacks. It was a mess.

You intrude

Raise expectations

Are they better off

Bread on the table

All true but for us, certain things remain non-negotiable. We will only do business based on human rights and fair labor protocols that are finally really becoming normative.

The question was what to do. When I met with the managers and representatives of the workers, almost all of them parents, about what makes sense, about what incentive was strong enough to

keep the integrity of the system whole, there was really only one. It was not enough to make rules, right, wrong or indifferent. The ethical issues notwithstanding, if the children couldn't work, then they had to go to school. That is where Save the Children came into the picture. They were already in discussion with The Atlantic Partnership to develop several schools in the area. I did not want to wait around for that to happen and we decided to immediately commit \$1 million to build and support the one school. We made the commitment from the company's charitable Foundation and it had no relevance to the soccer ball line's profitability. It was simply the right thing to do. The school is now up and running and even though it is only one school, and many more are needed, its very existence seems to have become a positive metaphor for change and, I think, hope. So until next time, things have settled down somewhat. But I don't kid myself, there will be a next time.

Did we get the news of the new school on the front page of the New York Times? Of course not, but this is an incremental business and so maybe we have learned something.

We are still not convinced

You have learned anything

Anything worthwhile

For a change

Try staying home

I think it's time for that scotch and water, far way from the annoying Choruses that seem to haunt the airways.