

Ethics
ROY PAULSON—PART 3
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Roy continued to work on the SOPs. One of the major tasks to be analyzed was resetting the electrical transformers and circuit breakers that powered the plant. Large electrical breakers would trip when one of the pieces of equipment overloaded the circuit. According to the manual supplied by the equipment manufacturer, the correct process for resetting the breaker was to remove whatever caused the overload (something caught in a fan, for instance), press the reset button on the bottom of the electrical cabinet door, and then push the breaker back into the “on” position. The problem was that often a breaker would trip for no apparent reason. The equipment was fairly old and had not been well maintained.

Roy watched Jim, an expert maintenance worker, reset one of the transformers. They went down to the electrical room where the breakers were located. The sign on the cabinet read, “Caution--480 Volts.” Jim kicked the reset button on the bottom of the door and pushed the breaker to the “on” position. As soon as he let go of the breaker, it snapped back to the “off” position. Jim tried the process three or four times with the same result.

Looking at Roy somewhat sheepishly, he said, “Look, I’m going to show you how we deal with these resets, but I don’t want you writing it down. It’s not exactly the way it should be done, but it is how we have to do things. We don’t have the time or money to call in an electrician, and we need to keep the system running. This equipment is so old that it doesn’t always do what it is supposed to do. But after working here for so many years, you figure out how to get things done. Watch.”

Jim opened the door to the panel, exposing the equipment inside.

“See down here? The reset button doesn’t make good contact so the breaker won’t reset. We can’t even get parts for these things now, so here’s what we do.”

He took a small piece of broom handle that had been cut to length, placed it against the reset mechanism inside the panel, and wedged it against the door. Then he pushed the door shut. When he moved the breaker to the “on” position, it locked in position.

Roy said, “We can’t put that in the SOP; the regulators will be all over us, not to mention the electricians’ union, OSHA, and everyone else.”

“Look,” said Jim, “It’s not that big a deal. We know what we’re doing; we’ve been doing it for years. We can’t even change a light bulb according to the electricians. Besides Sandra has made it clear that we have to keep costs down if we want to keep

our jobs. Just write the SOP the way the job *should* be done. No one will really know the difference, and we'll be able to keep the place running. Once we get back on our feet, Sandra said that she'll be getting us the new panels, breakers, and all the other parts that we need. She's been good to us, and I trust her." Roy wasn't happy about this and said he'd have to talk with Sandra.

He met her the next day and started to voice his concerns about what he felt were some unsafe practices.

"I watched one of the workers resetting some electrical equipment yesterday, and I'm worried about how it's being done," started Roy.

Sandra interrupted. "I know we have some difficulties with parts and equipment in the electrical distribution area, but we don't have the funds right now to replace them. It is first on my budget list, however, once we get past the regulatory inspections."

Roy continued, "That's good to know, but I'm worried someone could get hurt in the meantime. I saw..."

Again Sandra cut in. "Roy, I appreciate your concern, but, frankly, the details of how the work is done are outside my area of expertise, and I suspect it's outside your expertise, too. I trust the workers to do a good job and do what needs to be done. I think you need to have a little more faith in them. They are the subject matter experts. Let's get the documentation done; we'll clean it up later. I've got to prepare for a management meeting in two days, so I have to go. Ken asked that you stop by his office on your way back to the plant."

Roy found Ken at his desk.

"Come on in; good to see you." After some small talk, Ken got to business. "I've been checking with my contacts but haven't been very successful in finding anyone yet. But I'll tell you an old trick of the trade that's worked for me in the past. MWD seems to have some of the best training systems in place, but, as you might imagine, they're not too willing to share them with us. So here's what you do. Give them a call and tell them you're a student doing a paper on best training practices. They love helping students and are always willing to talk to an interested audience. Just ask some general questions and see if you can come up with an outline of their approach. Nothing detailed; we're not looking for proprietary information or anything, just a general approach. I've done it in the past and usually get good information, sometimes more than I thought I'd need. I'd do it myself, but almost everyone over there would recognize my voice. No one will know you, and it's not like we're asking them to give away secret information. Besides, you really are still a student, aren't you? So it's not like it's a lie, just stretching the facts a bit."

Roy expressed some doubts, but Ken reminded him of the need to finish the training outline within the next week. Roy didn't like the idea of calling MWD, so he

spent two days on the Internet and in the library doing research. He found some good information, but not enough. With the deadline fast approaching, he called MWD.

“Hi, my name is Roy Paulson, and I’m a grad student at the University. I’m doing some research on best training practices and know that MWD is considered a leader in the field. I wonder if you could tell me about...”

They were very open with him and most willing to share their training systems, especially with a grad student. They even invited him to come over and take a look at their operation, an invitation he declined.