

Trust Accounts

“The only thing better than having a problem solved, is having nobody to blame while it remains unsolved.”

By Dan Zahlis

While working as an environmental health and safety manager for a large manufacturing company, I was approached by an employee who asked, “Are you the head safety guy?” Being approached by employees of operating facilities was nothing new to me. Being seen as the “go-to guy” by people I had never met was not uncommon either.

Anyone in the environmental health and safety (EHS) profession can tell you they often are relied upon by line employees to solve problems. Some EHS professionals seem to like, even prefer, this role. My impression of this scenario is that an organization has failed miserably if an unknown person can walk into an operating environment and be viewed as the one to solve local problems. When this happens, the systems have failed.

On one occasion, I answered the “safety guy” question by saying, “No, but it is my responsibility to help the facilities make our company the safest it can be. What might I help you with?” Recognizing he had found his man, the fellow escorted me to a large pothole in the pavement between a processing building and a cold storage warehouse. The fellow then told me that he, and a growing list of others, had sore backs resulting from their forklifts jarring them as they drove over this pothole. I asked my new friend what had been done to resolve this problem and to this he replied, “We’ve talked to everybody, and nobody has done anything. They’re all too busy to worry about us.”

I asked the employee to meet me at the pothole the next day at high noon and bring along anyone

who was interested in solving the problem.

The next day, I approached the source of controversy (the pothole) as the employees mingled about in delight. The leader of the group approached me energetically, telling me, “You are a guy that gets things done. Wow! We have been screaming about this for weeks and you show up and ‘pow!’ it’s fixed.”

At this point, the plant manager and maintenance manager arrived at the newly filled pothole. The first thing the maintenance manager could say was, “Who in the hell filled that hole with cement?” My reply: “I did it last night.”

I then turned to the employee leader and told him that I paid \$12 of my personal money to buy the cement and another \$8 for the hand spade. I told him I was leaving the spade behind for him just in case I bought the wrong cement and it erodes as quickly as their management systems and communication had. I told the entire audience they now were empowered to solve their own problems if a solution was within their grasp and the management systems fail.

This experience, many like it and exposure to the ideas of people like Tom Peters led us to create the Trust Accounts module.

The Trust Accounts module does not have anything to do with financial trusts per se. This module allows organizations to grant employees a fixed amount of financial authority to solve problems when management systems fail. The module allows for the transfer of funds between employee accounts, allowing

employees to pool resources to solve larger problems. The module also requires employees to provide a detailed explanation of the steps taken to solve the problem, how existing systems have failed to remedy the problem, and what can be done to prevent similar system failures in the future.

What Gets Measured

The Trust Accounts module can be used by organizations to quantify communication and system failures. The mere presence of a Trust Account process can improve the performance of other systems and processes. If people are required to illustrate efforts before accessing funds, other systems will be more effectively utilized. The Trust Accounts module can also be used to measure the frequency at which circumvention via empowerment is required to solve problems. Ideal results would reflect a growing accrual within the Trust Account because problems are solved through existing channels and management systems.

What Gets Done

Problems get solved, systems get utilized, communications improve and people gain a sense of control over their work environment. Cultures get strengthened as blame becomes a thing of the past!

This Month's Links

Demo: <http://demo.activeagenda.net/list.php?mdl=tru>

Wiki: http://www.activeagenda.net/documentation/index.php?title=Trust_Account_Module

Forum: <http://www.activeagenda.net/discussions/viewforum.php?f=42>