

THE LOST ART OF THE INTERVIEW

**How auditors can make audits a better
experience**

Why do the words “you are going to be audited” still strike fear into the average person?

We can probably all agree that facing an audit from a revenue or government agency can certainly be intimidating. The same can be said for any type of audit, including quality audits. Often the actual auditors are to blame.

That’s right. As an auditor for 40 years and an auditing instructor for 30 of those years, I blame the way audits are conducted.

There are two important flaws that are made by auditors throughout the world: the approach and the interview.

THE APPROACH: Auditing the good and the bad in manufacturing

For many auditors, the problem with the approach goes back to when they were first trained. Every auditor training course in the world teaches the importance of gathering objective evidence. That is, you must have objective evidence to write a finding, or a non-conformance, if you prefer. Or, if I may be so bold, “...you must have evidence of things done wrong...” before you can write a finding.

However, the definition of an audit finding, according to ISO 19011:2018 para. 3.10, is “results of the evaluation of the collected audit evidence against audit criteria”. That applies to both positive and negative evidence. In other words, it is just as important to have evidence of things done right as it is to have evidence of things done wrong.

And here is the crux of the issue: it is often more difficult to find evidence of things done right versus things done wrong. To be honest, it is easy for a veteran auditor to find things wrong. Quite easy.

Does finding something wrong indicate that the process is completely flawed?

Not at all.

Is anyone or anything perfect?

No. Let me give you an example.

The motion picture Braveheart is regarded as one of the best movies of all time. In 1996, it was nominated for 10 Academy Awards and won 5 of them. Among the wins were Best Picture, Best Director and Best Cinematography. Impressive.

However, in one of the major battle scenes in the movie, there is an automobile visible in the background. A car? In the 13th century? Aha, something wrong! Yet, it won Best Director and Best Cinematography. Finding something wrong does not mean that the system has failed. It simply means it is not perfect and we have an opportunity to make it better.

A good auditor will not stop after finding something wrong. A good auditor will complete their task and judge the system as a whole. Or back to my film analogy, the movie was not “written off” because of a simple mistake. It was judged on its overall performance, which was amazing.

The auditor that forges ahead searching for “the good” in the system after finding something “bad” is the better auditor. And this does not go unnoticed. Operators and auditees see this. They see an auditor not just interested in finding something wrong but looking for evidence to judge the overall effectiveness of the system. Trust me -- this is appreciated.

THE INTERVIEW: Another key to auditor effectiveness

To me, the interview is the most enjoyable part of auditing.

Unfortunately for the operator, it is dreaded. The reason? Again, it is how the auditor conducts the interview. Interviews should not feel like an interrogation. Yet, that is how many people perceive them.

Historically, auditors have been intimidating. I do not see any benefit to that approach whatsoever. It affects the overall integrity of the audit and the profession.

A good auditor has perfected the interview almost to an art form. We want the operator to feel comfortable. Here are a few suggestions to help you make the interview more palatable for the operator:

- First, ensure you are scheduling the interview during the employee's normal working hours, recognizing lunch and break periods. This is especially important when you are on the floor of a factory. Break periods are not just for coffee, but for rest.
- Next, start the interview by putting the operator at ease. Explain the purpose of the audit and the importance of their contribution. Using open body position and language is also a contributor to the experience.
- If you are provided a guide for the audit, ask the guide to stand beside the operator, not beside you. You will be surprised how this simple technique makes the operator feel more relaxed, as the guide is one of their fellow team members.
- Explain any note taking. When you are writing, they assume the worst. I usually make a simple joke as to how bad my memory is, that if I do not record all the great information they are providing, I will have to keep coming back.
- Like that TV detective Columbo, "Ah, just one more thing...". Am I dating myself?
- Another easy way to help remove any tension is to start your questions by asking the operator to describe their work. That is an easy question. They know this.

Now to the listening part. Extremely important. The best auditors are good listeners.

- Start by looking at the interviewee, not your clipboard.
- Use body language to show the operator that you are interested in what they are saying. Instead of saying things like "uh huh" and "hmm", say "I see", "I understand", "very good".
- Finally, when you are finished with the interview, say "Thank you", just like your mom taught you. In reality the operator is helping you, not the other way around. Show them the respect they deserve.
- As author Roy T. Bennett put it: "Respect other people's feelings. It may mean nothing to you, but it could mean everything to them."

An auditor's approach and interview, when done with respect in mind, can help make audits a better experience for everyone, and will improve the effectiveness of the audit.

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* This course is certified by Exemplar Global and meets the training portion of the requirements for QMS Associate Auditor certification.

** This course is certified by Exemplar Global and meets the training portion of the requirements for certification of individual QMS Lead Auditors.

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By Bob Muir, Director of Global Training Services



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