

CONF 9317701

PNL-SA--21343

DE93 009478

INTERVIEW OR INQUISITION: SUCCESSFUL
COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES (OR WHAT DOES
ETHICS HAVE TO DO WITH IT, ANYWAY?)

DISCLAIMER

This report was prepared as an account of work sponsored by an agency of the United States Government. Neither the United States Government nor any agency thereof, nor any of their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately owned rights. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the United States Government or any agency thereof. The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States Government or any agency thereof.

R. C. Pratt

February 1993

Presented at the
1993 Quality Audit Conference
February 25-26, 1993
Charlotte, North Carolina

Prepared for
the U.S. Department of Energy
under Contract DE-AC06-76RLO 1830

Pacific Northwest Laboratory
Richland, Washington 99352

RECEIVED
FEB 19 1993
0 10 11

MASTER

DISTRIBUTION OF THIS DOCUMENT IS UNLIMITED

INTERVIEW OR INQUISITION: Successful Communication Techniques (Or what does ethics have to do with it, anyway?)

Roger C. Pratt
Manager, Quality Training Office
Pacific Northwest Laboratory¹
Battelle Boulevard
Richland, WA 99352

ABSTRACT

Auditing and being audited can be a very stressful event. The auditor has to be sensitive to the anxiety of all auditees and should do everything possible to put the auditee at ease and help the audit process to proceed smoothly.

In this paper, the human factors associated with auditing are discussed and methods of communication and other interfacing techniques are discussed which, hopefully, can act as stress reducers. The "bottom-line" of any audit should be to provide feedback to the auditees that will help validate or improve their process and management system. Reducing the stress and enhancing communication will help to better achieve this goal.

Although some evidence during an audit is gathered from records and documents, a significant portion of audit time is spent interviewing the audited organization's personnel. Therefore, much of this paper deals with interview techniques.

It is up to the auditor to establish an initial atmosphere of trust and open communication. The goal is to obtain as much valid information as possible in the shortest time possible. Auditors should emphasize that they are there to audit the systems or program, not the person. Auditors should help the auditees' line management view the audit not as a "search for the guilty," but an audit that will identify problems and assist in correction of existing or potential system problems. It should be the clearly defined policy of any audit program that there be no surprises involved with the evaluation. An ethical audit is not the place for cloak-and-dagger tactics, for witch hunting, or for the identification of situations that are then sprung at a critical and embarrassing time (a "gotcha").

The bottom-line may be a restatement of the golden rule (with a little poetic license):

AUDIT OTHERS AS YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE AUDITED.

¹Pacific Northwest Laboratory is operated by the Battelle Memorial Institute for the U.S. Department of Energy, under contract DE-AC06-76RLO 1830.

INTRODUCTION

The active interface with the auditee (i.e., the field investigative work) is the core of the audit. It is where observations are made, data are collected, members of the audited organization are interviewed, and an initial assessment of compliance and effectiveness is made.

TEXT

Dealing with Stress

Auditing and being audited can be a very stressful event. The auditee in particular feels the pressure of the audit, since the audit could potentially result in a job action (either punitive or positive). First-time auditees are usually the most fearful of the audit and require "special handling." The auditor has to be sensitive to the anxiety of all auditees and should do everything possible to put the audience at ease and help the audit process to proceed smoothly.

Human Factors - Understanding the Stress

An audit's effectiveness will be largely dependent upon the auditor's understanding of the role of human factors in the audit process. The audited individual's personal philosophies, motivational characteristics, and individual objectives must be taken into account and dealt with.

The announcement that an organization is going to be audited or that a particular function is going to be surveyed automatically creates a fear of the unknown in the audited individuals. Therefore, auditors must recognize that their early activities will be suspect. Even though the auditees are aware of the ground rules and the scope of the audit, auditees may be concerned that they will be singled out. They may be concerned that areas under their responsibility will be found to be lacking.

Fear tends to create hostility and attitudes of defensiveness. Fear, hostility, and defensiveness interfere with the gaining of valid information. These can be reduced somewhat if the auditor is aware that the atmosphere may initially be hostile and is careful not to react with that hostility.

Change of any sort is threatening to the individual. More time will probably be spent by the audited organization on justifying the status quo than in listening to suggested improvements. Equally important is the auditor's willingness and capability to accept different methods of compliance to a specific requirement; i.e., they must avoid the "my way is the only correct way" mentality.

Putting the Auditee at Ease

To alleviate some of this stress, the audit team should arrive at the designated locations on time and be mentally and physically prepared to audit. This means that the audit team appears to be a cohesive group with one leader who sets the tone and pace of the audit. The team should be enthusiastic and unbiased and should project an attitude of confidence in their ability to assist the organization. The audited organization needs to view the auditors as a valuable resource for providing input into the objective evaluation of their activities.

It is up to the auditor to establish an initial atmosphere of trust and open communication. The goal is to obtain as much valid information as possible in the shortest time possible. Some potential conditions that affect the initial interactions follow:

- The auditee's perceptions of the audit process — "This is a waste of time; I am being evaluated only to fulfill requirements."
- Auditees's initial feelings — fear, skepticism, desires — "Will this clear up the problems; will I come out of this looking OK?"
- Behavior patterns that are specific to that individual (i.e., agreeable or abrasive), and certain predispositions based on past experiences. The auditor must recognize that these factors exist and be aware of them during the audit process.

Auditors should emphasize that they are there to audit the systems or program, not the person. Auditors should help the auditee's line management view the audit not as a "search for the guilty," but an audit that will identify problems and assist in correction of potential system problems.

Interview/Communication Techniques

Although some evidence during an audit is gathered from records and documents, a significant portion of audit time is spent interviewing the audited organization's personnel. How questions are asked will affect the amount and quality of the information received. Preparation is the first and most important step; if it is known in advance what needs to be discussed, it is more likely that appropriate questions will be asked. Auditors should take notes throughout the interview process; memory is unreliable, at best. Note taking may create small pockets of silence (which are stress inducers). Most auditees will be comfortable with the note taking process if they understand that notes are being taken to ensure that accurate information is being recorded.

The importance of listening cannot be over stressed; it is difficult to gather information while talking. The auditor must listen intently. This involves not formulating new questions as the individual is responding to the previous ones and listening for more than the "bottom line." It is important to let the auditee respond in as much detail as possible to get the information that is needed. The best way to accomplish this is to ask open-ended questions to start with and then move to close-ended questions to get clarification of details.

Questions that can just be answered "yes" or "no" should be kept to a minimum, since valuable information is lost by using this type of question. An example of a yes-or-no or close-ended question is, "Do you perform reviews according to your project management procedure Number 51?" The reply would undoubtedly be "yes." An example of the way to phrase the question in an open-ended format is, "I've read your Procedure 51, which indicates that a particular type of review process is performed. Explain to me in detail how you implement that procedure."

Auditors need to be aware of the level of the individual they are interviewing. It is important to communicate at the knowledge and responsibility level of that individual. The discussions may range from quality philosophy with top management to specific techniques with the worker on the production line.

There are several clarification techniques that can be used to make sure that the information received from interviewees is clear and complete:

- Probing — using follow-up questions to further explore something the auditee has said.
- Paraphrasing — repeating and rewording important points.
- Summarizing — recapping and repeating a set of major points to make sure all the important information has been noted.

Using these techniques will show that the auditor is concerned, is a good listener, and is a professional. In addition, the techniques give the auditee a chance to fill in any missing or misunderstood information.

General Considerations

It is appropriate in a business situation to shake hands with all individuals when they are introduced, both males and females. Auditors should try to use the person's name occasionally in conversation. This shows an awareness of the auditee as an individual and facilitates the free exchange of information.

Auditors should use appropriate body language to show that they are listening and receiving the message that the individual is sending. This means using good eye contact, head nods, etc., as needed. Eye contact should be maintained about 25 percent of the time, as a rule. Too much eye contact makes an individual who is being questioned feel uncomfortable and too little makes the interview too impersonal. The auditor should smile when appropriate; it is possible for an individual to concentrate to such an extent that they appear unfriendly. Auditors need to be straightforward in all their dealings with auditees. It is imperative that an auditor not be devious in any manner or the trust that others have striven to achieve will be damaged.

The audit team's dress sets the tone for the level of professionalism perceived by the audited organization. For example, the auditor can project a "power image" (three-piece suit, gold watch in pocket); the auditor can have a casual look; or the auditor can project a "construction image" (blue jeans). Dress should be appropriate to the organization that is being audited. For example, it would be inappropriate to conduct an audit of construction activities in a three-piece suit or silk dress and high heels.

Dealing with the Unusual or Conflict

The goal during the interview portions of the audit is to gain information in the best atmosphere possible. There may be times, however, when conflicts or difficult situations arise. This includes situations when the auditee repeatedly fails to answer a question or answers inconsistently, when the auditee tries to dominate the situation, or when the auditee rambles on with an irrelevant monologue. In these cases, it is best to directly confront the individual's behavior and redirect the conversation. The auditor needs to be persistent and not allow intentional or unintentional avoidance of a topic; it is important that control is demonstrated in these types of situations.

It is possible that personnel who are anticipating the audit may develop data, statistics, or other information that is offered to the auditor as evidence of previous corrective action or purports to demonstrate that no problems exist. Some individuals are skilled at using statistical data in a manner that is deceptive. Such data should be used and accepted only if the auditor is convinced of its validity and appropriateness of use. Usually, obtaining validations from other sources is necessary before such information may be accepted and used in the system of program analysis.

Occasionally the auditees will resort to tactics such as showing new products under development, giving tours of the plant, or taking long lunch hours to divert the auditors from their planned activities. Any obvious diversionary tactics need to be resisted by the auditor.

If a facility is in trouble, and particularly if there are management problems, there may be sincerely ethical people who will indicate their interest in being heard by the auditor. This does not mean that these volunteers are necessarily right in their analysis of the situation. Care must be exercised to not be distracted by the side issues. On the other hand, this information should not be ignored and with proper validation may give valuable insights for feedback on system effectiveness.

Ethics

When dealing with the audited organization, there are some key principles to keep in mind that will assist in taking the above factors into account.

Maintaining the self-esteem of the individual, which implies that the auditor should refrain from cutting or sarcastic remarks. Maintaining the individual's self-esteem is important in building rapport between the auditor and the auditee, maintaining an atmosphere of openness and trust, and encouraging the flow of information. To enhance self-esteem, the auditor should show interest as the auditee talks and show approval of accomplishments that are discussed.

Showing empathy and understanding of the auditee will also help build rapport. This will free the flow of information and ease tension so that the auditor can gain information that would not have been gotten otherwise. To show empathy and understanding, the auditor should listen for both facts and emotions in what the auditee says. Using the technique of "reflecting" in which the auditor states the emotional content of what the auditee has said, shows that the auditor recognizes and understands the experiences associated with the verbal content. An example might be, "You seem dissatisfied with the manner in which that procedure was implemented."

Also, the auditor should try not to show shock, dismay, or surprise if the auditee reveals potentially damaging information; simply indicate that the facts were understood. An appreciation of openness and honesty should be indicated if appropriate.

Check findings and observations against the "so what?" reaction. This means measuring the perceived problem against potential consequences or risks if it is not corrected. If the consequences are small or non-existent, the auditor should investigate if they are symptoms of a larger system problem. They can then be used as facts supporting that bigger (more general) finding.

The auditor should maintain a conscious objectivity toward the subject being evaluated. Previous practices or personal beliefs can prevent a full understanding of the conditions that exist. The auditor will be confronted many times with conjecture, suggestions, leading or possible distracting opinions expressed by those being contacted. It is essential that the auditor keep his or her personal opinions aside and concentrate on elements of observed fact.

It should be the clearly defined policy of any audit program that there be **no surprises** involved with the evaluation. An ethical audit is not the place for cloak-and-dagger tactics, for witch hunting, or for the identification of situations that are then sprung at a critical and embarrassing time (a "gotcha"). This type of activity by an auditing staff is the worst form of violation of ethics.

All reported observations and recommendations, including the discussion and supporting data for such recommendations, should be stated in the impersonal tense. The use of names should be avoided; a definition of the functions that were evaluated and/or the level of the persons in that function should be substituted.

The auditor should comply to the greatest extent practicable with the customs of the facility that is under audit. This includes compliance with working hours, mode of dress, observance of lunch hours, and other facility requirements or customary procedures.

Concentrate on the relevant facts. The situation should be evaluated in sufficient depth such that the root cause can eventually be determined. It is not the responsibility, however, of the auditing organization to determine the specific source of the problem or to place blame.

Give the benefit of the doubt to the audited organization. When there is significant doubt in the mind of the auditor as to the verifiable facts or the correctness of the auditor's recommendation, the item should be carefully evaluated with other members of the team and the team leader. If, in further evaluation, the item continues to be of doubt, the item should be dropped or offered as a comment in the report in terms that acknowledge the appropriate degree of uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

The bottom-line may be a restatement of the golden rule (with a little poetic license):

AUDIT OTHERS AS YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE AUDITED.

Be professional, maintain the self-esteem of the individuals audited, and assure the audited organization is kept informed of all information gathered during the audit (no surprises). By following these simple rules, maybe you will be viewed as helping the process and may even be asked back.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Pratt, R.C., Ryder, D.E., and Hood, F.C. Auditing Methods for Lead Auditors. Quality Training and Resource Center Course #QLT-180010, Rev. 5, U.S. Department of Energy, Richland Operations Office, Richland, Washington.

END

**DATE
FILMED**

5 / 19 / 93

