Handout to the ISO 19011 Course: 10 Auditing Rules

Following these guidelines makes results more useful to management
by Joe Kausek

In 50 Words Or Less

- Make auditees feel as if they're part of the audit team.
- Communicate effectively, develop a verification strategy and don't nitpick.
- Avoid findings that don't affect the system's performance, and get management support by identifying real effects of findings, using dollar amounts when possible.

All auditors receive training in the basics of planning, conducting and reporting audits. Unfortunately, this is the only training many ever receive.

I now present 10 rules, or guidelines if you prefer, that, if practiced, will significantly improve the effectiveness of audits.

Rule 1: Make auditees feel like members of the audit team.

Instead of using the opening line, "Don't worry, we're not here to audit you, we're here to audit the system," say something like this:

"We're doing an evaluation of the [blank] process. We're trying to identify any weaknesses in the process or opportunities to improve it. To do that, we need your help. We'd like you to walk us through the process and explain how it works. We might need you to answer some questions or show us some of the records generated. If there is anything that doesn't work very well or improvements you feel would make the process better, we'd like to hear about those, too. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask them. OK?"

This kind of opening statement sounds much more sincere and truly reflects the role of the auditees. It also makes them members of the audit team, which is really what they are.

Note the use of the phrase "the process." The words "you" and "your" personalize, and saying something like, "We're here to evaluate your process" immediately puts auditees on the defensive by implying that if there is a problem, it's their problem. The words "you" and "your" should be avoided during audit interviews.

Also note the use of the word "evaluate" instead of "audit." The word "audit" will, by itself, make some people nervous, as will the use of the word "nonconformance." For this reason, consider using the word "weaknesses."

The use of this rule should result in an auditee who is not only willing, but also enthusiastic about assisting in the audit.

Rule 2: Start the evaluation by asking general, open-ended questions, then use clarifying questions to fill in the gaps.

There are three primary types of questions an auditor can ask during an interview: open-ended, closed-ended and clarifying.

Open-ended questions have no right or wrong answers. Auditees are free to respond to the question to a level and depth with which they feel comfortable. The auditor gets significantly more information from an open-ended question than from a closed-ended one. Also, because there are no right or wrong answers, auditees are generally more comfortable with open-ended questions, assuming the questions address a topic or process with which they are familiar.

Closed-ended questions elicit yes-no responses or specific right-wrong answers. For example, "Is there a communications log?" will

bring either a yes or a no response. Likewise, "How often are environmental regulations updated?" will result in a single response such as "quarterly," "annually" or even "we don't." Only one of these is likely to be correct, so the auditee has a greater chance of "crashing and burning" when answering a closed-ended question.

Because open-ended questions provide more information and are generally safer to the auditee, auditors are advised to use general, open-ended questions that cover broad sections of the topic being evaluated early in the interview process. These early responses provide a wealth of information to auditors and help them determine areas that need deeper review.

Assume the auditor asks, "Can you walk me through this process, starting from a request for a quote and ending with a contract award?" This is a good open-ended question with which to start the audit. The auditee might, in fact, answer other questions on the auditor's checklist in his or her first response to this question. In that case, all the auditor has to do is ask for the objective evidence to verify what he or she has been told. If something was left out that the auditor expected to hear, then he or she can follow with a clarifying question, the next type.

Clarifying questions are designed to fill in the gaps. If the auditee's initial response revealed nothing about feasibility reviews, the auditor would ask a clarifying question: "I didn't hear you mention anything about feasibility reviews. Can you explain when they are done and who does them?" The clarifying question is used to fill in the gaps or funnel down to the missing (or suspect) information.

When used in this manner, open-ended, closed-ended and clarifying questions form a strategy for conducting interviews we call the funnel approach, which is illustrated in Figure 1. To summarize, the use of the funnel approach leads to an efficient audit that covers the maximum amount in the least time. It is also safer to auditees and allows them to warm up in the interview.

Funnel approach / FIGURE 1

Start with broad, open-ended questions to obtain maximum information.

Use clarifying questions to "funnel" down to the missing information and to fill in the gaps.
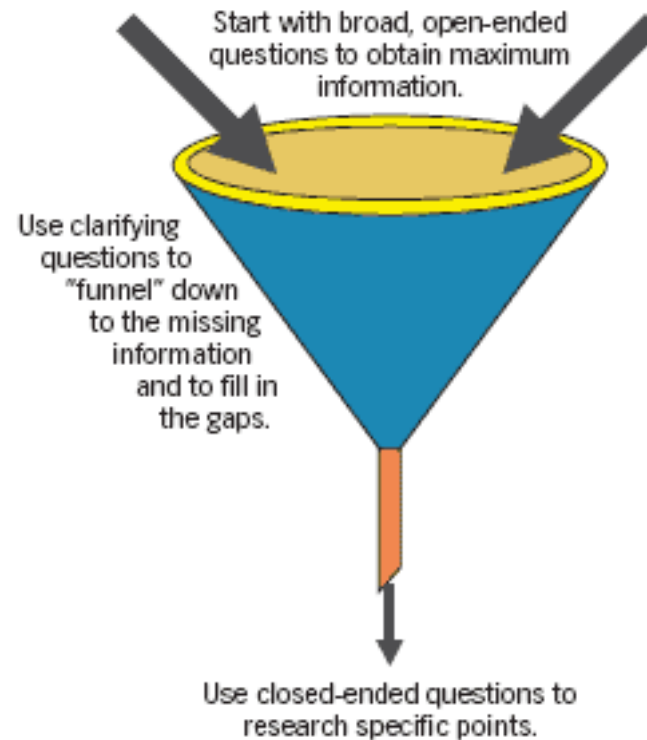
Use closed-ended questions to research specific points.

Figure 1

Rule 3: Be an active listener.

The importance of active listening cannot be overstated. An often quoted rule of thumb is that auditors should spend only 10% of their time talking and 90% listening during an audit.

An alarming statistic provided by research is that up to 70% of all communications are misunderstood. While many of these miscommunications might have no significant impact during routine interactions, a miscommunication during an audit can have

devastating effects on both auditee and auditor credibility. Simply stated, auditors must be active listeners.

Active listening involves hearing not only the words used by the speaker, but also the way the words are used, and observing the nonverbal cues. The words themselves convey only a part of the message, sometimes less than 10%, while the nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, body language and movements, possibly contain more than 60% of the overall communication. This is especially true when trying to gauge the truthfulness of a response.

What do we mean when we say "the way the words are used"? Say the following two statements aloud, placing emphasis on the italicized words in each sentence. Are the meanings the same?

1. I do *not* know of any problems with this supplier.
2. I do not know of any problems with *this* supplier.

Although the words are identical in both sentences, the meanings are quite different. In the first example, the auditee is stating emphatically that this supplier is a good one. In the second instance, the auditee is saying this supplier is OK, but there are others that are not. Just as important, the auditor is offering to share his or her thoughts on these problems with the auditor if he or she cares to listen.

What would happen if the auditor did not pick up on this subtle but important inflection? He or she would probably fail to find the weakness, which is the auditor's primary responsibility.

Finally, provide positive feedback to auditees as they respond. Some techniques for doing this are shown in Table 1.

Positive feedback examples / TABLE 1

Method	Examples	Advantages and applications
Verbal door-openers Short phrase interjected as auditee responds.	• "Very good." • "Excellent!" • "Please continue."	Short, nondisruptive; does not stop the flow of information from the auditee, but encourages auditee to continue to provide information; should be used liberally during interviews.
Nodding your head	You have to visualize this one.	Same advantages and applications as the verbal door-openers.
Echoing Short repeat, in the form of a question, of the topic the auditee mentioned on which the auditor wants more information.	• Material resource planning system? • Online learning? • Universal waste? • Job hazard analysis?	Normally causes the auditee to expand on the echoed topic without causing too much disruption in the communication coming from the auditee.
Reflecting Reflecting back the emotion displayed by the auditee.	"Sounds pretty tough. How has it affected your department?"	Indicates to the auditee that you care, and tests your understanding of their emotions; especially useful when pursuing resource issues and their impact.
Paraphrasing Summarizing, in the auditor's own words, the content of an auditee's response.	"Let me make sure I've got this straight …"	Somewhat disruptive because the auditee must stop talking while the auditor summarizes; critical tool for testing auditor understanding of what he or she has been told; should always be done after long responses and to confirm a finding.

Table 1

Rule 4: Never let the auditee pick the samples.

Assume you've been assigned to audit the purchasing process, and one of the requirements states that any receipt of nonconforming material will result in a supplier corrective action request (SCAR) being issued to the supplier, with a copy of the SCAR and response being placed in the supplier's history file. How would you verify that the SCARs are being issued as required?

Many auditors would ask the purchasing manager for examples of a supplier providing nonconforming product. This allows the auditee to select the samples, which is never a good way to find the weaknesses.

A better strategy would be to stop by the receiving department on the way to purchasing and note several instances of incoming product problems using the receiving-department records. When the auditor wants to verify this requirement during the purchasing-manager interview, he or she can then specifically ask to see the history files for the suppliers noted during this visit to the receiving department.

Auditors should examine each question on their checklists and ask themselves, "How will I verify the auditee's response? Do I know what to ask for and how I will choose the samples?" If the answer isn't evident, the auditor should develop a verification strategy and add it to the checklist.

Rule 5: Always try to identify any real effects of your findings, using dollar values when available.

One of the things that sets the superstar auditors apart from their counterparts is their ability to tie findings to real consequences. They have the ability to transform the finding from a technical violation into a problem that is affecting the organization. They get management's attention. They also get management's support.

Auditors should always attempt to determine whether a deficiency is having an effect on the organization and, if so, how much. Here are some examples. Decide which audit findings would most likely prompt a more supportive reaction from management and more assertive corrective action.

> Finding 1a: The control plan being used in final assembly for part BD459-X2 was obsolete, in violation of clause 4.2.3 of ISO 9001 and section 4.6 of QSP-QA-02.
>
> Finding 1b: The control plan being used in final assembly for part BD459-X2 was obsolete and did not contain all customer-required inspections, in violation of clause 4.2.3 of ISO 9001 and section 4.6 of QSP-QA-02. It was further noted that 400 units of product BD459-X2 were rejected by the customer in March for the attributes that were missing on the control plan. The direct costs associated with resolution of this problem were in excess of $200,000.

Rule 6: Always confirm your findings with the auditee.

Before leaving, auditors should always share their findings with auditees. This is critical when you think you have found a nonconformance.

Sharing the finding avoids invalid findings generated because of miscommunication. Recall that 70% of all communications are misunderstood. A well-trained auditor who practices active listening can significantly improve on that percentage. But the fact is, sometimes we just don't understand what the other person is trying to say, or the other person doesn't understand us. Sometimes we think we have a nonconformity, but we really don't.

Here's an example: Assume the procedure for supplier evaluation and selection requires joint agreement between purchasing and quality assurance before a new supplier goes on the approved supplier list. The auditor previously asked the purchasing manager to walk through the process for evaluating and selecting suppliers. She replied throughout her response, "I do this … I do that … I check this …" Never once did she ever mention any quality involvement.

The auditor decides to write up a nonconformance to the procedure requirement for quality assurance participation in this process. When the auditor gets to the closing meeting, he or she presents the nonconformance, at which time the purchasing manager and quality manager jump up and exclaim, "Quality is involved!"

The auditor responds by noting that never once did the purchasing manager mention quality's involvement, to which she responds, "I didn't know you wanted to know what everybody did. I only thought you wanted to know what I did." At this point, you slink down in your chair, and in your best Rosanne Roseannadanna-Gilda Radner "Saturday Night Live" voice meekly say, "Never mind."

Sharing the finding with the auditee before you leave, or even as it is identified, gives the auditee the chance to correct any misconceptions that could lead to an invalid finding. It protects you—the auditor.

Sharing the findings also reinforces the concept that the auditor and the auditee are on the same team. The auditor should be willing to share the findings with the auditee as a sign of courtesy and respect.

Rule 7: Don't go looking for nits.

Don't write up nits. What's a nit? A nit is any finding that is administrative in nature and could never have any real impact on the performance of the management system. Examples of nits are obvious typographical errors, blank fields not marked "N/A" for "not applicable" when there is no requirement or practical reason to do so, and administrative oversights that are obvious and easily correctable.

Since nits are sometimes violations of requirements, even if trivial, how does an auditor avoid writing them up? The short answer is, don't go looking for them. Focus on significant requirements, problem areas and performance. Do not focus on, or even look for nits.

Rule 8: Provide sufficient background information in your write-ups to allow the auditee to understand both what was found and what the requirement is.
Auditors must always remember who they are writing the nonconformance report for. It is not for the audit program manager and not for the other auditors. It is for the auditee manager or process owner who will have to take corrective action.

The manager or owner might not have been present when the deficiency was found. This means the write-up must be clear and directly traceable to the requirement that was violated. The description of the deficiency must leave no doubt as to what the problem was or why it is considered a violation.

By including information relating to the number of deficiencies or sample size, for example, the auditee manager can determine whether the violation was an isolated occurrence, in which case the action will be to correct it, or a systematic weakness that warrants significant effort for root-cause determination and elimination.

Rule 9: When citing areas of strength, be specific.

Shouldn't the auditor give credit where credit is due? Yes, the auditor should always note superior performance, especially when it represents what is a truly best practice. But the rule for doing so is this: Be specific. When giving praise, it is critical that you pinpoint the specific practices that are praiseworthy.

Rarely will an auditor have sufficient time to completely and in great depth evaluate an entire system or process to the point of being able to say the whole thing is really great. Instead, indicate exactly what you found to be superior. Maybe it was the control of electronic documentation or the methods used to communicate changes to document users. Do not make general statements.

Rule 10: Feed the auditor.

Apart from auditors being food motivated, there are some issues relating to lunch that need to be worked out, especially when conducting off-site audits. The foremost of these issues is whether to go out to lunch or have it brought in.

Auditees will often invite the auditors out to lunch. The lead auditor must weigh accepting this offer against the demands of the audit.

Most auditors have a working lunch, where they discuss what's been found so far, what needs to be reviewed in more detail and how they might want to adjust the afternoon's schedule. Many also take the opportunity to begin their audit write-ups. None of this can be accomplished when the audit team goes out to lunch.

In addition, it might be hard to go out and get back in less than an hour. For these reasons, most auditors prefer that lunch be brought in. Of course, for internal audits the issue is normally moot: The auditor is on his or her own.

Results: Practicing these 10 simple rules, or guidelines, will help you achieve more effective and efficient audits, while helping to provide a more positive image to all those involved.

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