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AUDIT UNTO OTHERS....

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AUDIT UNTO OTHERS...

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ABSTRACT

My first encounter with a quality assurance auditor is reminiscent of an old Dodge commercial. You remember? The old sheriff, masked in mirrored sunglasses, paunch hanging over his gun belt, prophesying, "You're in a heap o' trouble boy!" Well, my auditor could have been kin to the sheriff; they had the same posture, attitude, and mirrored sunglasses. Plus, my auditor wore a black leather vest and sported a "Buffalo Bill" goatee. While certainly memorable, both gentlemen were far from pleasant.

I'm fairly certain that the compliance auditor of old deserved this perceived association with his law enforcement counterpart. Both believed in enforcing the letter of the law, or their interpretations of it. Neither seemed capable of exercising interpretive powers, but instead relied on winning through intimidation, possibly with an eye toward claiming some version of a monthly Quota Award. Is the auditor of today any better perceived?

Because this "first encounter of the worst kind" made a lasting impression on me, I have dedicated considerable time and effort trying to avoid being perceived as another sheriff when I conduct audits. In my auditing career, I am determined to capitalize on each opportunity to turn negative situations, as experienced by the auditee, into meaningful opportunities for improved performance. I want to treat the auditee the way I want to be treated when I am being audited.

TEXT

Lesson Learned

Before becoming a quality professional, I was a police officer in southwest Washington state. As a rookie, I learned an important lesson that I carry with me in my quality career. One rainy night I stopped a traffic violator for exceeding the speed limit and negligent driving. As I stood in the pouring rain and delivered to the driver a scathing diatribe on traffic safety, the driver's patience began to wane.

When I finally excused myself to write the citation, the driver exploded. "I'll have your badge! The Chief's a personal friend of mine! You'll hear about this!" Undaunted, I handed the ticket to the driver, said "Good evening," and went back to the station to complete the paperwork. It turned

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out the driver's word was good for two out of the three. The Chief was the driver's personal friend, and I heard a lot about it. At least I kept my badge.

By the time the incident passed, I had learned my lesson: either chew them out or give them a ticket, but don't ever do both. As an auditor, I keep that lesson in mind. In fact, after twelve plus years of conducting quality audits, I've determined there is no room in the audit for verbal diatribes. The ultimate goal of the audit is process improvement, not alienation, denigration, or vilification.

The police officer and the auditor both provide a service. In the *Pirates of Penzance*, Sir William Schwenck Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan) told us, "When constabulary duty's to be done, the policeman's lot is not a happy one." Unfortunately, the auditor is too often looked upon as the "constabulary" of the quality profession. As auditors, perhaps it is this misidentification that contributes to our lot, at times, being an unhappy one.

Quite often, our service is broad and varied, but it is a service. For all intents and purposes, the auditees are our customers. We must give them the best service possible. To do so, we need to be knowledgeable of the area we are auditing, and we must keep in mind how we would want to be audited in that area. We need to be sensitive to those auditees who may have been abused and maligned by those who have gone before us. We must provide better service than our predecessors who may have been abusive.

As an auditor, if you subscribe to the proverb, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," then you can more easily convince the auditee that you are there to help. It is the intent of this paper to elaborate on these principals and, in so doing, to provide auditors with a baseline from which to operate. As an auditee, you will be provided with a model of good audit practice to expect from those performing the auditing service.

Perceptions

When I think of some of my personal encounters with auditors who assessed the various quality programs I've been involved with, I'm reminded of a story told by Hyrum Smith in his book, Where Eagles Rest. The story illustrates the difference between competent, capable, experienced auditors (the eagles), and those who lack both an understanding of human behavior and knowledge of the management system they are tasked with evaluating (the turkeys).

As the story goes, a naturalist is walking past a farm and notices an eagle amidst a flock of turkeys. When asked why an eagle is in with his turkeys, the farmer explained that he had found a rather large egg one day and placed it in with the turkey eggs to be hatched. When the farmer saw the hatchling, he thought it looked strange; but, he left it to be reared by the turkeys.

The naturalist told the farmer, "You know you have an eagle in among your turkeys?" "No eagles. Only turkeys," replied the farmer.

"No, really. Come here. I'll show you that there's an eagle." Leading the farmer by the arm, the naturalist took him to the farmyard, where the eagle was pecking in the dirt with the turkeys. The naturalist said, "There! That is an eagle!" "Nope, that's a turkey," replied the farmer. The debate continued. Wingspans were compared and, to prove a point, the naturalist put the eagle on a fence post and encouraged the bird to fly. The eagle hopped from the post and rejoined the turkeys. "Told you so," was the farmer's reply.

Undaunted, the naturalist took the eagle to the top of the barn and, whispering words of encouragement to the eagle, pointed him in the direction of the sun and released him. The eagle swooped down from the barn to rejoin the flock of turkeys. The farmer shook his head. The naturalist countered, "That is an eagle, and tomorrow I will prove it."

The next day, the naturalist went back early and took the farmer and the eagle to a high promontory where the eagle could no longer see the barnyard. Placing the eagle on the edge of a cliff, he pointed the eagle's head in the direction of the sun and said, "You are an eagle. Fly!" With the sun in his eyes the eagle stepped forward. Unable to see the barnyard, he spread his wings and soared from the cliff's edge. Flying and soaring, the eagle was an impressive sight. By increasing his vision and understanding, he was able to find his true potential. This was no turkey!

I challenge all auditors to come out of the barnyard, so to speak. Advance your professionalism and careers through continuing education and certification. Take the time to learn the management systems you audit, and stay abreast of changing technologies pertaining to those systems. Do your homework during the preparation phase of the audit. Develop checklists that have meaningful, open-ended questions to probe beneath the surface into the depth of the system. Regard the auditee as a customer, and conduct the audit as a service geared toward process or program improvement. Rise above the turkeys, advance the auditing cause, and come to be viewed as an asset rather than a hinderance. In a word, "FLY!"

As auditors, we have been and will continue to be auditees on occasion. This reverse perspective should allow us to ask, "Since I am the auditee, how do I want to be treated by the auditor?" Realize that one audit done well is better than six done poorly, and accept any findings graciously. Regardless of your position in an audit, opt to be the professional, the "eagle."

Changing the Image

There is a recognized image problem associated with auditors. Lawrence B Sawyer, in his book Elements of Management-Oriented Auditing, discusses the pioneering work done by Churchill and Cooper in the mid-sixties on the relationship between auditors and auditees. While the initial study was limited to seven firms in the Pittsburgh area, results indicated that 75% of the respondents "did not have entirely pleasant feelings toward internal auditors." That same study showed that 58% of the auditees viewed internal auditors as police officers. It is Sawyer's contention, "that a great many

people share this view." Sawyer places blame for this perception on the auditors themselves.

The following satirical profile by Elbert Hubbard further supports Churchill and Coopers findings:

The typical auditor is a man past middle age, spare, wrinkled, intelligent, cold, passive, noncommittal, with eyes like codfish, polite in contact, but at the same time unresponsive, calm, and as damnably composed as a concrete post or a plaster-of-paris cast; a human petrification with a heart of feldspar and without charm, minus bowels, passion, or a sense of humor. Happily, they never reproduce; and all of them finally go to Hell.

I find Sawyer's conclusion and Hubbard's analogy of merit. Perception of the auditor by the auditee is a legitimate problem. In a recent conversation I had with the students in a lead-auditor class I conducted, a student commented that we should change the term "audit" to something more palatable. After the class, my interest was heightened by a message I received from one of my colleagues in the Quality Auditing Division (QAD) of the American Society for Quality Control. He had been in a discussion with an acquaintance from a government regulatory agency that same afternoon, on the same subject. "Change the name 'audit' to something else," his acquaintance had suggested.

As a partial solution to the image problem, changing the "audit" label is worth considering. But, like Sawyer, I feel the auditors themselves are largely to blame for the bad connotation of "audit," a word that simply means to "check, examine, or probe." An analogy to which we might all relate brings this point home: Those of us who have had a bad experience with liver know, regardless of the amount of ketchup and onions heaped upon it, you can never turn liver into filet mignon, although it may have come from the same source. Although liver will remain liver, as expected, must auditors limit themselves to an image taken from Hubbard? I think not. As Sawyer said, "You just can't shrug your shoulders and say, 'That's life; it goes with the territory.' because many internal auditors today are finding that such an attitude has an adverse effect on audit results."

Along with an impaired image, auditors must have an ability to understand people and their behavior. In 1972, Dr. Frederic E. Mints undertook a more comprehensive study for the Institute of Internal Auditors. Entitled *Behavioral Patterns in Internal Audit Relationships*, the study supports the theory that an auditor's success is dependent upon his/her ability to deal with people. If one does not consider the feelings of those whose work we audit, our efforts toward process improvement may blow up in our faces.

As part of the study, Dr. Mints sent out questionnaires to the auditees of three large companies. The responses to the questionnaires identified the following causal factors of problems in the audit relationship:

- fear of criticism
- punitive action by superiors
- overly critical reports

- the auditor's style
- the mystery-cloaking audits.

Twenty years later, these issues are still valid. They are still discussed and presented by audit mentors to most quality audit classes. The early proponents of quality auditing (Marvin Johnson, Jim Thresh, and Bob Peach) cautioned of these potential pitfalls, as do the quality audit gurus of today (Arter, Mills, Robinson, and Sayle). Let's evaluate these problems and discuss some of the methods that might be used to resolve them.

FEAR OF CRITICISM. Nobody likes criticism. Even when we must agree with findings of a deficiency, we still take umbrage with criticism. When the criticism is rude or presented without merit, it is even less tolerable.

PUNITIVE ACTION BY SUPERIORS. Even in today's business environment, some organizations still use the audit as a tool for retribution, or worse, as a method of dealing with "problem" employees. The audit is no more than a tool used to evaluate the existing management system of an organization. It should never be used for effecting disciplinary change. The only change that the audit should effect is one of process improvement.

OVERLY CRITICAL REPORTS. Here again, the philosophy of presenting either the citation or the lecture, but not both, should apply. If making a formal citation of a program weakness, present it in the body of the report with the necessary detail. Don't belabor the issue; certainly, don't vilify the auditee. When opportunities arise, cite areas of exemplary performance noted during the audit, or problems resolved on the spot by the auditee. Psychologists specializing in human factors have determined it takes seven times the effort, praise, and adulation to counter the effects of one negative criticism. If this is true, we auditors are operating with a surplus of negative influence.

THE AUDITOR'S STYLE. As I mentioned regarding my first encounter with the auditor bedecked in mirrored sunglasses, an auditor's style can have a lasting impact on the auditee. Credibility and professionalism in style manner, and appearance help to create a positive impression, making our job easier. Competence elicits confidence. We should do all we can to eliminate the negative stereotypes. As Sawyer says, "sell - don't tell." Be prepared to sell the mission. Do your homework beforehand. If the auditee likes you, they will like your product.

THE MYSTERY-CLOAKING AUDITS. We need to be up front with the auditee. No secrets. No surprises. Remember Colonel Flagg from the old television series *M.A.S.H.*? This guy was covert from the word "go." He said his name was Flagg, and he claimed to work for the CIA, the CID, the OSS, and other "intelligence" organizations, both foreign and domestic. But, nobody was certain of his affiliations, or even of his name. Avoid Colonel Flagg's persona. Audits are rarely, if ever, conducted under the cloak of secrecy. Keep the auditee apprised of audit progress. More importantly, include them in the planning process.

CONCLUSION

The following objectives will help you remember to audit others as you would have them audit you:

- Develop your personality to put people at ease.
- Conduct your audit in a professional and assured manner.
- Be sensitive to the way people respond to your line of inquiry.
- Learn when you have acquired enough information, then SHUT UP!!!

An auditee must understand that even the best management systems can develop problems; nothing works perfectly. Given the opportunity, internal quality audits performed by professionals can help effect meaningful corrective action. As auditors, we can most effectively serve our customers in this way by remaining attentive to our perceived image and developing our understanding of human behavior.

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