

## Too hot to handle

### An insider divulges a “sensational” tip right before your audit. How should you proceed?

Prior to an internal audit, it’s not unusual for auditors to receive “hot tips” from staff, co-workers, or even the auditee(s) and section managers about possible non-conformances. When that happens, your auditing routine comes to a screeching halt while you try to figure out how to handle the new information.

A well-planned audit involves preparing an audit checklist or going over the available checklist questions, reviewing the last few internal audit reports, and noting any recent or recurring non-conformances that had been identified during the previous audits.

And there you are, ready to start, when a confidential tip comes to skew - or skewer - your best-laid plans for tomorrow’s audit. In a short period of time, you have to make some snap, and hopefully correct, decisions about how to proceed.

#### Look before you leap

Here are some practical considerations to help you separate the slanderous chaff from the nuggets of real concern.

- **Gather the maximum amount of information.** More often than not, your informant will be unwilling or unable to provide technical details or supporting documentation. Without accurate and adequate information, your internal audit can turn into a fishing expedition that will serve only to confuse and aggravate the auditee(s). So gathering corroborating information is an important first step.
- **Objectively evaluate the effect of the perceived non-conformance.** Your familiarity with the process or operation to be audited should give you an intuitive feeling on how serious the issue is. In the event that the tip turns out to be true, how serious would its impact be on the final product and/or the client? Your course of action depends on this assessment. You may decide not to pursue the tip any further.

However, if you decide to pursue it further, then:

- **Evaluate your source.** Zealous auditors might take the information at face value without evaluating the source and underlying motives. Instead, what should occur is an objective evaluation of the source’s technical knowledge and involvement in the process that’s under the spotlight. Third-party and grudge-based hearsay may be discounted more easily than information coming directly from a whistleblower inside the department.

the **AUDITOR**

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### Use discretion to avoid alienating auditees

Once you're satisfied with the source's bona fides, then you must decide whether to:

- **Discuss the issue with the section manager.** If you're not sure of the value and impact of the "sensational" information you've been given, you may have to discuss it with the section manager. This definitely requires discretion and diplomatic skills. Although this may be a prudent approach to spare the auditee(s) any distasteful surprises, be aware that by discussing the problem before the start of the audit, you may jeopardize the integrity of your audit findings. The manager, citing his or her grasp on the "big picture," may be able to explain away or justify the presumed non-conformance(s). Regardless of the explanation, you may still want to explore the issue during the internal audit.
- **Be discrete.** Don't divulge your sources. Regardless of the audit's outcome, or whether the tip pans out, keeping your source(s) confidential will reduce repercussions. Indicating at any time during the course of an audit that you have "insider" information you'd like to follow up isn't a wise strategy. Because auditees don't know the extent or nature of the information, they tend to become apprehensive, defensive, and occasionally outright hostile or uncommunicative. After the audit concludes, speculation on who, what, when, and where will be rife anyway and may be highly disruptive to staff morale.
- **Audit with courtesy and emphasize teamwork.** Because there are no a priori findings, you should conduct the audit by giving auditees the benefit of the doubt. Being courteous and emphasizing teamwork will net you more cooperation than an antagonizing and aggressive approach.

### Cultivate teamwork

Internal audits aim to be periodic checkups on the health of your processes, systems, and product quality. They're also excellent training for auditees on how to be audited by third-parties, e.g., registrars. If you have a registered quality management system (QMS), your periodic internal audits will uncover issues and practices that you'll want corrected long before your third-party auditor shows up.

When auditees consider the auditor a partner, you may find that they not only will volunteer information, but also point out some of the difficulties they've been having in implementing their processes.

- **Be generous with your continual improvement suggestions.** These will be always welcome (but not always implemented). Staff, be it in manufacturing or service industries, are always interested in continual improvement that will make their routine tasks easier, be less expensive to perform, may save raw materials, or will improve product quality.
- **Tackle the audit aftermath wisely.** The tip may turn out to be a false alarm. If you've been discrete, the auditees will never know there's been a tip. Of course, the tipster loses his or her credibility.

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However, if the tip turns out to be justified, then a decision must be made, based on the circumstance, whether to go for a correction ("an action to eliminate a detected nonconformity," per clause 3.6.6 in ANSI/ISO/ASQ Q9000-2005) or a corrective action. The latter is "an action to eliminate the cause of a detected nonconformity" (clause 3.6.5, *ibid.*). To determine the root cause of a corrective action, the auditor also needs to determine whether the non-conformance would have come to light without the tip.

### **Conclusion**

In a mature QMS, non-conformances will be uncovered through self-evaluation rather than internal audits. "Hot tips" indicate that the staff still is not confident enough to share the existence of non-conformances and their root causes with their quality staff and program management.

- Fostering a non-judgmental atmosphere where auditor and auditee value teamwork and the sharing and achieving of common project goals should be a prime objective of quality auditing. Although this may not be a "measurable" objective in the traditional sense, its rewards in mutual respect and open internal communications enhance productivity, customer satisfaction, team spirit, and cohesion.

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