

Guidance for reviewing and closing nonconformities

The value that can be provided to an organization can be enhanced or diminished by the review that an auditor conducts of the organization's response to a nonconformity, as well as by the close-out process that is applied. An auditor will add value by ensuring that the organization has satisfactorily addressed correction/analysis of the cause, and corrective action, as this will increase the likelihood of the organization achieving customer satisfaction.

This document provides guidance to help auditors in the process of reviewing and closing nonconformities arising from audits.

Review of actions in response to a nonconformity

Management system auditors are responsible for reviewing the response to nonconformity and verifying the effectiveness of actions taken.

There should be three parts to the response of an organization to nonconformity:

- correction, analysis of cause, and corrective action
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Note that two different sequences are given as it may depend on the product type, or the situation of the nonconformity, as to which is the correct one to be followed. However, the three parts to resolving the nonconformity are the same in each case. For example, for software, it is inadvisable to implement a correction until the cause is known. Alternately, as a hardware example, if a 'low brake-pad' warning light were to illuminate in a vehicle and you immediately implemented the correction of replacing the brake pads before examining if the sensor was faulty, you might fail to resolve the problem and would have wasted time and resources.

The authoritative source for making the opening statement are some pertinent definitions in ISO 9000:

- nonconformity: non-fulfillment of a requirement (ISO 9000, clause 3.6.2)
- correction: action to eliminate a detected nonconformity (ISO 9000, clause 3.6.6)
- corrective action: action to eliminate the cause of a detected nonconformity or other undesirable situation (ISO 9000, clause 3.6.5)

Both correction and corrective action should be expected when there is a detected nonconformity.

Correction is action to eliminate a detected nonconformity. For example, correction may involve replacing nonconforming product with conforming product or replacing an obsolete procedure with the current issue etc.

The definition of corrective action is 'action to eliminate the cause of a detected nonconformity.' Corrective action cannot be taken without first making a determination of the cause of nonconformity. There are many methods and tools available to an organization for determining the cause of a nonconformity, from simple brainstorming to more complex, systematic problem solving techniques (eg root cause analysis, fish-bone diagrams, five whys etc). An auditor should be familiar with the appropriate use of these tools. The extent and

effectiveness of the corrective actions depends upon identifying the true cause. In some cases this will assist an organization to identify and minimize similar nonconformities in another areas.

In reviewing the response of an organization to a nonconformity, the auditor should confirm that documentation and objective evidence for all three parts - correction/analysis of the cause, and corrective action - are provided by the organization, and are appropriate, before accepting the response. Important elements to verify in the review process include:

- statements of actions; are they clear and concise ?
- descriptions of actions; are they thorough and do they accurately reference specific documents, procedures etc as appropriate?
- the use of the past tense (was, has or have been, were), as an indicator that the actions taken have been completed
- the date of completion of the corrective actions; past dates should be found that indicate that the actions have been taken (dates indicating future action are not good practice)
- evidence supporting the claim that a corrective action has been fully and effectively implemented and that the corrective action has been performed in the way that it was described

Additionally, the auditor should verify that the organization has ensured that the corrective action taken does not itself create further problems relating to product quality or to implementation of the QMS.

It should be noted that both correction and corrective action are not always appropriate and that either correction or corrective action may be sufficient on their own. This may happen, for example, in cases in which it can be demonstrated that the nonconformity was absolutely accidental, and the probability of re-occurrence is very low.

Effective corrective action should prevent the recurrence of the nonconformity, by eliminating the cause. However, corrective action should not be confused with preventive action. The definition for preventive action is: action to eliminate the cause of a potential nonconformity or other undesirable situation (ISO 9000, clause 3.6.4).

It should be noted that preventive action, by the nature of its definition, is not applicable to already detected nonconformities. However, an analysis of the causes of detected nonconformities may identify potential nonconformities on a wider scale in other areas of the organization and provide input for preventive action.

Closing nonconformities

As nonconformities tend to be individual in their nature, a variety of methods or activities may be used to close them off. For example, some will require direct examination on site (which may require the need for additional site visits), while others may be closed off remotely (by review of submitted documentary evidence).

Before deciding to agree to close-off a nonconformity, an audit team leader (or the auditor, in sole auditor situations) should review what the organization did in respect of correction/analysis of the cause, and the results it achieved through corrective action. The audit team leader/auditor needs to ensure that there is objective evidence (including supporting documentation) to demonstrate that the described corrective action has been fully implemented and is effective in preventing the nonconformity from re-occurring. Only once the situation is satisfactory, should the nonconformity be closed off.

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The ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group is an informal group of QMS experts, auditors and practitioners drawn from the ISO Technical Committee 176 Quality Management and Quality Assurance (ISO/TC 176) and the IAF. It has developed a number of guidance papers and presentations that contain explanations about the auditing of QMSs. These reflect the process-based approach that is essential for auditing the requirements of ISO 9001.

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