

## A GUEST AUDITOR PROGRAM

### Maximize Your Corporate Process

By James A. Burk and Janet Hendry



**A robust corporate OSH audit process is a valuable tool for providing input to a company's board of directors and senior management regarding the effectiveness of the organization's OSH programs.**

**Independent corporate OSH audits** also provide valuable information to business unit operations leaders and facility managers by evaluating the strengths and opportunities for improvement (findings) of the OSH programs and processes at the facility, business unit and geographical levels of the organization.

A guest auditor program can maximize the value of the corporate OSH audit process. Such a program can bring various benefits to the entire organization beyond the aforementioned traditional results of an OSH audit. A guest auditor program can provide the following benefits to participants:

- an in-depth understanding of the corporate OSH audit process;
- the opportunity to learn good auditing techniques that can be applied to self auditing at their own locations or, for regional OSH professionals, the sites they support;
- a more thorough understanding of company OSH standards and government regulations, and new depth of knowledge in targeted OSH processes;
- the opportunity to observe unfamiliar manufacturing processes at other sites within the organization and to learn how other plants or business units have achieved compliance with corporate OSH standards and government regulations;
- opportunities to meet and network with other OSH staff;
- practical experience in methods of quickly developing working relationships with site teams and presenting gaps in a constructive team-building manner;
- observing best practices and proven solutions in other facilities that can be brought back to the participant's site or shared with supported sites or within their business unit;
- a venue for guest auditors to share their facilities' best practices with the audited site.

#### Learning the Basic Audit Technique

At a fundamental level, a guest auditor program can provide the participant with firsthand knowledge of how the corporate audit process functions. Essential elements that guest auditors can learn include:

- how sites are selected for audit;
- the process of sending out audit announcements;
- holding the on-site opening meeting;
- how documents are reviewed;
- conducting employee interviews;
- measuring physical conditions;
- effective sampling versus inspection;
- conducting daily update meetings;
- conducting the formal closing meeting;
- how identified findings are documented and tracked in a corporate findings repository.

This knowledge can remove the mystery from the corporate audit process. And, in the future, when the participant's site is selected to receive a corporate audit this knowledge will reduce the stress of undergoing a corporate audit and empower the site safety leader (the former guest auditor participant) to effectively prepare his/her site team and leadership with what to expect.

#### Gaining In-Depth Technical Understanding

In general, OSH professionals are knowledgeable; they live risk control processes every day. They routinely conduct assessments, provide training, develop solutions for OSH issues, interface with site and business unit leadership and employees as a technical resource, respond to incidents and lead root-cause investigations. They have read about, taken training classes or received formal education regarding the applicable regulations and company standards to which they are aligning. But how long ago was that education? Do they remember all of the details of the regulations and company standards? With their busy schedules, OSH professionals typically have little time each day to spend poring over regulations and company standards.

On the other hand, corporate OSH auditors do have time for such activities, as it is a fundamental part of their daily job. They spend time measuring against, discussing, reading, referring to and citing OSH regulations and company standards. This is a luxury that many site and regional OSH leaders simply may not have time for. As a result, corporate OSH auditors often become company technical experts and a corporate re-

source in OSH requirements. Providing an opportunity for the site and regional OSH leaders to participate in a 1- or 2-week-long corporate audit provides the guest auditor participant with an immersive refresher of the corporate and regulatory OSH requirements. The experience provides them with an opportunity not only to refresh their knowledge on the required regulations and company standards, but also to learn some of the finer details that may have been overlooked in the past. They will spend the audit time measuring against these requirements and seeing their practical application firsthand on the shop floor, thus reinforcing their knowledge and any new learnings through the audit activities. Guest auditors can then return to their regular roles with not only a refreshed understanding of the regulations and standards that apply to their operations, but perhaps also a deeper understanding based on firsthand observations and auditing activity. This can help them provide increasingly more accurate information to their site teams and aid in stronger OSH alignment at their operations.

#### Developing the Interpersonal Skill Set

Leading a successful corporate audit is not strictly based on technical knowledge, but also requires strong interpersonal skills. These interpersonal or soft skills are imperative to prevent an audit from turning into an us-versus-them negative experience in which the auditee becomes defensive and reluctant to share information as a result of a well-meaning auditor acting more like a judge rather than a team member. Learning how to quickly build a positive relationship with a new group is essential and, once learned, can be a valuable professional skill carried through the guest auditor's professional career.

Start team building early. First, be engaged, empathetic and real. Most people can detect insincerity quickly and lose trust as a result. Make sincerity the foundation of your efforts. At the opening meeting, remind everyone that as a corporate auditor you are not a regulatory agency, but you are all on the same team. Use inclusive words, such as *us*, *we* and *our*. For example, instead of saying, "Audit findings are not about

identifying your faults,” say “audit findings are not about finding our faults but rather our next set of opportunities to strengthen the site’s OSH systems.” By embedding inclusive language into the comments and conversations throughout the process, auditors can foster a team environment.

The opening meeting is also the time to define the term *findings*. Audit findings do not indicate that the audited party has been bad, wrong, negligent or incompetent; they simply identify a difference. When regulations and company standards define requirements, these documents have set minimum expectations. When sites have not conducted or fully implemented these required minimum processes, procedures or physical conditions, a gap exists. This gap between a required and defined requirement is called a finding. OSH professionals and the site team should not dwell on findings as personal failures but rather embrace the idea that findings should be celebrated as opportunities to improve the systems. A finding enables the site to determine how the current system allows the finding to exist, how this system gap can be addressed, and how the implemented fix can be sustained by a measurement system moving forward. They represent a discovery of at-risk conditions that we can now use to avoid OSH incidents. If organizations are not willing to identify gaps, how can they expect to improve their OSH systems and workplace environments?

Corporate audits play an important role in providing sites with an independent identification of gaps that can be used to strengthen site OSH programs. Effectively and quickly identifying OSH gaps is an important skill for the guest auditor to learn. Conveying this information in a manner that encourages positive engagement, action and improvement is invaluable.

Acknowledge the stress that accompanies a corporate audit and be empathetic. It is never too early for the corporate audit team to acknowledge the stress that site personnel often feel during an audit. Although all parties involved in the internal audit process work for the same employer, believe in OSH excellence and want to improve, it is difficult to have someone looking over your shoulder, meticulously reviewing all your documents, efforts and outcomes. Regardless of the interpersonal skills of an auditor, audits are rarely stress free. This is an important lesson for the guest auditor. Sites can appear to be defensive, argumentative or frustrated. Often this occurs not because these individuals are bad employees, but rather because they created the processes and systems being reviewed and they feel a

sense of ownership for the outcomes. The auditor should recognize that the response is not defensive but rather is a reflection of deep care about the OSH systems, the effort it took to create these systems and getting them right, and that having gaps identified in those efforts can create strong emotions. Empathy, compassion and patience are skills individuals can learn through the guest auditor process that will serve them well not only in the OSH profession but also in a leadership capacity.

### **Strengthening the Company OSH Community & Raising the Bar**

There is a distinct benefit to the guest auditor process in that participants learn the value of sharing best practices and proven solutions that they have developed at their local sites, and how that can have a tangible positive impact on other sites within an organization.

Although plant OSH leaders may feel that they are on their own in the OSH effort, the guest auditor experience can help alleviate this. A team of peers at other company locations faces similar challenges. The audited site OSH leaders also gain a deeper understanding that they have additional OSH resources such as regional safety leaders and corporate OSH leaders who are available for support and who want you to succeed. Through the guest auditor process, the guest auditors have had an opportunity to create professional and technical relationships with not only the audit team but also with peers at another site. This can provide the site with future sources of support they may not have otherwise had access to.

As a result, the guest auditor participant can realize personal and professional development, and can gain knowledge to strengthen their sites or business unit OSH program and processes. Guest auditors have also been known to suggest changes to corporate documents to make them more understandable at the plant level.

### **Building & Sustaining a Guest Auditor Program**

Creating a great guest auditor process is not just a matter of grabbing random

available OSH staff and taking them along with the corporate auditors. To have a successful and sustained guest auditor program, all aspects of the program should be thoughtfully designed and documented. Important components include a scope, process description, a feedback mechanism to identify opportunities for improvement of the process, and an annual evaluation of the program’s effectiveness including details such as:

- Scope: definition of who can participate and how often;
- Definition of the process: how the cost of participation will be addressed (e.g., corporate budget, guest auditor funds), the method for annual solicitation for participation, how participation approvals are obtained, how you will provide basic auditor training, managing the experience through a documented guest auditor learning plan, how you will document and provide feedback from guest auditors regarding their participation;
- Methods to sustain: soliciting program improvement input, making program adjustments as necessary.

A key learning document in the process is a guest auditor learning plan. This plan defines how guest auditors will participate in the corporate audit, the knowledge set they will be required to possess, the various roles and activities they will be expected to participate in and measurable outcomes. This documentation will establish not only clear expectations for the participation but will also provide a venue to share the guest auditor’s results with leadership, identifying the skill demonstrated and knowledge learned via the guest auditor experience that can be brought back to their own organizations.

A guest auditor program can take a process designed to provide assurance to senior leadership regarding the strengths of the OSH programs and turn it into a tool to leverage OSH professional growth throughout all levels of the organization and over time strengthen the entire company OSH performance. **PSJ**

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