

Easy Audits—the Downfall of ISO 9001

By Mike Micklewright

"If I can stretch it out to not be a major nonconformity, I will do whatever I can."

"I will do whatever I can for you to make your date." (A promise to the client's customer about when the company will be recommended for ISO 9001 certification.)"

"The likelihood of your getting recommended is very high."

"Don't expect me to aggregate your minors into majors."

"If there are any major nonconformities, they would have to be closed out with an on-site audit. I would hope that I would not have to do this."

"Assuming everything goes okay, the first surveillance audit will be October 7 and 8 (dates changed). Is that okay?" (The registrar auditor proceeded to schedule the surveillance audit with the client.)"

In utter disbelief, I feverishly recorded these comments made by a certified Lead Auditor from an unnamed Registrar, as he recited his three-hour monologue, also known as the Opening Meeting, at the beginning of a five-and-a-half day ISO/TS 16949 audit.

You read that right - these comments were made in the Opening Meeting. The Lead Auditor, with years of experience, had not yet audited anything at this client's facility; yet he was practically handing the ISO/TS 16949 Certificate (supposedly one of the J110st difficult to achieve) to the client on a golden platter.

The end result? This company was recommended for certification and they received the letter from the registrar informing their customers of the recommendation so that they could meet the date promised to their customer and hopefully receive the business they were seeking. My opinion? This company should not have been certified. I informed this same company of my opinion after they received the recommendation.

Quick recap: I was called in as a consultant five weeks before their registration audit. At that point, the company had no

quality system in compliance with documented procedures. In those five weeks, I tried my best to help them avoid receiving a major nonconformity (apparently it worked, I'm embarrassed to say). At the time of the audit, the vast majority of employees had no idea of the existence of documented procedures, they were not trained in these procedures, there was little or no corrective action or internal audit system, and some of the company's customers were very unhappy with the company's performance (as evidenced by supplier score cards which were seen by the auditor). (Note: I write this knowing the risk that I might lose a client and there might be other fill-outs - but someone has to stand up and start the improvement process.)

It's time for a change.

This ISO 9001 Third Party Auditing System needs to be fixed before it continues to die the slow death it is now experiencing. Certifications to an ISO 9001-Based Standard are becoming way too easy to attain, companies are seeing less value (Registrars don't force improvement, so why improve?), and fewer companies are seeking certification or recertification as a result (only 25% of companies had recertified by 10/31/03).

I believe in the goodness of the ISO 9001 Standard. I think the Technical Committee that developed this standard did a great job. But just like the procedures in your company, a Standard can be written well, but that doesn't mean that it will be implemented well. We have a great ISO 9001 Standard, but the implementation, the most difficult part, is awful because Registrars allow minimal or no adherence to the Standard. I write this article because I see something I believe in so much being diminished in value.

Companies should take responsibility, too.

Companies are always so proud of themselves when, upon the conclusion of a surveillance audit, they receive less than three minor nonconformities. They think they've done so well and the managers applaud everyone's performance. Ironically, managers still want

as few as possible recorded nonconformities to the procedures they have approved, even though they know the procedures are not being followed and there is no improvement to the system. This is analogous to a parent applauding a child for not getting into a car accident because of drinking too much while ignoring the telltale signs that their child is drinking and driving.

Are managers crazy today? Don't they realize that when a Registrar Auditor finds one minor nonconformity per audit man day, they have wasted \$1,200, plus an opportunity to improve? This is not something to be applauded, as so many managers do. I know - I can audit any company today and easily find at least 10 actual nonconformities in any given audit day. No company is perfect or even close. However, the Registrar Auditors lead us to believe we are, giving little incentive to improve. Eventually, some leaders realize that if there has been little incentive to improve, they won't improve. So why are they paying for surveillance audits and the certificate on the wall when they are receiving no benefit from it? Good question.

Unfortunately, this apathy about ISO 9001 has led companies and managers to take the attitude that, "Even though I signed and approved procedures for how I want this process to run, don't let me know that you're not following them and don't let the auditor catch you not following them. If you have to cover something up, so be it. Just don't let me know! The effectiveness of meeting these requirements will be reflected in as few nonconformities (we know there will be at least one, though every Auditor finds one to justify his existence) as possible. If this is achieved, I will pat everyone's back and happily pay the Registrar's invoice until I realize that is not worth it."

What is to be done?

1) Delay the review and rewriting of the ISO 9001 Standard. Redirect resources to work on the problem of why so many companies are not recertifying to ISO 9001:2000. Besides the ISO 9001:2000 Standard is written very well; it is the least of this industry's problems.

2) Set objectives. What are the overall objectives an ISO 9001:2000? Is one of the objectives to increase the number of companies certified to ISO 9001 :2000? It should be! Is another objective to recertify 98% of ISO 9001/2/3:1994 companies to ISO 9001:2000? It should have been.

3) Develop a correction or corrective action (in accordance with 8.2.3 of the Standard) and focus the resources in this area if planned results were not attained.

4) Practice what we preach. We are not nearly attaining our (undocumented?) results. What is the root cause? Should we use the "5 Why's" to discover it? For example:

1. Companies are not recertifying to ISO 9001:2000 because they find little value **in** doing so.
2. This is because they haven't improved in terms of quality and costs.
3. This is because there has not been anything in the system to drive them towards continual improvement.
4. This is because the audits they receive from Registrars are meaningless and do not evaluate conformance or effectiveness of the system very well.
5. This is because Registrars do not want to upset their clients and they want clients to feel good about their companies. So they only "find" a couple of non conformities so their clients can receive the desired business they were seeking.
6. This is because Registrars are driven to maintain whatever business they can maintain and do almost anything they want to maintain it (including the provision of easy audits).
7. This is because Registrars *can* do whatever they want because the checks and balance system is ineffective and there is no effective manner of evaluating the *effectiveness* of the audits they provide.

5) Determine a corrective action to this problem. I have a few radical ideas about how to do this, but I believe the experts and their customers should work on this if they truly desire ISO 9001 to survive.

ISO 9001 as an entity is dying because its purveyors are not practicing the principles they preach and the principles for which ISO 9001 stands. This is and should be an embarrassment to the quality community! However, if it can recover by implementing effective corrective actions (as it preaches in 8.5.2), measuring customer perception of the effectiveness of its quality service, and attaining its own quality objectives and planned results, it will then be a victory and an example of why such a system is necessary and effective. Otherwise, ISO 9001 will continue to progress toward a slow death and another well intentioned quality initiative will have become another fad of the weak.

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