How to Prepare for a Process Audit

Process audits can be defined in hundreds of different ways and the type of process could be everything from how to purchase capital equipment to a safety procedure for holding safety inspections to how to properly inspect a 737 before take-off. In generic terms: A written process which should properly describe how to do almost everything.

The Process Audit was developed to validate whether you are performing your process or task exactly like you designed and documented it in the beginning. Those of you who have a little grey hair and studied industrial engineering have heard of G. Edward Deming, probably the greatest manufacturing engineer of all time. Deming used to say and I paraphrase “If you can’t sit down and write down exactly how you perform a specific process or tasks then you don’t know what you are doing.”

I will refer to one of my favorite examples, the cooking recipe. If the ingredients, tools, and preparation steps of the recipe are not communicated or written well then anyone who comes into the kitchen may perform the tasks differently. This could result in some dishes being edible and others having to be thrown away. Everything in your business and personal life that is important or critical to success at the end of the day should have a documented process.

So back to the original question, How do you prepare for a process audit? The simple answer is you perform a self-audit prior to the official one taking place. In most cases if you took the time to develop a documented process then the process is probably fairly critical to your operation which means you should be doing self-audits on at least a yearly basis.

In many organizations, the first thing that jumps out during the self-audit is nobody:

- can find the documented process or
- knows who has the most current version

In many cases you will need to reprint and redistribute because the paper is yellow or the person who wrote it has been retired so long you don’t even know where they are. But let’s be more optimistic and you have the process and it is only a year or two old. The next step is to review the document. Actually watch how the process is being performed and compare it to the documented process. If it matches and the desired results are as expected, perfect, then you are good to go.
If it doesn’t match or the results fail in some way, you either need to retrain your personnel to perform the process properly or rewrite the process to meet current needs. Remember a process can be as simple as how and when you inspect exit signs and fire doors to the extremely complex processes as you would find in a manufacturing facility. Keep in mind that OSHA and EPA inspections are mostly process audits. If you have a well-developed process for your property storm water plan and you follow the process to the letter you will likely never have a problem when your state or local inspector comes to audit and inspect.

Now to Mikes World, I have a little different spin on how to prepare for a Process Audit....You don’t prepare! What I mean is when you hear the CEO is coming to visit and inspect your facility you don’t scramble out and start cleaning up and painting everything that is not moving. In Mike’s World everything is always audit ready. I learned this from two different points of view years ago. In my early years when I was a maintenance supervisor; we would get the alarm that an OSHA inspector was at the security gate. We had a well-defined and well-trained process of what to do when this happen. What we didn’t have was a well-defined process to keep us from getting citations. We would actually send all contractors and vendors home for the day and we would stop all maintenance work and tell the inspector they were all in training. Sometimes you learn from not doing things properly. It took me a while to learn the right way but it happen when I met the best boss and leader I ever had, his name was Bill McPhaul. In Bill’s World we were always audit or inspection ready; we never painted or cleaned up prior to the CEO visit or the OSHA inspection because we were always ready. It’s kind of like performing preventive maintenance instead of waiting for things to break and then work on them. The proactive way is always better, cheaper, and safer.

So in summary the secret is to create a culture where you are always ready for the audit and develop an atmosphere where you constantly review, update, and train so you rarely need to prepare for the audit.