

## **DISCLOSURE OF QUALITY CONTROL**

### Interviews with Government Auditors

By Connie J. Schlosberg ©

#### **The Moral of the Story**

“Common sense will not be tolerated,” chuckles Tom, the oldest one in the office. Tom’s an ornery gray-haired gentleman who smells of cigarette smoke but has a charming southern disposition. “It’s all about recovery,” replies the wise-cracking curly haired Ron. The auditors are giving me their favorite mottos for their jobs. It is almost 10:00 a.m. on a warm Wednesday morning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Quality Program Management Division’s conference room. The auditors are having another staff meeting; there never seems to be enough of them from what I gather. The meeting is just finishing up in the dark, cherry-wood filled conference room.

Twelve overstuffed blue-cushioned chairs surround the rectangle table with another twelve chairs lined up against the stark white walls. An overhead projector looms above us with a projection screen hanging in front of it. Roasted coffee beans scent the room from the Starbucks’ cups of the seven auditors I chose to interview. A basket of Hershey’s chocolate and a plate of homemade oatmeal raisin cookies are being passed around. Black leather bound notebooks, cheap Skilcraft pens (a required purchase from the National Industries for the Blind), Palm Pilots and cell phones are sprawled out on top of the table.

I originally decline the plate of cookies but change my mind when I see the insulted look I get from Jim. The tall handsome retired Air Force master sergeant turned hipster has made them especially for me since he knows I am a health nut. He is an apparent gourmand. After biting into the crisp and chewy cookie, I understand why Ron says he will make a great wife someday. I thought this time will be the only time I have to interview these auditors, but my session will turn into several over the next few days. I hope to learn more about the tasks they accomplish each work day to see if there is truth to the undue stresses of working as an auditor for the Air Force (1993 letter and report from Vice President Al Gore to President Bill Clinton).

I am not sure how these questions will be answered or if anyone is going to give me anything other than cookie-cutter responses. After closely spending a couple of months with them, I knew that they are comfortable with my presence; however, they can be cliquish and respond according to what they think I want to hear. I have my Franklin Covey planner open with a blank note page waiting for words. I unfold the typed interview questions from my planner and take a sip of Earl Grey tea from my cup.

## **What's in a name?**

Before I can get the first question out, Freddy, wearing his 'Father Knows Best' brown sweater, asks everyone what their plans are for Thanksgiving. Most of them take off for the holidays. It's rare for a long-time government civilian to actually show up for work around the holidays when they accumulate enough leave to disburse their vacations throughout the year (The DoD Financial Management Regulation, Volume 8: Civilian Pay Policy and Procedures). I see a lot of camaraderie among them as they share plans for their time off with their families. Freddy tells us he's worried that his wife wants to go to Oklahoma to visit with her family. He prefers to stay home and vegetate on the couch. Driving to Oklahoma will take two days of driving there and back which means he will have no free time to himself. Dennis asks him, "So what happens when she doesn't hint anymore and tells you that you're going?" Freddy smiles and says, "I guess I'm driving to Oklahoma."

To keep the conversation lively and friendly, I ask them about the infamous nicknames that some of them have. Rusty got named Mountain Man because he's a former Army paratrooper and an avid hunter. Redheaded and buffed, he is quite the outdoorsman. Rusty is one of the few retired military that actually kept his physique after he left service. The rest of them resemble the Pillsbury Dough Boy. Jim became Baby Face because - even though he's in his forties - he still has a youthful look. He also has a couple of other nicknames such as Princess - he won't elaborate why - although I suspect it's because he likes to cook - and Doc because he makes his rounds when auditing contractors. Dan, with his tattoos and multiple gold hoop earrings, is called Ski because his last name is a typical Polish name with the necessary "ski" at the end. Dan reminds me of a weekend warrior biker, but he's really soft spoken and polite. The image doesn't fit the personality. I ask them if nicknames are something that carried over from when they were in the military, but they said that has nothing to do with it. Dennis replies, "We like to have fun and nicknames give us some team spirit and I guess you would say, something that binds us." Dennis is an older gentleman complete with graying hair and enough wisdom to match his years. Jim concludes that it keeps a serious job light.

## **What's your tag line?**

I ask them about their mottos that they like to throw around during their work days. After a couple of months of listening to them philosophize about their jobs, I want to know where these mottos came from. The latest one from Bob, another one of the senior employees there, is "In God we trust, all others we audit." To me, that can be intimidating depending on who hears it. Given the fact that most Americans despise auditors for what they represent and what they are trying to do. No one wants to be audited (The Freeman - Ideas on Liberty, Nov 98). Bob states that it's not meant for others' ears. It's just a joke they have among themselves. What it represents is that they can't assume that everyone is honest or even just completing the project correctly. A lot of times it's not malicious; the contractors simply didn't know they were doing it wrong.

Tom's favorite of "Common sense will not be tolerated" came about because every time they try to fix what's wrong with the policies, they get turned down. "Nothing is written with logic in mind. We spend an awful lot of time trying to make things better especially these processes. There are too much wasted procedures in place that nobody truly understands," Tom says.

Several photographs from around the world are on the wall from the various sites they manage such as Thule and Diego Garcia. Thule Air Base, Greenland has a nickname, too. They call it the "Top of the World" where the land meets the sky. It's the reason why the United States has a base in Greenland. From the top of the world, the military can easily watch over the planet. While the auditors are speaking, I look around the conference room once more. I never noticed the American flag in the corner over by the projection screen. I can't believe I didn't see it since that the pole is almost as high as the ceiling. The flag seems like a metaphor of who these auditors are – inconspicuous but standing tall.

### **It all pays the same**

At 12:30 pm on this same Wednesday, I walk back to the Program Management Office break room. I can smell hot spices simmering in a crock pot on a small table in the corner near one of the refrigerators. They have two refrigerators (and two microwaves) because the quality and program management sections moved in to one office together last January. Jim has made gumbo with rice for anyone who wants it. Already eating at the round dinette set that seats four is Nicole, Jim, Inge and Bob.

Inge had shown up before the gumbo was even finished cooking. I think Inge is a woman who doesn't care what most people think. She is getting ready to retire in the next couple of years. She's already retired Air Force. When Inge was in the Air Force, it was predominately male. She is the kind of woman who could go head-to-head with any man. Originally from Denmark, she's a naturalized U.S. citizen. The short haired, thick-skinned lady can make anyone nervous. One of the first things she told me is that she was an M-16 sharp shooter. I didn't know if I should take this as a threat. I'm not sure how Inge thinks. I certainly didn't say anything to her that should have made her not like me. Nonetheless, I think she may be my most challenging person to interview so I pull up a seat next to her to chat. While she dines on gumbo, I ask her what she thinks about women in her line of work and how much respect she gets from it. According to the Journal of Business Ethics, women auditors are often greeted with skepticism from their clients (Journal of Business Ethics, Aug 83). She rolls her eyes up towards the overhead lighting as if the answer may be written on the ceiling.

"Most women will hate me for saying this," Inge says as she looks over at Nicole, "but I truly believe it's a man's world. I'm not disagreeing about women in the workplace including this type of job. Actually, I think women are more organized for this job. You need to be detailed oriented. Not too many men can say that they are." She further explains that she doesn't like the chivalry because she doesn't think it belongs in our society anymore – most especially in the military workplace. She spent many

years proving herself to the “testosterone” and she doesn’t feel that the younger generations of women like Nicole need to prove anything anymore. I ask her what she meant by “a man’s world.” Inge says “Regardless of the fact that women are in this field now, we still don’t receive the same respect as the guys. I may throw out an opinion here or there but it falls on deaf ears unless one of the guys comes up with the same thought.” Nicole being the fresh-faced graduate student adds her observations as well. “I could definitely see a difference in the way men and women treat each other here. I was just finished with college so I didn’t understand what the fuss was when I first got here.” She told me that - from her perspective - the guys may kid around but they know when to be serious. She hasn’t experienced any discrimination. If anything, they have been helpful in supporting her in her career giving her advice when asked.

Jim and Bob didn’t interject any wisdom. I honestly think they are afraid of Inge. I’m surprised they stayed as long as they did. The conversation changes from serious to fun when one of the quality guys comes into the kitchenette. He grabs a cup of Jim’s gumbo, takes a taste with a plastic spoon and tells Jim he’d make a great wife some day. Jim sure takes a lot of teasing. Inge swiftly gets up and returns to her desk.

### **It’s all in the family**

A couple of days later I meet with Ron who is a few minutes late for our meeting, announcing he’s debating whether to stick to his Atkins diet or have a bagel and cream cheese for breakfast. Fresh off a 6 am meeting via video conferencing with the commander of Thule Air Base, he is wearing a short-sleeved khaki shirt, no tie, and casual slacks with Dockside shoes.

We talk about how hard it is to be an auditor and scrutinize processes. It may be the processes that they audit but since people are at the helms of these processes, that scrutiny can be detrimental to one’s job and even hurtful. He recalls how he didn’t have a great reputation coming on his first contract. “I was already a horrible legend at Boeing.” Ron laughs. “I’m the guy who wrote up his own mother because she didn’t follow directions properly.” Not only did he write up his mother, he wrote up his father and sister, too, while working as a quality assurance inspector for the federal government in Wichita, Kansas. He explains, “Wichita doesn’t have many places to work. Most people work at Boeing – my family included.” Being a stickler for the rules, Ron says Sunday dinners at the family farm weren’t always pleasant.

I am flabbergasted when he tells me that he wrote up his own mother. I guess there’s no way around those situations if an auditor is going to do his/her job properly. Although I believe Ron may be the exception to the norm. With the days I’ve spent shadowing a lot of these auditors, I do not suspect that all of them are willing to take the job as seriously as Ron did. I’m not indicating that they support nepotism, but I think their approach wouldn’t be so harsh.

Ron is my last interview and the work week is coming to an end. Publications like Rolling Stone are always covering politics and government in a dim light. On a whole,

I'm sure that's true. However, when I witness the worker bees in action and see that it's not all peaches and cream, I understand that their tasks entail some stressful decision making along with "dog and pony shows" for the senior leaders. I think a lot about how their jobs and lives are a balance of good fun and hard work. One other motto that they have is "work hard, play hard." I can see they live up to that saying.

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