Psychological Safety
in the Audit Function

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What We Will Cover Today

1	About QMII
2	Why Are We Here?
3	Creating safety for the auditor
4	Q & A

About QMII

- QMII has provided best in industry process improvement consulting, auditing, and training since 1986
- Headquartered in Ashburn, Virginia
- ISO 9001:2015-certified
- SBA 8(a) and DBE-certified
- Minority-owned business
- GSA MAS holder

About QMII

US Coast Guard	Crowley
FHWA	Harley Marine
US Navy	Interlake
NJ Transit	Indorama
US Army	GE Aerospace
Amtrak	Commerial

Why Are We Here?

Understand how fear, power and silence can distort the integrity of the audit

Understand how to reframe the role of the auditor as a system participant
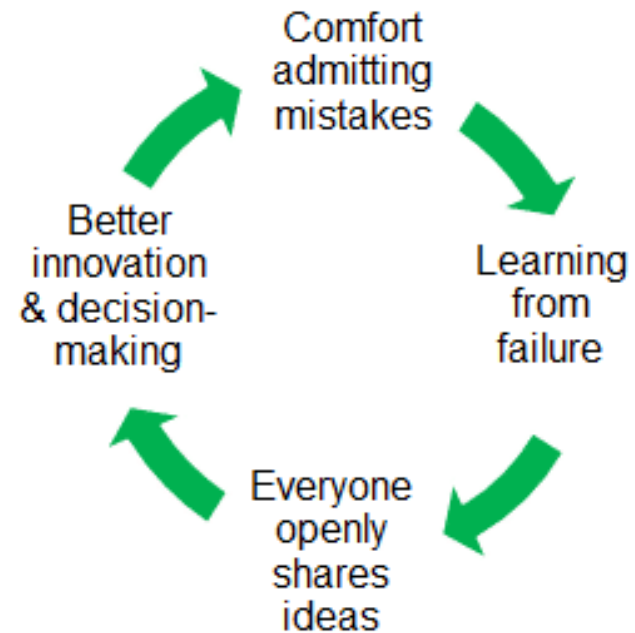
Strategies to ensure audits drive learning and improvement

Psychological Safety

- Coined by Dr. Amy Edmondson: "A belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks"

- It is about candor - of being open and honest in expression

- Critical for honest feedback loops

Source: Leadership Circle

The Auditor's Reality

- Often positioned as neutral, but exposed to tension and politics
  - Someone whose presence signals trouble
- Caught between leadership expectations and operational truth
- Visibility without protection. Responsibility without support.
  - Where audit findings challenge someone's sense of control

"I've walked into rooms where people were more focused on defending themselves than engaging with the truth."

A Paradox of Objectivity

- Auditors are trained to be impartial and objective
 - Can they truly be so? Perhaps an overt desire not to be feared

- "Just follow the evidence" is easier said than done in unsafe systems
  - What if the evidence has been curated prior arrival?

- Objectivity becomes a shield—to avoid confrontation
  - Stick to documents, avoid asking probing questions, reframe non-conformities as opportunities for improvement

Signs Psychological Safety is Missing

- Findings are softened or ignored
  - When people give you the answers, they think you want

- Auditors fear being seen as "difficult"
  - Findings are reworded and reframed

- Repeated issues are rationalized or buried

- Defensiveness in closing meetings
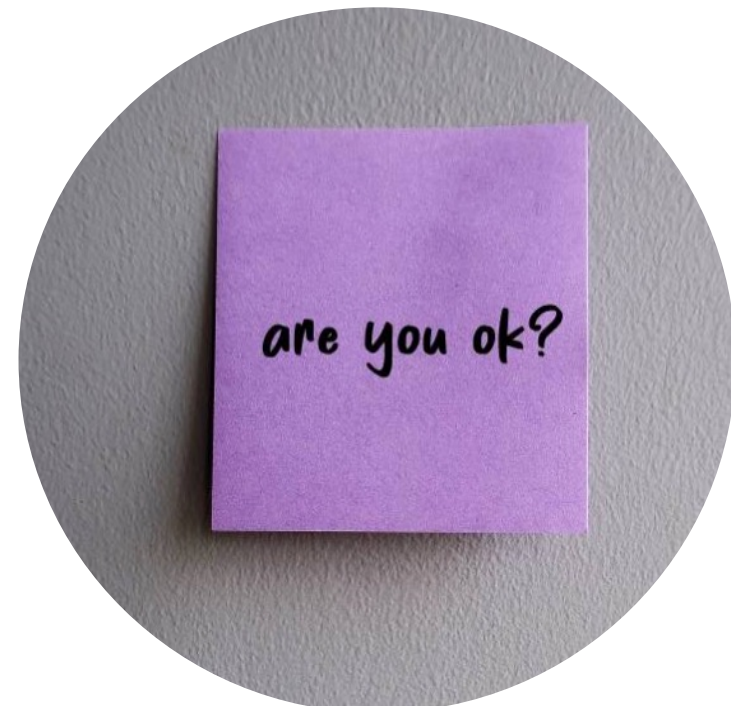
The Auditor as a System Element

- Auditors are not external—they reflect and shape the system
  - Audits are snapshots and they are part of the feedback loop
- Unsafe systems produce distorted audit results
  - Where auditors tend to self-censor
- Findings become symptoms of a deeper cultural condition
  - A direct reflection of the system's maturity

"Auditors are not passive observers - the system will shape their behavior, just as they try to shape it through their audits."

Risks of Ignoring Auditor Safety

- Audit quality suffers—less truth, more polish
  - Vague observations, watered-down reports

- Recurring issues
  - When auditors don't feel safe to challenge the system

- Auditor disengagement and burnout
  - Checked boxes. Inadequate insights.

- Loss of trust in the audit process

"A false sense of security that leads to real failure"

Creating Safety for Auditors

- Leadership sets the tone—do they reward honesty or manage optics?

- Audit findings should be welcomed, not weaponized

- Celebrate "difficult truths"

- Protect audit independence both structurally and culturally
  - Formalize escalation channels

- Encourage honest reporting. Even if it challenges authority

Encouraging the Auditor's Voice

- Normalize "upward feedback" from audits
  - When audit findings are viewed as attacks people avoid the truth
  - Train your auditors in writing non-conformities
- Invite auditors into leadership debriefs
  - Internal auditors can benefit from cross functional learning
- Frame findings as opportunities, not accusations
- Debrief with intent
  - Hold structured conversations where auditors share what they 'sensed'

"Audit effectiveness depends not just on auditor competence, but also on the system's tolerance for truth."

Building a Safe Audit Culture

- Value the truth over the image of perfection

- Audit reports lead to dialogue and systemic improvement not damage control

- Reward transparency even when risky practices or poor oversight is identified

- Audit results feed into strategic improvements

- Auditors accept challenges based on objectivity
  - Train your auditors well!

Reflections….

- Have you ever felt it wasn't safe to say what needed to be said?

- What happens in your organization when audit findings challenge power?

- Do auditors feel they belong or that they must walk on eggshells?

Remember ….

1	2	3	4	5
Protect Auditor Independence	Frame audits as learning opportunities, not fault-finding	Establish safe channels for escalation	Write Non-Conformities well to identify the issue clearly for the auditee	Reward systemic insight

Procurement Options

GSA MAS: 47QTCA20D0050
SAM UEI: E8KYQBSFJ6V6
CAGE: 1GFC9
STARS 8(a) III

SDVOSB Partners
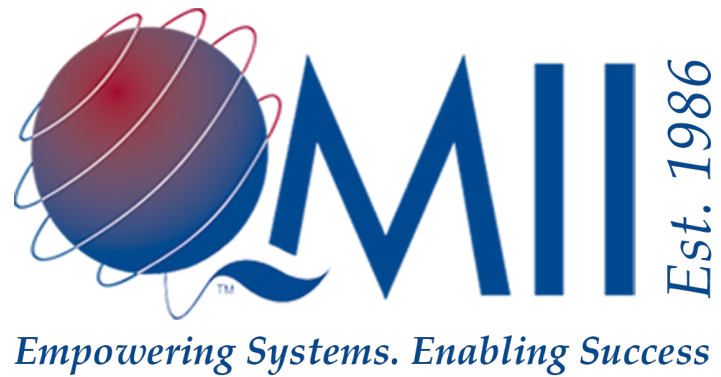WOSB Partners
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Thank You!!!

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