What the Auditor Saw

Another year, another round of adventure activity safety audits. Or, at least, *surveillance audits*, to use that creepy auditing term.

What did I see?

I saw considerably improved safety planning, but I often saw weaknesses around reviewing – staff monitoring, reporting up the line, incident trend analysis, and safety management plan reviews. And I saw some grumpiness too.

Grumpiness

There's grumpiness around time and cost, and that's understandable – it's chunky money. As part of the certification scheme review, the Tourism Industry Association is raising this issue on behalf of members.

However, I did find the grumpiest operators viewing their audit as a compliance exercise ("clipping the ticket") rather than a value-added exercise (an external review of their safety practices). They were especially grumpy when they had voluntarily worked hard to gain qualifications and received little recognition through the audit process for their efforts. They wanted the focus on outdoor leader skills, not on system auditing.

They're right in believing that the leader competence signalled by their qualifications is a key to safety, and I always encourage outdoor leaders to gain qualifications. It's a clearer path to determining competence than an internal process, which was often questionable, eg could I always be sure an internal assessor was competent to assess others?

However, it's not the whole package. The big picture requires more than competent leaders, as the [safety audit standard](#) spells out. It requires operators to plan for safety matters such as hazard ID and management (including drugs and alcohol), staff induction and ongoing training, internal communication, risk disclosure, leadership support, legislation compliance, emergencies, and continual improvement. Operators who had attended workshops or graduated from polytech programmes tended to understand this.

The best plan on the planet

I often saw good induction and training procedures but poor monitoring records. New staff were inducted, trained, assessed as competent, and then assumed to be working to the plan. However, the best plan on the planet is no use if staff aren't working to it, and managers often just assumed they were. Accident investigations sometimes found otherwise, but that's a little late.

Monitoring isn't an easy matter for operators whose staff work alone. Sometimes client feedback was cited as evidence, but if clients know enough about safety to usefully comment, many wouldn't be clients. The cost of observing a leader working is real, especially for small businesses, but what is more important than assurance that your plan is live, well, and driving safety?

Sometimes peer review worked for operators, and I accepted that. Assuming it was formalised and recorded that is, say a standard one-pager that focuses on whether each staff member is working to the standard operating procedures. In fact, peer review may be the best way to develop a positive safety culture.

Tracking data

If you're not tracking safety data, what other client data are you missing? Chris Warburton, TIA workshop facilitator

The safety audit standard requires operators to review a block of incidents, usually a season or a year's worth.

Individually, incidents were usually well recorded and well analysed, although it was often far from clear whether that work changed the operating procedures. Better records of that process – record, analyse, feedback, change – is the next step.

Analysing a block of incidents was not so well done. Sometimes I saw collated incidents only – no apparent analysis, no apparent change to procedures, no change to the hazard register. The hard work had been done but the key learnings weren't teased out, or at least it wasn't clear they had been.

Not that the hard work always included recording and analysing near misses as well as accidents, which former NZOIA President and mountain guide Ray Button called *the tip of the iceberg*. Near misses are free lessons. Recording and analysing them is steadily becoming part of the sector's culture, but nowhere near as frequently as studies indicate it should be. If the operator's safety culture doesn't encourage recording near misses, the trend analysis will be short of data. The alternative is to wait for the accident….

It starts at the top

Large operators tended to be slick at keeping directors up to speed, and small operators usually had owners involved in daily operations.

However, some operators couldn't demonstrate that their directors had approved their safety management system, nor were operators always reporting to them formally and regularly on safety performance. It was sometimes difficult to see that directors were meeting their safety responsibilities.

The journey continues

Occasionally, outdoor leaders with high-level qualifications seemed to imply they had arrived and the journey was over. It isn't.

Good safety planning involves regular reviews. Ideally it involves staff, takes into account both incident trends and complaints, and relates performance to objectives.

I saw a sector getting better at reviewing, but not always getting better at recording the process and updating their plans. It is a requirement of the safety audit standard, but the quality of safety management plan reviews remains quite variable.

So, what's it all mean?

Operators' safety planning has improved. Numerous workshops, guidance from WorkSafe, and the SupportAdventure website have all played a part, not to mention the sanctions inherent to the regulations.

The sector has come a long way in a short time, but monitoring and continual improvement is a work in progress for some. Reviewing is a key part of building a positive safety culture and, in a year's time, I look forward to seeing evidence of more thorough reviews and an even stronger safety culture.

Stu Allan is the Tourism Industry Association's Adventure and Outdoor Project Leader. He's a Skills Active Safety Auditor, NZOIA Board member, and former Principal Advisor, Adventure Activities, WorkSafe.