

Guidance on auditor soft skills and behaviour

About this document

This document is part of the ResponsibleSteel assurance system and therefore mandatory for certification bodies and auditors. It provides advice on key aspects of ResponsibleSteel audits:

- Interviewing stakeholders, in particular workers and local community members
- How to interact with stakeholders and
- The attitude and mindset you should display when engaging with stakeholders

Please note the following ResponsibleSteel documents that are related to this guidance document:

- Assurance Manual: Contains mandatory requirements for stakeholder and worker engagement, for example the types and numbers of workers to be interviewed
- Guidance on stakeholder engagement: We advise to follow this guidance document. It describes principles of good stakeholder engagement, contains a template that can be used to contact stakeholders and provides a generic stakeholder interview questionnaire. It is intended to guide your engagement with stakeholders such as civil society organisations, labour union representatives or authority representatives, not so much with local community members
- Introduction to ResponsibleSteel for stakeholders: We recommend that you provide this document to external stakeholders. It briefly describes what ResponsibleSteel is, why it is important that stakeholders engage in the audit process and how they can provide input.

The document at hand, 'Guidance on auditor soft skills and behaviour', complements these other assurance-related documents.

In case of questions or need for advice, certification bodies and their auditors may contact ResponsibleSteel under assurance@responsiblesteel.org. We also welcome any suggestions on how to further improve this guidance document.

Version history

No.	Date	Description
Version 1.0	05 March 2024	First published version

Disclaimer

The official language of this document is English. The definitive version is held on the ResponsibleSteel website <https://www.responsiblesteel.org>. Any discrepancy between copies, versions or translations shall be resolved by reference to the definitive English version.

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Interviews with workers and external stakeholders

Interviews with workers and external stakeholders are a key source of information and evidence for the auditors. While the content of the steel site's documented procedures, plans or strategies might meet all the requirements, their implementation might not. Workers and external stakeholders can provide valuable insights into how well the steel site's intentions are put into practice. Preconditions for useful interviews are that they are well prepared and well conducted. Even though you might be interviewing company representatives during audits on a daily basis, it is always useful to step back and critically reflect on one's practices. Below, we provide advice on good practice to support further improvement of how you engage with stakeholders, even when you are a highly experienced auditor.

Preparing for interviews

- Use the stage 1 audit to prepare for the worker and stakeholder interviews and put together different lists of questions for different interview partners
- Make sure you tailor your questions to topics that are relevant to the respective interviewee and that they will or should be able to contribute to (see some examples of questions further below)
- Frame your questions in a way that is appropriate to the respective interview partner. For example, you might ask a representative of an environmental authority about "fugitive emissions". Speaking to a member of a local community, do not use such technical terms but rather ask them about "dust from the site", so you don't intimidate them
- Consider the results of your media analysis when developing questions for interviews. Are there environmental, social or governance issues in the public domain related to the steel site that you should address with external stakeholders and workers?
- Allocate appropriate time in your audit plan for stakeholder and worker interviews. Your interview partners will note if you are rushing through the interviews, not really listening, not going deeper when this would be appropriate, and they will likely not be open about their opinions and views. This will have implications for the outputs of your interviews
- Think carefully about how best to contact external stakeholders. Some might use email on a daily basis, others might not, they might not even have an internet connection. The channels for business-related communication can also vary from country to country and region to region. For example, in some cases it might be appropriate to contact them via an instant messaging service like WhatsApp, in others not
- Make sure the steel site understands that they cannot influence or manipulate their workers, stakeholders or you in how and on what you engage with them. Make them also aware that supervisors shall not be present when you interview workers
- Make sure your interview partners are fine with the setting of the interview, i.e. the venue where it will take place, the time of the interview, whether it will be an individual or a group interview. For worker interviews you might need the site to be your intermediary and check with the workers that the interview set-up is fine. If a neutral venue is needed, it is best to do the interview off-site at a place that is not affiliated with the site
- For some stakeholders, for example labour unions, you might want to check if the signing of a non-disclosure agreement is needed. Where there are a number of unions at a site, make sure you speak to

representatives of all of them. In case you are considering interviewing them as a group, ask all trade unions if they are fine with this

- If you have to have to use a translator, assure yourself about the quality of their work. Are they sufficiently competent to deliver appropriate translations? Are they independent of the site and neutral towards the stakeholders?

Selecting workers for interviews

- You as the auditor propose and select workers to be interviewed. The site shall not interfere with your selection process, other than supporting you on an administrative or logistical basis, for example informing you that a certain worker will be on leave when the audit will take place
- Take note of ResponsibleSteel's definition of 'workers' in the binding Glossary. It does not only cover workers that are employed directly by the site. It basically covers everybody that comes to the site to work
- The number of men, women and minorities in your interview mix should reflect the composition of the workers at the site
- It should also reflect the different functions carried out at the site. For example, if the ratio of management level positions compared to steel worker positions is 10 : 100, you should not interview 10 managers and 10 steel workers as that would tilt the received input to the managerial side of things
- When thinking about interview partners, take account of workers that are not directly involved steel making and processing, but that provide, for example, maintenance, slag treatment or canteen services
- You may also liaise with worker representatives and local labour unions to guide you on workers to speak to
- You should also consider the time that your interview partners have been working at the site and aim for your interview partner mix reflecting the mix at the site more broadly

Conducting interviews

- When speaking to workers you should be mindful that they have never met you before and that you need to build trust in a very short amount of time
- Some of the reasons why interviews might not produce helpful insights are that the time allocation for interviews is too short, the interview questions are not meaningful and that subtleties and hints given by the interview partner are overlooked. You should be mindful of these points when carrying out interviews
- Before you start the actual interview, take 2 minutes to introduce yourself, who you work for, why you are there and what the interview is for (see the box below for inspiration). Make sure that the way you speak to your counterpart meets them at their level of experience and professionalism, so you do not come across as superior
- Some people might be nervous because they have never been part of an audit before or have never been interviewed. Make them relax by explaining that you are not there to judge them or their work.

Ease them into the conversation by asking questions about their work, the length of time they have been with the company – things they feel comfortable and confident about

- Be culturally sensitive in your interviews and be aware that there might be systemic issues in some societies, for example due to caste and similar systems of inherited status, or due to widespread discrimination based on religion, descent, etc. In such cases, you should seek to find out what the steel site does to create equal opportunities and a healthy work atmosphere within its own site
- You might address some very sensitive issues with your interview partners, for example sexual harassment. Let your interview partners know that your conversation will be treated confidentially
- Manage expectations with them. You are not a regulator. In case the interview uncovers bad things, you cannot force the steel site to change its ways. Your role is to establish whether the site meets the ResponsibleSteel Standard
- Be mindful of your gestures and posture. For example, do not roll your eyes or sigh as that can alienate your interview partner and make them go quiet
- Pay attention to how you speak, be polite at all times, but not inappropriately jovial, never be aggressive. Not only what you say but also how you say it can make a difference
- People also communicate indirectly through their body language. Watch out for confused looks or defensive postures. Also pay attention to your own body language. You may say the right things to appear neutral, but give away your feelings by shrugging your shoulders or rolling your eyes
- Give them time to think, do not get impatient. If you feel they might not have understood what you are asking, try to re-phrase the question
- Listen and let them finish. If they go too much off track, gently bring them back to the topic of the conversation
- Remember that an interview is not an interrogation. Treat the interviewee as you would like to be treated if the roles were reversed
- When you are interviewing a group of individuals, be mindful of group dynamics. There might be group leaders and followers and you will want to make sure that you also hear from those who are more quiet and reserved
- You will likely interview more than one person about a specific topic. If you get differing answers, you might want to talk to more workers or stakeholders about the respective topic and check back with the responsible manager to see if you have mis-understood anything, all the while protecting the identity of the stakeholders you spoke to
- If an interview partner is providing a lot of useful insight, you might want to let the conversation carry on for a bit longer rather than ending it and missing out on important information. Building some flexibility into your audit plan for stakeholder and worker interviews will allow for this
- Give your interview partner the opportunity to raise any issues that are on their mind and that were not addressed during the interview. You may have overlooked an important process or task they are responsible for
- At the end of the conversation, thank them for their time and leave your contact details so they can follow up with you in case something comes to mind that they think is relevant for you
- Check if they want to see your interview notes once you have reviewed them. If so, make sure you have a way of contacting them. Reassure them once again, that the conversation was confidential and that their name or details of the conversation will not be shared with the site

- Inform them about the next steps in the audit process and where and approximately when they might find out whether the site received ResponsibleSteel certification. You may point them to the ResponsibleSteel website for that purpose where summaries of audit reports are publicly

Suggested introduction to ResponsibleSteel and the audit before starting the interview (please adapt the wording to the local reality and to make sure that the stakeholders understand your explanations):

ResponsibleSteel is a voluntary initiative that has defined a Standard for the responsible sourcing and production of steel. The standard is very broad and covers important social and environmental issues such as labour rights, communities, health and safety, greenhouse gases and air emissions. The steel site has applied to be assessed against that Standard.

The role of my organisation is to find out whether the site meets the Standard. For that purpose I will be spending a few days on-site, visiting workplaces and speaking to many different people, inside and outside of the site. I will also read through a lot of documents and articles to conclude whether the site aligns with the Standard.

Our interview will help me understand whether the steel site manages the implementation of environmental and social procedures, plans and commitments well, how it treats its workers, whether it can be considered a good neighbour – basically whether it deserves to be called a responsibly managed and operated steel site.

You can rest assured that anything you tell me will be treated confidentially, it will not be shared with the site. I would also like to point out though that my role is to establish whether the site meets the ResponsibleSteel Standard. I am not a regulator and cannot force the site to change or stop its practices in case there are any issues.

How to ask questions

- When you ask a question, listen actively rather than thinking about your next question. Thoughtfully consider your interviewee partner's answer
- Ask one question after the other. Shooting off multiple questions at once will overwhelm your counterpart
- Start with rather high-level questions and continue with more specific questions so that your interview partner gets eased into the subject (see some examples below)
- Ask for explanations and examples to ensure you fully understand a process or procedure. Rephrase your question to gain clarification and keep neutral on the subject. Do not take sides and remember that you are fact finding, not fault finding

Using different question styles

Styles of question	Purpose	Example and comments
Open-ended	Open-ended questions invite your counterpart to speak rather freely about a subject and can help you gain an understanding of how procedures,	When interviewing a steel production worker: "Please tell me what you do when you get to your workplace at the beginning of your shift." The purpose of your

	plans and commitments are implemented.	question might be to hear about safety routines. If your interview partner tells you things that are not of relevance (for example, “First I go to the canteen and get a coffee and sandwich”), you might give them gentle prompts without pushing them into giving specific answers. For example, “When you enter the hot strip mill, what are the first things you do?”
Closed	Closed questions should be used only when you need very specific information. You should rely primarily on open questions for expanded responses	“Can I please see the air emissions records for November 2023 for the coking plant?”
Challenging	When you are presented with a picture that seems overly positive you might want to ask a somewhat challenging question.	“We have never had any complaints about anything internally”. Your question could then be: “Have all workers been trained on your grievance mechanism?”
Summarising	To get confirmation of what you have heard and understood you can may a summarising question. It also shows your interview partner that you have been listening to what they have said.	“Did I understand correctly that every worker gets two weeks of paid annual leave in the first year they are with the company and then three weeks in the following years?”
Simple	Simple questions help keep things in plain English and maximise the chance that your interview partner actually understands what you are looking for.	“What if...” questions can help explore how well procedures are being understood. For example: “What if there was a fire in the sinter plant today?”
“Please show me...”	Some people are better at demonstrating things than explaining them.	“Please show me...” questions can be a good way of confirming whether procedures have been understood. For example: “Please show me how you would log a complaint with your employer.”

Styles of questions you should never ask

Styles of question	Purpose	Example and comments
Suggestive	Suggestive questions that force or imply a certain answer.	“You feel accepted and respected by your colleagues, yes?”
Obsolete	Questions that you should have covered when preparing for the audit through, for example, a media analysis	In an interview with representatives of a neighbouring community you ask “Do you have any issues with noise from the steel plant?” when the issue has been widely covered in the local media

Taking notes during interviews

- You will need to take notes during the interviews since you might not remember what was said after a full day of auditing
- Note that it is not at all acceptable to do a voice or video recording of interviews, only written notes on your laptop or on a writing pad are appropriate
- Interviews provide oral evidence and there will only be your notes to back up what was being said. It is therefore important to record certain details in your notes, e.g. who did you speak to, what is their role and workplace, the date and place of the interview. You will also need this information to be able to describe your audit sample and you may need it to raise a non-conformity (without giving away the identity of your interview partner)
- Before starting to take notes, explain to your interview partner why you are doing this (i.e. because you might forget what they said) and reassure them that the notes will not be shared with the steel site, that they are only for your records. If you are not giving a reason for taking notes, the interviewee might think you are breaching confidentiality
- Be mindful not to “hide” behind your computer but to make eye contact with your interview partner and show them that you are listening. You should get used to taking shorthand notes and extend them to full sentences after the interview

Following up interviews

If the interview partner confirmed that they want to see your notes, do not forget to actually send the notes to them so they can confirm that you understood everything as intended

It is good practice to send a personal note to interview partners, informing them of the audit outcome and inviting them to contact you at any time if anything comes up that they think might be relevant for the next audit

Example interview questions

The document ‘ResponsibleSteel guidance on stakeholder engagement’ contains generic interview questions that are suitable for “professional” external stakeholders such as civil society organisations and authority representatives. It is important to complement generic with specific questions that are tailored to the type of stakeholder or stakeholder group that you are interviewing. Below, we list a few questions that you might want to ask to different types of stakeholders. This list is not at all exhaustive! It is meant to get you to think about questions that are relevant to different types of stakeholders and workers.

Questions for workers

Question	Purpose of question
How would you describe the atmosphere in your company and in your team?	This may lead to a conversation about issues such as discrimination, disciplinary practices, equal opportunities, etc.
If you have suggestions for improvements or you have concerns related to your workplace, your team, your own job, your managers, are there ways for you to bring them to the company?	This question can bridge to topics such as worker engagement in H&S decisions, freedom of association, grievance mechanisms, etc.
What kind of support does the company provide to you so you can carry out your work in a safe way and in a pleasant environment?	This is aimed at understanding how the company approaches training and competence, worker well-being, etc.
How would you judge your work-life balance?	This question can bridge to topics such as fatigue management, working time, worker well-being, etc.
If there was a fire or an explosion at the site, what would you do?	The aim is to understand whether the worker is aware of and familiar with emergency response procedures
Are you aware of any activities of the site to promote respect for one another, to build a sense of togetherness?	This question can shed light on the site's implementation of commitments, building an inclusive corporate culture, fighting discrimination and other issues, and communicating with workers
Can you explain to me how environmental measurements are taken at the facility where you work?	This will help you understand whether the worker is aware of and familiar with sampling procedures related to air, GHG and water emissions
What is done with the environmental data that is retrieved?	This can provide insight on whether and how environmental data is taken into account by the site when seeking to improve operations, set reduction targets, etc.
Are you aware of anything the site does to protect the environment, meaning animals and plants in and around the site, the soil, air and water?	This question can shed light on the site's implementation of commitments, on how it addresses issues related to air, GHG, water, biodiversity, and on how it communicates with workers
Do you have any thoughts on how happy neighbouring communities are with the site?	The worker will usually be from a neighbouring community and can provide insight on how the site is perceived by that community. The question can also be a bridge to the quality of the site's stakeholder engagement

Questions for external stakeholders

Question	Purpose of question
How would you describe your relationship with the site?	This question can give you insights into the quality of the relationship between the site and the stakeholder
Do you feel well-informed about developments at the site that are relevant to you / your work?	This speaks to the quality of the site's communication with stakeholders
When you want to raise an issue with the site, what are the ways for you to do so and do they work well from your perspective?	Is the stakeholder aware of the site's grievance mechanism, is the mechanism accessible and does it function to the stakeholder's satisfaction? The question can also shed light on how well the site communicates its mechanism
Do you feel that the site is listening to your concerns and is trying to act on them? Follow-on question if response is negative: What do you think keeps the site from acting on your concerns?	These questions can provide insight into how well the site understands the interests and concerns of stakeholders and whether it is prepared to address their concerns
For how long has the issue been going on? Have you tried to escalate the issue within the company? If so, how and what were the results? Do you have anything to support your complaints? For example, noise/ dust measurements? Have you raised the issue with the authorities and what was their response?	In case there is a long-lasting dispute between the site and the stakeholder, this series of questions might help understand the chain of events and the severity of the issues. In such cases, it is important to clarify to the stakeholder that you are not a regulator and cannot force the site to change or stop its activities
From your perspective, how could the site improve the ways that it engages with its neighbours?	This may help you judge the quality of the site's interactions with stakeholders. If the question uncovers improvement opportunities that the site is not aware of, they might not effectively consult with stakeholders on the best ways to engage them