

The Several Purposes of the OO Crystal Ball

MARY ROWE

ABSTRACT

The Crystal Ball began, in 1984, as a device to help Organizational Ombudsmen (OOs) to anticipate problems that are new to their organizations. This came about by collecting wisdom from many OOs about “new things.” Each OO may collect bits of new information from a whole organization—the Crystal Ball then pulls these ideas together. Over the years the Crystal Ball has proven useful in helping OOs in the important OO task of seeking, identifying, assessing and communicating issues new to their organizations. Crystal Ball discussions have in turn helped OOs to think about how to help their organizations to learn about and manage emerging issues, how to foster and collaborate on systems initiatives when appropriate—and how to follow up. The issues enumerated in this article have included many of the serious problems of our times. The Crystal Ball illuminates one important source of organizational ombudsman effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

Crystal ball, organizational ombudsman, predicting problems, organizational change, disruptive problems, wisdom of crowds

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The author would like to thank David Miller and three anonymous reviewers for their wisdom and considerable help with this article.

The Crystal Ball began, in 1984, primarily as an aid to Organizational Ombudsmen (OOs) in anticipating how to deal with specific conflicts. The Crystal Ball, in addition, has turned out to be an important example of additional functions of an OO and additional aspects of OO effectiveness: identifying and assessing new concerns and conflicts — and areas for systems change — as well as helping to deal with specific problems.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TASKS

Identify concerns, especially those that seem to be “new” to the organization or unrecognized by the organization, and, especially, disruptive concerns¹

Assess concerns

Provide timely information to managers in ways consonant with confidentiality

Help to resolve and manage concerns, as appropriate

Follow-up on specific concerns, as appropriate

Help to support systems change to prevent problems

In the past many employers simply hoped that OOs would help in *managing* specific conflicts. (Some still just consider OOs as an “ADR mechanism.”) However, in modern times many employers are looking to OOs for help in *identifying, assessing and communicating* concerns that are new to the organization. (Sometimes the concerns are not really new but the organization has not yet begun to deal with the given issue.)

Modern employers are especially asking for help in swift identification of new, disruptive and illegal concerns and conflicts. They need early warning of problems that can be addressed through interest-based (ADR) channels — as well as through formal channels.

The Crystal Ball has been a feature of many organizational ombuds conferences for more than twenty-five years. This article presents the history of Crystal Ball discussions, and an illustration of the modern-day, broader significance of the Crystal Ball. It also includes a non-scientific list of topics picked up by ombuds professionals over the years — topics that appeared to OOs to be “new” to their organizations, or largely unrecognized by their organizations.

HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL OMBUDS CRYSTAL BALL

The Crystal Ball began in 1984 as several OOs sat planning the first sizable Corporate Ombudsman Association Conference². The group talked about topics where OOs thought they needed to know more from each other. As an early example of the “wisdom of crowds³” — and as a delightful example of the Crystal Ball itself, since ombuds were seeking “collective wisdom” about the future very early on — OOs decided to put together what they were seeing. *It quickly became apparent that ombuds professionals were picking up some problems very early, in their organizations, and that this might be useful to their managers and others.*

There has been much discussion about *how* and *why* ombuds practitioners are proving useful in picking up new things. We believe we are sometimes able to do this because we strive to be “zero barrier” practitioners, *safe and accessible*. And we sometimes can do this because we are one of the few offices with a view of the whole organization. At times of increasing complexity, when many senior officers have become specialists or regional experts, the OO may be able to pick up *small bits of information from all over the organization — and fit them together in a pattern* — before the pattern is obvious to everyone. And of course one of the purposes of OOs is to be scanning the organization for good ideas and good practices to share.

Over time OOs learned that it is especially important to be on the lookout for any new issue that might be *disruptive* to an organization in terms of needing new policy, new procedures or structures. The list below provides examples.

In the 1980’s, Crystal Ball issues were collected by word of mouth and telephone calls, and on the basis of consulting calls from practitioners who wanted to discuss some new problem. Since the advent of the worldwide web, I have sent out an annual query to organizational ombuds around the world — to ask about “new things” and about issues the profession will face in the coming year. As ombuds responded I have typically sent out further queries about issues that seemed especially interesting to those who wrote in.

In 2010 there were a great many responses to the Crystal Ball query. And, in 2010, there was a “new aspect” to the responses. Along with sadness and grief and concern about the state of the world, ombuds appeared to have dug their heels in, resiliently determined to work for a better world. At least 80 ombuds, of the hundred plus respondents, described systems initiatives where they were working with in-house colleagues to address one or major issues. [http://www.ombudsassociation.org/conference/2010/Crystal-Ball_2010.pdf]. It appears that the “systems” task in conflict management (see **Conflict Management Tasks** above) has become more important.

A FEW TOPICS AS INFORMALLY RECALLED BY UNITED STATES ORGANIZATIONAL OMBUDSMEN⁴

At the turn of the century I tried to remember when I had first heard of an issue in my office. I started with my own first list from 1973. At times of increasing complexity I then sent the list to long-term OOs for additions and comments. The list below was drawn from informal recollections from many OOs. Some issues of course had been well known for years — but OOs have helped to illuminate and even to name a few issues (*like micro-inequities, sexual harassment, and integrated conflict management system*) and to encourage organizations to establish policies and procedures to deal with them.

1973

- Sexual and racial harassment, anti-Semitism, pornography, offensive ethnic images, racial assault and sexual assault, homophobic discrimination, advisories for “targets” of discrimination; many kinds of civility and free speech concerns in a rapidly changing workforce
- Subtle and covert discrimination, which were dubbed “Micro-inequities;” mentoring systems, which were found to be built on “Micro-affirmations;” networks of minorities, and of women — also built on “Micro-affirmations”
- Affirmative action and job posting systems in organizations; equal pay for equal work, equal pensions for men and women with the same record of work
- Non-exempt staff issues — professional job titles, safety in the office, respect, privacy, compensation, career development
- Cafeteria benefits, flexible work-hours, shared jobs, leave without pay — voluntary furloughs (for example, for employees to take exams;); many dependent care issues — parental leave, support for adoption, day care, elder care issues
- Illegal drugs and designer drugs
- Concerns about the welfare of low-income students and employees
- Workplace and supervisory abuse and mistreatment issues, later called “bullying;” managers who would not or could not deal with human resource issues

1974

- Graduate student and post-doc mistreatment issues
- Coordinated non-union dispute resolution “systems” — later called “conflict management systems;” and “integrated conflict management systems;”. “Accompaniment” of disputants in complaint and disciplinary channels, later (on and off) a Weingarten right
- Trans-gender, bi-gender concerns

1975

- Federal contract concerns and alleged crimes—including behavior that was later called waste, fraud and abuse, see also 1986
- Smokers vs. non-smokers

1976

- Systems recognition of academic, scientific, and research misconduct, plagiarism, and interference with the integrity of the work of others
- Whistle-blowing
- Mistreatment concerns from international graduate students

1977

- Conflicts of interest — supervisory, familial and sexual conflicts of interest added to emerging understanding of financial conflicts of interest
- Hazing
- Anorexia and other eating disorders

1978

- Workplace safety concerns with respect to air, fluorescent light, water, early computers, extensive travel, etc.
- Non-union formal grievance channels; complaint channels “parallel” to the line of supervision, for example through HR

1979

- Concerns about some racist acts by international graduate students

1980

- Computer-related crime and mischief
- Beginning to train the workforce not to harass

1981

- Beginning to train supervisors on harassment
- Tensions with government agencies about dispute resolution options

1982

- Fear of GRID, later fear of AIDS
- Computer related strain injuries, later called RSI
- Cutbacks — demand for higher productivity with fewer emotional and financial resources; decline in “loyalty” in the workplace

- Quality Assurance and Total Quality Management as responses to poor service and low productivity, including some “employee involvement”
- Obsessed following behavior, including behavior later referred to as “stalking”
- More focus on building internal conflict management systems with mediation

1983

- Backlash against feminism and women’s programming; attacks on “political correctness”
- Downsizing problems with extensive layoffs
- Concerns about whistle blowing and retaliation

1984

- Religious discomforts and harassment alleged by adherents of many religions; concerns about providing prayer time for Muslims, and tensions between secular and devout Muslims concerning the behavior of women
- Concerns about Satanic cults
- Fear of AIDS
- Fear of violence in the workplace, fear of “lone offenders” and sabotage
- Genetic testing and drug testing

1985

- Cross-culture on the team, miscommunication on international teams; new free speech concerns
- Learning and mental disabilities being given more attention in the workplace; discussions of Asperger’s syndrome

1986

- Domestic violence receives much more attention; discussion of qui tam claims

1987

- Concern about abuse of foreign nationals as students and employees — later discussed as concerns about “internationals”
- Tension reported among and from Asian-Americans

1988

- Challenges to confidentiality of neutrals

1989

- Identity impersonations, later called “identity theft”

1990

- “Political correctness” becomes more salient
- Religious harassment — especially of Muslims, see also 1984
- Beginning to train “active bystanders” about harassment

1991

- Intra-team conflicts as they affect team productivity
- Intellectual property and patent conflicts

1992

- Outsourcing and more cutbacks; offshore cost-savings and lay offs
- Pornography on computers and nets
- “Bullying” in the workplace, now including groups, later called “mobbing”

1993

- Concerns about “Re-engineering” begin
- “This function does not work well” — poor service within the organization

1994

- More “changing workforce” — part timers, different work ethics, many generational tensions; managers with little knowledge of rules and policies
- Unionizing graduate students
- More backlash against affirmative action
- Anonymous vicious attacks (on posters, graffiti, soon to be joined by anonymous attacks on the web, later called “cyberbullying”)
- Racism from and among international students and international managers
- Mergers and acquisitions problems of every kind

- *Integration* of internal conflict management systems becomes a goal
- Distance-learning related disputes; increased stress from high turnover and from extensive travel
- Binge drinking discussions

1995

- Email and voicemail privacy issues
- Poor service, poorly functioning individuals including managers, people “breaking down,” long, slow uptick in mental illness in organizations seen to be quickening

1996

- Intra-organizational computer privacy issues worsened by hacking
- Overwork and overload
- Poor function in whole units (manufacturing and services); more concern about re-engineering
- Conflict of commitment tensions

1997

- Stress, depression and exhaustion
- Scarce experts problems—new technologies sharply increasing the need for rare expertise; complex computer systems problems

1998

- Very complex intellectual property problems
- Conflict of interest problems in start-ups
- Resurgence of concern about every kind of harassment and abuse; gross, insubordinate, uncouth behavior toward supervisors and faculty

1999

- Concern about cynicism increasing in the workplace; “morale is dropping,” people trust much less and report much more bullying

IN THE 21ST CENTURY THUS FAR

- Very difficult intellectual property, research misconduct and plagiarism problems; layoffs, concerns about overwork and acute family problems caused by economic upheavals; fear of violence, terrorism, sabotage; free speech issues; much more religious and ethnic tension; grief and exhaustion; wide generational differences in the work force. Privacy issues and cruel interpersonal attacks have become much more serious with the advent of the internet and social networking. Lack of resources and deferred maintenance have led to many difficulties with “poor service,” and costly errors.
- There are now many more “complex” cases: with multiple cohorts and many issues; with people from different ethnicities, languages, tribal and clan groups, races, genders, ages and various generations, involving inconsistent laws and regulations across multiple national and organizational boundaries, and long-term conflicts. There are more anonymous cases and group cases. Boundaries appear to be blurring with more problems coming in from people outside the organization and members of the organization concerned with outsiders. Bullying and mobbing issues, and high tech crimes — some sophisticated, covert, and vicious — are reported worldwide.

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

Crystal Ball reports now appear to have several purposes and several functions. These reports help each OO with the Conflict Management Tasks described above. And they help to affirm the usefulness of the ombuds profession.

- Crystal Ball reports help to demonstrate the wisdom of having a safe place in organizations to express concerns — a place for members of an organization to say, early on, what is giving rise to worry, and what vulnerabilities are being endured. The platform of principles upon which the OO resides is what makes this possible.
- Crystal Ball reports have reflected vital societal concerns, whether they relate to gender, human rights, or cafeteria policies. Computer-related issues emerged as early as 1980 — when the new-fangled ‘Personal Computer’ started becoming more avail-

able in work- and study-places. The Crystal Ball reports through the decades have anticipated and reflected technological and other societal developments. For example:

Health: AIDS, mental health, stress, depression

Ideology and interpersonal issues: gender, religion and race, micro-inequities, religious harassment, affirmative action, bullying, intellectual property

Integrity issues: waste, fraud, fabrication, plagiarism and all academic and research misconduct, crimes of all kinds

Computers and the internet: computer crime, pornography, cyber-bullying

Job security: international vulnerabilities, cynicism, economic fear and want

Internationalism: economic interdependence, cross-cultural dependence, terrorism

- The Crystal Ball has benefits for organizations:

Collective wisdom provides a 'weather vane' for policy lacunae and defects and development;

Collective wisdom enables OOs to share and learn from each other when facing new challenges — to assess "new" issues — and to share good ideas and good practice;

The Crystal Ball supports OOs to give early warning to organizations about what matters to its workforce, and enables evidence-based data for policy development;

Collective wisdom enables organizations to take more timely action, where structural and administrative responses may be advisable.

Crystal ball discussions illuminate OO ideas and methods that are working well.

OOs are sleuths, weather vanes, periscopes, and diviners. The structure and principles of the office make divination of future issues possible. We become repositories of organizational vulnerability, and can more easily detect future vulnerabilities as a result. And we can see and share what is going right when the organization may be consumed with what went wrong.

The platform of principles upon which the OO rests may actually, in view of the Crystal Ball outputs, be more of a springboard. By showing where initiatives are required to ensure difficult situations are responded to appropriately, the OO also has, in the Crystal Ball, an impetus for broader professional evolution. Our relevance is determined in part by the degree to which we can engage with our organizations. The Crystal Ball is more than a mirror of discontent — for the Alert, Complete Ombudsman, the Crystal Ball — a collective gift from OOs to OOs — may help us also to divine our future professional directions.

ENDNOTES

¹ There are of course very few concerns that are really brand-new in the world. An OO may however identify concerns that an organization appears not have dealt with before. It is especially important to take note of "new" concerns that may be disruptive for managers and employees. Laws and policies often follow behind changes in norms, technology, values, and problems. OOs can sometimes help with swift identification.

² There had been only small meetings of COA in 1982 and in the summer of 1983. (COA was a precursor of The Ombudsman Association, which in turn then became the International Ombudsman Association.) I raised several "new" issues: Fear of people with HIV, and unusual religious complaints. I said I had maintained a list since 1973 of issues that appeared to be at least somewhat new to my organization — this list appears below. Carole Trocchio, the OO from Southland Corporation (who at the same meeting proposed the Code of Ethics which has largely stood the test of time) immediately called for a "Crystal Ball" at all conferences. She suggested that it was important for all OOs to identify and communicate problems that appeared to be new to our organizations.

³ *Wikipedia* describes this concept in this way: The wisdom of the crowd refers to the process of taking into account the collective opinion of a group of individuals rather than a single expert to answer a question. This process, while not new to the information age, has been pushed into the mainstream spotlight by social information sites such as *Wikipedia* and *Yahoo! Answers*, and other web resources that rely on human opinion. This process, in the business world at least, was written about in detail by James Surowiecki in his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*.

⁴ This list has been substantially corrected, revised and edited from an earlier list sketched out in 2000.