

# The Functions of an Organizational Ombuds

Working Paper ©2018 Mary Rowe, PhD

MIT

The first task for an ombudsman is to work to build enough of a relationship with each stakeholder and stakeholder group to be perceived as *fair, safe, accessible, and credible*. The second task is to help all managers and employees and all constituents actually to *understand* the organization's conflict management system (CMS), its options and its resources. And even to help informally to coordinate an integrated system (ICMS).

**The basic functions.** Many constituents move around constantly. Few people listen well. Few managers respond promptly to calls for help—in fact few managers are able to respond timely to any communication. People joke, "Nobody reads the rules anymore." Few people understand their options when they have a problem. In this context, for many OOs around the world, the most basic functions of an OO include:

- delivering respect, and good "customer service" to all, for example, affirming the feelings of each person involved in a concern, while staying explicitly impartial on the facts of a case, responding as quickly as possible when called, endeavoring to build some degree of relationship, exemplifying a commitment to addressing issues in a fair and equitable way,
- active listening, probing respectfully, serving as a sounding board, providing an "opportunity to be heard," and always alert to the possibility of an emergency.
- providing and explaining information, one-on-one, for example, about policies and rules, and about the *context* of a concern, providing a voice for fairness,
- receiving vital information, one-on-one, for example, from those reporting unacceptable behavior—criminal, safety, national security violations, and the like—to aid in getting that information where it needs to go,
- helping individuals and groups to make sense of their experiences at work,
- reframing issues as appropriate, illuminating the context, and facts and feelings that might have been overlooked, helping people understand what has happened to them.
- helping to develop options, and then helping to evaluate the pros and cons of all the choices for the issues at hand.

**Helping people to help themselves.** In their direct work with those who call upon the office, the OO's orientation is to work with callers to develop some of the skills the callers will need to deal with their issues in context. OOs try to provide "just-in-time" support in learning about effective negotiation, one-on-one, in a way that is tailored to individual and group needs. These functions include:

- offering the option of referrals to other resources—including "key people" in the relevant department, managers and compliance offices, and all relevant support services,
- helping people help themselves to use a direct approach, for example, helping people collect and analyze their own information, helping people to draft a letter about their issues, coaching and role-playing to help people learn to negotiate and to engage in timely problem-solving. This is the function of teaching people "how to fish," rather than "giving them a fish."
- helping people to find or start responsible affinity groups for mentoring and networking.

**Informal intervention.** Often those who come to the OO do not want or need direct intervention from the OO, or at least not initially. However, there are many situations where an OO may also offer, or be asked, to play a role. Except in the rare case where the OO judges there is imminent risk of serious harm, and that there are no other options, this would be done with permission from the person who asks for help—and of course the OO also has to agree to act. These functions might include:

- offering shuttle diplomacy, for example, helping protagonists to think through proposals that may resolve a dispute in a fair way, while facilitating discussions, in a back and forth process,
- offering mediation inside the organization, bringing various people together,
- offering mediation outside the organization or department, bringing various people together, occasionally using the power of persuasion to get people to consider doing the right thing,
- "looking into" a problem informally, for example checking for new policies, or resource constraints, assessing multiple points of view, checking unobtrusively with staff offices to find out if colleagues have heard about a certain kind of systemic issue;
- reviewing organizational data, anonymous survey information, statistical records of the OO office, to write "systemic reviews;"
- facilitating a generic approach to an individual or group problem, for example, meeting with a unit in turmoil and reflecting back to the unit what is heard, while protecting individual identities, and then offering both formal and informal options; asking management for a certain rule to be monitored or enforced throughout a whole organization. This may lead to

a fair outcome for the problem, while protecting the identity of any individual who came forward,

- "following up" on a specific case, or with a specific unit, with relevant stakeholders.

**Support to the conflict management system.** An OO may serve the whole organization or department and its conflict management system. These functions include:

- finding ways of providing *early warning of an issue that is "new"* and potentially disruptive or costly for the organization or department—by getting back to relevant managers—in a manner consonant with confidentiality,
- identifying and communicating about *patterns of issues*, for example reporting to each senior officer or relevant manager on a regular basis about what comes to the OO office about his or her domain. "A complaint is a gift that can help us improve,"
- working for systems change, for example, suggesting new policies, procedures, and structures; offering or and participating in relevant training about a wide variety of issues in conflict management; serving as a facilitator or resource person to units in turmoil and policy committees; helping to spread good ideas that have popped up somewhere in the organization,
- following up on system change recommendations made by the OO,
- helping informally, and often invisibly, to connect and coordinate all the elements of the conflict management system—in the context of daily communications with employees and managers—as OOs support all cohorts to understand and use the resources and options in the system,
- helping managers to do professional development planning and succession planning.