The ombudsman as an ounce of prevention

By JOHN RODDY AND MARY P. ROWE

What do hundreds of institutions as diverse as General Electric, the World Bank, McDonald's hamburger chain, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have in common? All have created an ombudsman's office to solicit, attempt to resolve, and most important, learn from employee problems.

An ombudsman is a confidential neutral who works with employees and management to resolve problems cooperatively in the workplace. The ombudsman does not infringe on the prerogatives of management, personnel or the employee relations department. The office provides an alternative channel of complaint and communication within a company but does not make, change, or set aside policy.

The businesses that have explored the idea find that the ombudsman discovers and resolves more and different problems than are addressed by traditional avenues. Significant new, unusual, hidden, or frightening problems are the ombudsman's stock-in-trade. Often, these problems indicate larger concerns, for good or bad, which in the ombudsman's absence would not be brought to management's attention. This upward feedback function may be even more important than the ombudsman's problem-solving role, as it provides a constantly up-to-date review of the important internal tickings of the company.

These two valuable, and in the absence of an ombudsman, primarily unavailable functions illustrate why at least 200 American corporations have instituted an ombudsman's office. The November 24, 1986 issue of Fortune magazine reported on this trend, citing the creation of ombuds offices by such traditional employers as Anheuser-Busch, AT&T's Bell Labs, General Dynamics and "many members of the Fortune 500" as evidence of the concept's validity.

The ombudsman acts in several capacities in fulfilling the office's rather broad problem-solving focus. For most complaints and inquiries, the office acts as a resource and a clearinghouse, referring employees to counsellors, social workers, service agencies, or to line management, personnel or other in-house assistance.

Often, the ombudsman only needs to communicate, educate, or just listen to an employee in order to satisfy the concern that prompted the visit. In other cases, the ombudsman will work with an employee in a cooperative effort to develop an integrative, non-polarized resolution to a particular problem or complaint. And finally, in a small but significant percentage of cases, the ombudsman will learn of a serious problem that would, if undiscovered or dealt with insensitively or unfairly, have a substantially negative impact on the company.

These kinds of time-bombs come in many forms. For example, a work group may have falsified research data or test results, violated OSHA regulations in a way that is causally related to a worker's serious personal injury, or engaged in unsafe, unethical, or illegal practices. An individual employee may be seriously sabotaging work or product, have severe drinking, drug, or psychological problems which affect not only him but co-workers as well, or be on the verge of suing the company for real or imagined wrongs. In these instances at least one other person is usually aware of the problem, but probably won't come forward for fear of reprisals. An employee who would otherwise feel compelled to tell someone who could appropriately intervene may fear that management or personnel may be involved in the unusual behavior, and/or accept it as powerless to affect it, or not trustworthy enough to keep such a report confidential.

The ombudsman's existence tangibly represents the company's commitment to behaving fairly and continued on 122
 directly implemented and thereby save face not only for the parties directly involved, but also those who would feel the repercussions of a public dispute.

The potential for problems like these is exactly why Zimmer & Taylor cases exist in every company. In both cases, the employees felt they had no alternative but to litigate. In other instances the employee's seemingly unavoidable alternative may be to call, to become increasingly unproductive, or to reduct to theft, sabotage, or other harmful options in order to "get even." In these cases the result is negative. And the important point is not whether the employee was treated unfairly, but that the company made him feel that way.

The ombudsman is insurance against this type of avoidable loss. The office provides an alternative to the lost-resort solutions that develop into losses of money; perfecting the company's productivity. Over time the ombudsman will averit much litigation; discover uaptors, unethical and illegal behavior; learn of bizarre or psychotic behavior and appropriately intervene; keep valuable employees with the company; and, in both a preventive and an affirmative way, enhance the company's internal and market place images. According to Fortune magazine, if the ombudsman fills only a portion of that promise, the office will pay for itself.

As previously noted, because the office constantly sees the problems within a company, the ombudsman can act as an extended eyes and ears of top management. A more focused application of "management by walking around," by hearing complaints and problems on a daily basis, the ombudsman is able to inform the CEO about such things as policies or practices that are apparently unfair, unattractive, or unproductive. The ombudsman's role is to assist in making changes that are experiencing difficulties, or even patterns, feelings, or ideas that may be useful, harmful or just interesting.

It is a simple but true axiom that the more management understands the company and has a sense of the people who work for it both as individuals and as working groups, the better able it is to plan, set and revise policy.