

The Poster War

An Ombuds Learns about Sources of Power, Helping People Help Themselves, and the Role of Affinity Groups in Bringing About Change

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In 1973, I was invited to serve the President and Chancellor of MIT as their Special Assistant for Women and Work. I was to report only to them and be an almost completely confidential resource for everyone in the MIT community—men as well as women—who had workplace-related concerns. (The only exceptions to the complete confidentiality were the very rare cases that presented an imminent risk of harm.) I was a designated neutral... that is, I was meant to be completely impartial, despite the apparent focus of the first part of my title. And I had no management decision-making power.

The job they gave me turned out to be the prototype of what we now call an organizational ombuds. In effect, I became an early organizational ombuds. But I had to learn how to be one.

That year, while I was “learning how”¹ to be an ombuds, I was invited to talk with several women from an off-campus lab. Would I come to a brown bag lunch? “Come over to see us—if you are able to come, come as soon as you can—and otherwise we will find some other way to meet with you,” said the woman who called me. “We would like to talk about how to find other jobs at MIT or Harvard. Can you help us with résumés? We need to get out of this lab.”

It was a very packed month. I was happy to have been invited to a local brown bag lunch meeting, but I wondered why it was urgent that I should go to the women’s workplace. Was there some difficulty for some of the research staff in being able to get away? I only had time after hours. I asked my caller about the best time and place to meet.

“The reason that we wanted to invite you to our lounge area is so that you could see it.”

“I would love to come over,” I replied. “And please do not quit right away. In fact, could I come over at the end of the day today? And—to see what exactly? Is there something special about your lounge? Would it be okay if I came as late as seven o’clock, after my last appointment?”

“Yes, please, there is something special. I would be happy to meet you here in the evening, actually—you will probably be more comfortable seeing it after hours any way. At least I will be more comfortable inviting you to come here after hours.”

Walking some blocks away that evening I wondered about the lounge. I had seen unusual MIT spaces by this time. Some were decorated in odd ways—the dorm hall painted black, lit only with black lights, the office space with homegrown murals that glowed in the dark. I had seen a wide couch with a narrow waterbed for a “seat,” which made sitting on it feel very peculiar.

¹ See Mary Rowe, ["Becoming an Ombuds at MIT,"](#) *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* Vol. 40, Issue 4 (Summer 2023): 497-504.

(After I had spent an otherworldly half hour trying to sit on it in someone's office, I was told that that couch was used only for sleeping, but I didn't think I could have done that either.) I had seen mobiles that transformed themselves, morphing and whistling when you turned a fan on them. I had seen some captivating holograms painstakingly set up in a lab—one of them was of my boss, which was startling. What would I find in this lounge?

I rang the outside bell to the building. It was a peculiar old building, one of many that were rented by the university from time to time for extra space. It matched a hundred others in Cambridge, old warehouse brick, in the common architectural style I thought of as Early Industrial Park. Had I come too late? I rang again.

A woman came to the door, looked around, and saw that there was no one near me. I was immediately reminded of experiences I had had in Eastern Europe as a student in the late 1950s, when I had wandered around in the outskirts of Moscow or Prague. One would get out of a trolley, walk among apparently unlabeled, indistinguishable buildings in a housing development, to meet someone who had to be careful about an American visitor. Was this woman at the door of an MIT office afraid to be seen with me?

I was ushered into the lounge. It was a large dreary room, with rundown furniture and side tables covered with what I guessed were journals. The smell of cold coffee left for a long time in an aluminum urn mixed in my nose with the smells of old walls and carpet. There were used, stained cups in and around an overly full metal wastebasket with rust around the edge. Could there be coffee dregs in that waste can? I wondered idly. I followed my guide, intensely curious. What was here? Still concerned about the spookiness of meeting with a woman who might be afraid to be seen with me, I was relieved to find that the two of us were alone. There were no elevator noises or other sounds. Probably we were the last ones in the building.

I looked around. There were many tiresome advertisements on the walls—a topless woman selling tools, and large vendor calendars with more of the same. I moved to sit down. I glanced at the side table next to my old leather chair. The table was covered, but not with the usual scientific journals. I glanced around at the other end tables. Girlie magazines were everywhere. Playboy might have seemed like Little Bo-Peep in this environment. I had never seen some of the magazines in the lounge, which seemed to have as much to do with motorcycles and leather as with sex. One of the covers announced an article about SNUFF MOVIES. Quickly I counted magazines, counting out loud. Maybe there were as many as fifty? Feeling very ill at ease, I glanced at the woman who had asked me to come.

“There are many more magazines than just those that are here,” she said quietly. “Some of the men have a shelf in the office.”

I was speechless for a bit. As so many times before in my new environment I just waited, giving myself space to think. (*Ask a question*, I thought to myself. *You do not need to say anything profound*.) “What is it like to work here?” I asked.

“The magazines are not the worst. The worst is the effect this place has on the men. There are only two women in the whole big group on this floor and three women upstairs—same group,

same scene. They sometimes bump into us as a “joke.” They make jokes. They mock-proposition us, big joke, sometimes specifically, and sometimes by innuendo, and they ask us questions about our sex lives. If you stand in front of that window over there, by daylight, they will talk about whatever clothing they think you have on under your dress and about how it fits you.”

“Surely you have talked with your supervisor?”

“Of course we have, and many times. He says that he cannot do anything. We are new to this lab; all five of us would like to work somewhere else.”

(During those early days in the 1970s, I heard from many talented people wanting to get out of disrespectful work groups.² Many just wanted to do their work, practice their professions, and did not want to be seen as “complainers.” Many of these people knew they had options, and did not want me to intervene, much as I often wanted to do.)

After some discussion with the woman who had invited me to see the lounge, we devised a plan. Like so many others, the women in this lab were sure that it would damage their professional image if I said anything to anyone. We agreed that the five women in this group would go the following day to the section head and ask to have the magazines removed. The woman who had initially contacted me would telephone me afterwards to let me know how it went.

I waited and waited for them to call. I kept looking out of my window, thinking about the lounge. There was no call. I dreamed about the department that night and woke up scared and angry from a dream in which some faceless man in the department had asked to see me.

The following afternoon, my caller telephoned me to apologize. The five women had not been able to get an appointment with the section head. They would try again. I tried not to think about my visit to their lounge.

Some days later, they called back—two women on the line this time. I thought one was perhaps crying a little. The call was brief. The section head had talked about how the magazines were simply “erotic art” and how different people had different tastes and anyway, he asked, “Why look at the magazines and calendars if you do not like them? Just don’t look at them!”

I kept thinking to myself about going to leadership. (I knew *my* bosses would act if this went to the top.) So, I asked the women again if they would permit me to go to the head of the department? “No,” they said; they all would go. They were very concerned about how they would be perceived if anyone knew they “went outside the department.”

I kept trying not to think of the wretched place. I learned again, as we all know, that it is difficult to “not think of” a certain subject, especially if your feelings are engaged by the issues involved. I made lists about what I had seen. I sketched the lounge on a bit of paper showing the locations

² See Mary Rowe, [“BELONGING—The Feeling That We ‘Belong’ May Depend in Part on ‘Affirmations.’”](#) *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* Vol. 16, No. 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024), for a story from 1973 of a talented Black administrative assistant whose coworkers seldom spoke to her.

of the wall-posters, trying to see if it was physically possible “not to look at” the calendars on the walls.

Finally, my caller phoned me at my office, after work. “The department head told us that this is a matter of academic freedom,” she said, and, also, asked why the women were “wasting time thinking about this instead of getting the work done.” She said the women were despondent, and they all were going to look for other jobs. We planned that I would meet with them and help work on their résumés and talk about networking possibilities in Cambridge and elsewhere. I too, was discouraged. It was a Friday. I mused over the weekend about getting permission from the women to talk with HR about MIT developing a posting system for Jobs Available across the university.³

Monday morning, I got a call. “We have an idea about what to do. We will let you know.” They said they had a plan, it might take a couple of weeks, but they were pleased with the idea, they said. There was something about a shopping trip and somebody’s husband. I was concerned, but the woman on the line seemed more cheerful and reassured me that they thought things would be okay. There was a lot of work to be done in the next few weeks, they were preparing for a project officer’s visit, and they would get back to me. And if things did not go well, they were all prepared to leave. With no better ideas of my own—the women had told me not to go up the ladder or otherwise intervene—I asked if I might at least call back in a couple of weeks.

Two weeks later I got an update from the two women who had called me earlier. One of the other women who worked in the building had gone with her husband to a red-light district in her city and had bought a large poster of a nude male. The poster was said to be very tall and “depicted a gentleman,” they said, “in a highly turgid condition.” This woman had put up the poster in the lounge, at 6 a.m., in place of one of the calendars. One of her male co-workers came in early and was going to tear down her poster, but she rescued it without a word and hid it in her office. She sat back to wait for the visit from the sponsor—a small team of scientists from out of state.

When the sponsor team came, the magazines had been piled in a corner, the calendars were stowed away. Fresh coffee was available, in china cups, windows had been opened, and the carpets had at last been freshly vacuumed. The woman with the poster put it up, in a prominent place in her own office, with a little legend underneath which said *...when I look at a man, all I can see is his body*. She left the door to her office open, so that the poster was visible from the hallway.

The sponsor’s project team came and went. The woman was called to a meeting with the supervisor, the section head, and the department head. They were very angry. She said nothing. They asked how anyone could act in a manner so unprofessional. She waited quietly, so I was told, for many minutes as first one and then another of the managers expressed outrage. When at last they drew breath, they asked her if she had anything to say for herself. I was told she looked up and said, in a measured and civil voice, “Gentlemen, *you* have said it all; you’ve said everything that should be said.”

³ A job posting system was later put in place; that was one of several systemic changes that this case helped to support.

The lounge got cleaned up. I also met with the group of women to develop the version of the story (with many details changed) that I was given permission to tell—as I am telling it here. (They promised me also that they would safeguard The Poster.) As I checked in later, I learned from the women that the sense of a team—a sense of community—in that building had distinctively improved. The whole building was now one working group. It was as if the women were seen to have handled the matter directly, quietly, decisively, effectively, and in-house. (Or, as one of them said to me, “We took this on man to man.”)

And I learned a lot.

I learned a great deal from this case about unexpected sources of power in human interactions, that is, in negotiations. Sometimes “legitimate authority,” to wit, the line of supervision, is not trusted to be “available” to get something done. Moral authority, strong relationships, humor, a brilliant idea, and commitment power (not giving up) can sometimes make a difference. Acting as a group helps a lot. And it was very important to the group of women that they had a fallback position, a BATNA (a Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement).⁴ They knew they were talented and were willing to go get other jobs.

A different individual or affinity group might not have had all these “sources of power,” but sometimes thinking about power helps. I developed a list of Sources of Power⁵ in negotiations that has often helped in developing options with visitors to the ombuds office who would come in saying, “there is no way out—I am trapped.” I had already been developing a mode for myself of working with visitors who brought concerns to my office to develop options from which they themselves could choose.⁶ My hope was to help visitors feel they were *not* stuck with just one path forward.⁷ And sometimes, as in this case, the process resulted in identifying new options—actions that complainants could take on their own.⁸ From this case I learned a lot about the ombuds function that now is called “Helping People Help Themselves”⁹ (if the visitors so choose.) It was important for me to learn that I need not intervene directly to help people. Being a supportive listener and a questioner can often help people handle a situation on their own.

⁴ See Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, 2nd ed. (Penguin Putnam, 2006).

⁵ Mary Rowe, “[Sources of Power in Negotiations](https://mitsloan-php.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-faculty/sites/84/2023/08/18131605/Mary-Rowe-List-of-Sources-of-Power-in-Negotiation.pdf),” <https://mitsloan-php.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-faculty/sites/84/2023/08/18131605/Mary-Rowe-List-of-Sources-of-Power-in-Negotiation.pdf> (Note: This one-page list was compiled for MIT Sloan course 15.667. It is also available in a [longer, annotated version](#) that includes examples and a table.)

⁶ For a case with many options, see Brian Bloch, David Miller, and Mary Rowe, “[Systems for Dealing with Conflict and Learning from Conflict—Options for Complaint-Handling: An Illustrative Case](#),” *Harvard Negotiation Law Review* 14 (2009): 239-247.

⁷ For a discussion about why a choice of options helps those with concerns, see Mary Rowe, “Options and Choice for Conflict Resolution in the Workplace: Complainants Should Have More Choice About How to Complain,” https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/155962/Rowe_CH_1993_Options-Choice-Preprint.pdf.

⁸ For examples, see Mary Rowe, “[‘Drafting a Letter’ for People Dealing with Harassment or Bullying](#),” *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* Vol. 16, No 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024).

⁹ Mary Rowe, Timothy Hedeem, and Jennifer Schneider, “[What Do Organizational Ombuds Do? And Not Do?](#),” *The Independent Voice*, International Ombudsman Association, September 2020; and Mary P. Rowe, “[Helping People Help Themselves: An ADR Option for Complaint Handlers](#),” *Negotiation Journal* Vol. 6, No. 3 (July 1990): 239-248.

This experience also taught me about the effectiveness of affinity groups and worker voice. In decades at MIT, I met with dozens of affinity groups who came to the ombuds office with hundreds of good ideas and important concerns that led to needed changes—just as this small, informal, affinity group of five women achieved an important change.¹⁰

In fact, the actions this small group of women took indirectly helped to bring about effective change at maybe a dozen other sites at MIT that also had had many pornographic posters. And the group helped to inspire a 1973 statement by the then-MIT President against harassment, seven years before the EEOC Guidelines of 1980.

And the example helped elsewhere. After The Poster War, other groups of women—in organizations around the country—would sometimes call me about girlie calendars and posters, pornographic magazines, distracting and depressing cartoons on bulletin boards, and distressing posters announcing some professional event with a picture of a partially nude female body to attract attention. Many posters were also racist, sacrilegious, or disrespectful of disabilities and body shapes. On occasion, I would quietly tell this poster story. And, not infrequently, I heard from colleagues around the country that calendars came down.

¹⁰ For some examples of changes that took place at MIT, see Mary P. Rowe, “Mary P. Rowe Research and Publications Biography for MIT Archives and MIT Sloan,” <https://mitsloan-php.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-faculty/sites/84/2023/10/24190750/Mary-P-Rowe-Research-and-Publications-Biography-with-10-2023-updates-1.pdf>.