

# Becoming an Ombuds at MIT

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## I. Coming to MIT

Realistic souls might have hesitated to take a job they knew so little about. And they might have hesitated to throw their hearts and souls into an *organization* they knew so little about. Also, it was winter—hardly the season to throw heart and soul into anything. This was five years before the Great Blizzard of 1978 but still, it was mid-winter and a very gloomy February day in 1973 when I started my new job at MIT.

I was the new Special Assistant to the President and Chancellor for Women and Work. I would report only to MIT President Jerome Wiesner and Chancellor Paul Gray, as an independent resource for the Institute available to anyone in the MIT community.

I climbed snowy, unwelcoming concrete steps between great forbidding columns and shivered into a slippery, gloomy, medieval hall, the entrance lobby of MIT. “Entrance lobby” was hardly the word. It seemed to me like the Lincoln Memorial—high ceilings, very high ceilings—and side halls. I was to be met by a student. Should I have come in earlier and found my office, gotten out of my thick winter coat, brushed my hair, and changed out of my snowy boots?

As I now try to recall the details, a young woman immediately came up to see me, calling my name. No escape—a bright, lively person ready to welcome me. And her manner was professional. “What are you planning to do at MIT?” She did not intend a long interview. She was just collecting my “first thoughts.” I was relieved that she did not have a camera. I had no idea what to answer.

I had the first of many moments of speechless uncertainty that could have blossomed into a bit of panic; moments which were to characterize my first year at the job. I had no plans for what I was going to do. What do you say when you have no answers in your first interview? In a moment of clarity, I thought wryly, “Tell the truth.” As I remember, I smiled and said, “I do not know the Institute at all. Perhaps you could just tell people that if anyone has any ideas how to improve the quality of life at MIT they might please call or come see me?”

Many people called or came to see me my first full week. They were faculty, staff, students, employees, a past President of MIT, a custodian. Many men and women came to see me or called. They were kind, focused, and very lucid about MIT. Disconcertingly for me, however, they had all kinds of different ideas.

When I came to MIT, I was an ivory tower research economist of the kind that many people know. That is, I had little experience of the real world, albeit a little training in building conceptual models. What was I to do with dozens of different observations about my new workplace, my new professional home?

As a cheerful young feminist, I expected to hear different thoughts from women than from men. However, this was not the issue that faced me. I could not seem to fit all the advice and suggestions and concerns—and stories—into any models at all. In particular, the women did not agree with each other, and neither did the men.

I fell back on my painstaking professional training. What, after all, does an economist do? Look at facts, of course. I would “collect the data.” I would try to do anything that I could think of to help anyone who came to see me — and in addition, I would “collect the data.” (This seemingly profound idea comforted me and helped me feel less at sea). I kept notes. For months, I wrote a sentence or two about each of the concerns and suggestions brought to me—anything that any of the visitors to my office said or described or complained about. I used an obscure method of coding, and I left out the identities of those who came and called. I did, however, try to keep track of the issues that came in. I listened and listened and sometimes gently asked questions. I painstakingly responded as soon as possible to every single note I got. I tried to imagine how to help and support everyone who came in, and, if possible, how to use what I was told to help MIT.

I tried to listen to everyone as long as they wanted to talk. At the beginning, this was probably because I understood so little about MIT; I remember being happy when people talked in great detail and at great length — it helped me to understand my strange new environment.

Happily enough, this practice of “long-listening” turned out to be an important professional tool for the ombuds profession I was later to help to

develop. When people are very angry or upset, and also when they have good ideas to offer, they may need a lot of time to talk. Some people will express their fear and anger and grief before they can get to thinking about constructive options in life. Some people have just a general intuition about what should happen next—and they learn more about their ideas through the process of talking about them.

I walked all over MIT, which seemed large even in those days. I aimlessly scouted the many numbered buildings. I followed dozens of halls that mainly seemed to be a sort of muddy-sandy color. I later learned this paint was improbably called “Institute white,” that is, about the color of an old sneaker. I explored into and around buildings identified only by noncontiguous numbers and only rarely referred to by their names.

(Had the buildings been numbered in the order of their being built? How could this impractical numbering system exist in an institution dedicated to science, measurement, technology, and the transparency of scientific theory? I made little maps for myself—my coming to MIT preceded the excellent maps now available—and I allotted an extra half hour to get anywhere, turning unmarked corners, walking down very long halls, and sometimes getting lost. The worst time I got lost was in a relatively deep tunnel under one end of one of the many connected buildings collectively called Building Twenty. There, for some reason, a fire door or some other kind of door closed behind me in a then unlit part of a tunnel. I thought instantly about the story of the *Cask of Amontillado*, where someone gets sealed into catacombs. My children were still quite young. Would I ever be found?)

At the end of my first several months I had a long laundry list of all the ideas and complaints and suggestions that had come to me. I was ready to seek an appointment with President Wiesner, a man I hardly knew. My list was, I thought, elegantly complete and exhaustive. In it, I had included a few brief notes from almost every visit. I remember being pleased with myself for having collected the data so comprehensively.

I had no satisfactory idea how to characterize the concerns and no way to know if these concerns were a “sample” of anything. I reasoned that I had a “case study” so far, and the only proper way to present these “data” was to present a “universe” of the reflections people had brought to me. I was quite proud of my painstaking recordkeeping, especially since I had taken

care to be sure that each sentence describing each contact with me was free of identifying detail. I was also pleased with my preparation to report “just fact” in this institution of science and technology—with no interpretation or opinions. (And, of course, I was comforted to realize that reporting the facts by themselves might relieve me from having to understand all that I was hearing.)

Alas, as it turned out I was not prepared for what was to come. I was not experienced enough to understand that my exhaustive list could also be exhausting. I also had not realized that the lack of identifying details might make some of my careful reporting somewhat hard to follow.

I had not anticipated that a chief executive might not *want* to hear about all the problems in his organization. I did not know enough to realize that a chief executive does not necessarily know or hear about the commonplace meanness and infelicities, and the small, painful incompetencies of the mundane work environment. (I was to learn over many months that most people do not misbehave directly in front of an honorable senior manager. It is therefore possible for a very good manager to be considerably insulated.)

Finally, I did not know that this chief executive, mild mannered and usually rather quiet, was capable of deep anger. When “meanness” actually was cruelty, when infelicities actually represented discrimination, when incompetence seriously interfered with someone’s life at MIT, my new boss could get very angry.

So, modestly pleased with myself, I made an appointment with my new boss. Fortunately, it was at the end of the day. “Sir, I thought you might like to know what I think I hear?”

President Wiesner was not a large man. He often dressed in a rather rumpled gray suit and seemed not quite to fill his large chair. He was very attentive. He sat quietly with my long list of concerns, reading very slowly. He did not skim.

His face would flush. He asked many questions. To this day I remember some of those questions, and in retrospect I realize how insightful they were. My boss never asked me a question about who had come to see me, nor asked me to identify a person who seemed to be the problem in a given concern. But this President was quite angry, and he asked a lot of

questions to understand the perceived problems laid out on the pages in his hand. He was sober faced and quiet.

To my great relief—after at least an hour—he finished reading the last page. He fell completely silent, and he looked at the floor. I looked at the floor.

In the long silence, I reminded myself that I was theoretically on leave from my former job at a consulting company, and that my dear colleagues there had said they wanted me back. I reminded myself that I was used to just sitting in silence. I also was quiet because I was quite abashed about what I had done (although I also was not clear just what I had done). Finally, he looked up quizzically.

“Mary,” he asked. “Did MIT have any of these problems before *you* came?”

I had a moment of speechless uncertainty. I continued to look at the floor. I kept thinking that it would be okay to go back to my family who loved me. Finally, I looked up.

He was teasing me. This profoundly intelligent man had an extraordinary sense of humor. As I got to know him a little, I would notice what he sometimes did when faced with a new problem. He could cycle through a spectrum of all logical solutions. He might mention various unlikely and improbable possibilities, and maybe some possible options; he might perhaps continue through other very unlikely ideas, all without commentary or censoring.

(All by himself he was following the rules that later would become popular for “brainstorming” in a group. However, he was brainstorming within his own head. Listening to this process could be unnerving until one got used to it. And then—of course—listening to my President opened up wide worlds of thinking. Later I would hear a world-famous scientist talk to me about what it had been like to come to the Physics department at MIT. A very bright man, this physicist had been used, all his life, to being much brighter than everyone else. He spoke of his then having come to his department at MIT and of meeting the occasional person who would do “cartwheels and pinwheels” of the mind, “far beyond (his) own capabilities or those of anyone else (he) had ever known.” Here in the President’s office, I was watching just such a man. My boss was thinking to himself—

and he was also just teasing me with one of the ideas that had crossed his mind.)

Scientist and engineer and remarkable humanist, the President seemed to have taken in all that I had written. I asked him if he had any instructions for me? He looked up, immediately and thoughtfully, with three instructions: “Help each person, on a completely confidential basis, as well as you think you can. Look for any idea or issue that is *new*, or that surprises you. And Mary—make sure that no problem ever happens here twice.”

Later he was to add more instructions. One occurred after he read something I had written (with permission) about what seemed to be the mistreatment of a woman professional. The Chancellor called me in and said the note had dismayed the President. I was never again to present a one-sided point of view. I had prided myself on presenting “just the facts” of the concern as the woman professional saw the story. I had, nevertheless, alas, presented *the point of view of only one side*. My new bosses required me to learn to be impartial—a “designated neutral”—in the President’s Office.

The last instructions came after I had been working at MIT for about a year. I was told to be sure that I quietly got back to line management—in some way consonant with the confidentiality of my office, a concept the President always affirmed and confirmed—every time I came to learn something that could help a line manager manage better. If I did not get permission from my visitors, I sometimes might not be able to say much—but sometimes I might find a way to talk at least a little about the *issues*, even if not at all about *individuals*.

The President was not interested in annual reports and in fact for some years I was gently told not to make one. He was also (usually) not interested in punishing anyone who had made a mistake, so long as the person had acted in good faith and with integrity. What *did* matter was getting to line management to try to make things right. The MIT President was a scientist and an engineer — he wanted “faults in the system” to be identified and assessed, and then he wanted line management to get the problems resolved.

As I write, many years later, I see how remarkable this attitude was. A keen lament today, among organizational ombudsman colleagues all over the

world, is that senior officers do not necessarily want faults in the system to be identified.

And as I write, I see the broad elements of what are now the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice for an organizational ombuds: confidentiality, neutrality or impartiality, independence, and informal practice. “Informal practice” meant that no one could be required to come see me; everyone who came to me came voluntarily. I had no managerial decision-making authority, and no formal powers of redress. I did not speak for MIT. Coming to see me did not put MIT “on notice.”

I also had a fifth and sixth charge: to look for issues or ideas or patterns that seemed “new.” And I was—in ways completely consonant with confidentiality—to foster and support appropriate systems change. The President really wanted to catch problems early and to “prevent problems from happening twice.”

These specific job descriptions came iteratively, gently, and elegantly from my very gifted first two bosses. The President and Chancellor of MIT understood the importance of near-absolute confidentiality. They were committed to what later came to be called “continuous improvement,” that is, that managers should work constantly to make the Institute a better place and therefore always needed timely information about problems. In order to help people bring forward this information, I would need to be near-absolutely confidential, so people could trust me enough to bring delicate and painful issues.

One day I asked them, “What if I make a mistake? What if I am *too* confidential and fail to convey an issue to line management? What if MIT gets sued because I was alleged to have known about a problem?”

The President said, “We will take that risk. It is *less than the risk of the MIT community not trusting you to protect their privacy, and therefore not coming to you about a problem.*”

My two new bosses were explicit and clear about this: they were willing to take some risks by instructing me to keep the confidence of those who called me, in return for knowing more about their Institute. They believed MIT would reduce the risk to itself by reducing the risk its people would face by discussing an issue. *And* they were willing to look squarely at the issues that I brought to them.

Over the years, the President and Chancellor instructed me with courage and insight, and helped me develop the ideas of confidentiality, neutrality, independence, and informal practice for the job that is now called “organizational ombudsman.” They affirmed the functions of helping individuals, *and* pursuing steady state systems change. The key to my job was to try to help a whole institution understand itself, and constantly improve, through support to leadership and managers—while supporting individuals. My bosses wanted to build systems that monitored themselves, were able to repair their own faults and were able to develop creatively.

## **II How it happened that I took the job at MIT**

I was acutely embarrassed by what I had done. In the fall of 1972, a woman professor at MIT—I think she was one of seventeen women on the faculty at the time—had called me at work. I was happily working at a consulting firm in Cambridge, as a day care economist. As we talked, I looked outside, across my broad desktop. I was looking out through a huge glass window at my little son playing outside at the day care center we had started at the consulting firm. I loved this job. My mother was a Grandmother in Residence at the day care center. My colleagues seemed much more talented than I; I knew I was learning every day. It was a perfect job for me, thinking about the lives of women and men and children and how to support them.

My caller said that MIT “had advertised a job for a person to report to the President and Chancellor to support the careers of women.”

“Sounds good,” I replied.

“Well it should be good news, but that was many months ago, and nothing has happened—why don’t you apply?”

“But I have a job that I love and .....

“Tell you what. Just apply for the job, and see what happens in the process, and then we will know if there is something fishy going on.”



I must have agreed, but I was acutely uncomfortable all day long thinking about it. At the end of the day, I thought I would have to do something. I had told my caller that I would send in my resume. Then I realized that I could ... just ... send in my resumé. So I did that. As I recall, I mailed my resumé—with no cover letter—to MIT Personnel. The letter might have been marked with the name of the job: Special Assistant to the President and Chancellor for Women. Or it might not have been marked, because, after I sent it, I remember thinking that the letter would get routed to oblivion. I was relieved. Everyone knows what might happen to a random resume in a Personnel Department, and, of course, why should anyone notice such a resumé, if there was no cover letter?

Two days later I got a call from the assistant to the Chancellor. “This is Lillian. The Chancellor at MIT would like to see you about the job as his Special Assistant.” I took a deep breath and miserably thought through options. Could I claim that someone must have sent the resumé in without my permission? Or, perhaps, “There must be some mistake, Mary Rowe is a common name, perhaps this is some other Mary Rowe?”

Faced with my perfidy...I was stuck with the truth. “Lillian, can I tell you what really happened? Someone was just wondering what was happening with the recruitment process for that job. I.... I... I agreed to send in my resume. I don’t know what I was thinking. I am so sorry. Will you forgive me?” I told her the whole story from beginning to end, though carefully leaving out the name of the professor who had called me. Lillian laughed. I hung up, and went back to work, abashed. But I was very relieved that this was over.

The next day, Lillian called back and said the Chancellor would now *really* like to see me. I had to go, I knew. For one thing, in another random moment, I had undertaken to help a major foundation give money to several area universities, to buy released time from senior faculty women to work for the support of women in academe. MIT was on the list of the universities included in my grant proposal to the foundation. I also had been invited to give a major speech at MIT, early the next summer, at a convocation commemorating 100 years of women at MIT. I had to go. So I made the appointment with Lillian. “Good,” she said, “We need you to come right away.”

I went in that same week to meet Chancellor Paul Gray, in a beautiful room looking out over MIT's Killian Court to the Charles River. He had a kind face, a quiet smile, graying hair, little scars on his hands, and an unpretentious demeanor. He seemed comfortable with himself—he was serene within himself, I thought, and I felt immediately drawn to an attentive intelligence and apparent deep integrity. I was quite glad that I had come.

I remember a beautiful piece of needlework on the wall. I do not remember at all what the Chancellor may have asked of me. But *I* asked every difficult question I could think of, as politely as I could, since I already liked him.

I did not want a position that dealt “only” with women—such a position, I thought, could easily be sidelined. More important, after having spent some years working in the Caribbean and in Africa, I had concerns about the lives and careers of people of color, as well as the lives and careers of women.

And, most important, I was very interested in work process as it affects men as well as women. I thought women as a group could never really succeed in paid employment unless men had an equal life in taking care of children. Moreover, if things were to go better for women at MIT they would also need to go well for men; I was thinking about changes in the structure of work and benefits for everyone. One might suggest changes in benefits at MIT, I thought—for example, more support for taking care of children and other family members with special needs.

So I did not want to have a job that was “just” on behalf of women; I was afraid that the job might be defined so narrowly that one could not actually make a real difference. Could I request a slightly different title? That was fine, said the Chancellor. I could have the title I wanted, “Special Assistant to the President and Chancellor for Women and for Work.”

I needed flexible hours because of my three young children. “See if you can make this work,” he said. “You will start an experiment.” As we chitchatted, I tried to get to know him a little. I asked about a scar on his hand. “Wood-working,” he recounted in a friendly way, as he told me about his shop at home. I could see a wedding ring. I asked hesitantly about his wife; what did she do? His answer was full of affection and pride and knowledge, as he described her extraordinary skills in stitchery, and in teaching stitchery.

He spoke of their home and their four children. I glanced up at the wall, at the beautiful hanging and he nodded.

“May I continue my research?” I asked—foolishly as it turned out. I was assigned a little room in the Libraries, which I never once got to, to my chagrin and embarrassment. I was allotted the MIT consulting privilege of a “day a week.” That, too, I used only rarely.

“May I ask, sir, supposing I were to come and listened a lot and found that people thought that you or the President, to whom I will report, were seen to be the source of a particular problem? What would I do?”

“Well, supposing that you could not work it out with me, or the President, I suppose you would go to the Chairman of the Corporation,” he replied. I was impressed.

What else could I ask? I took another deep breath. “Please could I ask you how it is that the search for this position has gone on for so long?”

“Yes of course,” he answered. “But the answer is full of sadness. We did a long search and interviewed many people. We chose an outstanding person and offered her the position a few days ago. She was killed in an accident that very day.”

I was stunned. “Would you be willing to tell me the name of that person?” I asked slowly. The Chancellor named a prominent, brilliant, Black psychologist of my acquaintance. She was older and much more accomplished than I, with a firm and forthright personality. I had recently heard her take a definite position in public on some major issue. And she had in fact been killed in a terrible traffic accident on Route 2. I felt the loss of that extraordinary woman—and what she might have meant for a great university—like a blow. I thought to myself, “These people must be for real. They really want to make a difference if they had chosen her.” I sat for a long moment reflecting.

I asked then one last question. “If I were to come, and if I were to stay for two years on leave from my present job—and if you were to think that I had succeeded in this job—what is it that I would have done?”

The Chancellor looked at me for a long moment, thinking, before replying: “I don’t know that I can answer that. I will get back to you.” I left, puzzled, full of respect for this down-to-earth person, but cautious. I was wondering what would happen next.

Nothing happened next. I did not hear a thing for a few weeks and more or less wrote it off. As I think about it now, however, I think it is possible that MIT was checking my references. I remember learning, years later, from the Chancellor, that he had called the COO of my consulting firm. The Chancellor told me, with amusement, that the COO of the consulting firm had said very nice things about me, but that he had added, “And for goodness sake don’t hire her if you are not serious about what you are doing!”

In any event, six weeks after meeting the Chancellor, I was working hard on a grant proposal with my team at the consulting firm and had pretty much forgotten the whole thing. Then I got a call, made personally by the Chancellor. I was startled and very alert. Was this about to be a polite “No, thank you”?

“I have talked several times with the President, and we have an answer for you. It may not be too helpful because it is not very specific. But here it is. We would like you to do your best to make human beings more visible, in this institution of science and technology.”

Who could resist a job description like this? I agreed to start at MIT some weeks later. I would take a two-year leave of absence from the consulting company. I would be paid at a rate much less than I had been making. But these two years seemed like the opportunity of a lifetime.

As it has turned out, the job was an extraordinary opportunity—and has been—for many decades. The President and Chancellor gave me their own giant conference room, with a beautiful table that nearly filled it, as my office. I was directly across the hall from them, in a location where I could casually “run into” every senior officer.

I have treasured the many handwritten notes from these bosses and every memory I have of them: the President stopping by to crack peanuts, the Chancellor with quiet and compassionate instructions through thick and thin—and each of them capable of telling very funny stories. (And, back to

the reason that I actually came to the interview at MIT in the first place, I am also happy to recount that the Carnegie Foundation for whom I wrote the proposal did generously launch a very significant grant for several universities, including MIT. The Foundation presciently gave money to pay for released time for senior faculty women, to work on helping women students and postdocs. The MIT women faculty who participated in the program created extraordinarily inspiring initiatives for women.)

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