



OMBUDSING IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

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In an era of rapid change, escalating challenges, and growing complexity, the role of the Organisational Ombuds is both more vital and more vulnerable than ever. This article examines the increasing demands on practitioners and programs, arguing the importance of a contemporary, coherent, and adaptive role narrative supported by a knowledge base that meaningfully sustains effective practice in today's organisational environments.

Drawing on personal experience, professional reflection, and a detailed case study, the article contends that Ombuds are increasingly expected to help individuals and organisations navigate 21st-century complexity while operating with a largely 20th-century professional identity and toolkit. It argues that a clear and consistent contemporary role definition, grounded in robust theoretical frameworks, enables Ombuds to engage confidently with modern organisational challenges while avoiding entanglement in the very dynamics they are tasked with addressing.

From this role definition flows the imperative for a comprehensive, contemporary knowledge base. Such a base provides the foundation for an evolving practice that moves beyond transactional conflict management toward the transformative facilitation of systemic insight.

The paper contributes to the ongoing conversation about what contains, sustains, and advances Ombuds practice, proposing critical next steps to ensure practitioners are equipped to meet the increasingly complex demands of our time.

KeyWords: Complexity, Ombuds Profession, Role, Identity, Knowledge base, Theory

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Introduction

As I began to reflect on the turbulent year that was 2024, the pressures of 2025 quickly demanded my attention. What became apparent was that the social, political, economic, and organisational forces that shaped the previous year were not only persisting but intensifying, creating heightened risks for individuals, programs, and the profession itself.

Paradoxically, this made the need to pause, reflect, and draw lessons from the past more urgent than ever. Without that pause, the unresolved weight of the previous year, the immediate demands clamouring for attention, and the strategic imperatives emerging for the year ahead threatened to overwhelm me.

A central theme became apparent to me during this period, which is that Ombuds are being asked to help organisations navigate 21st-century complexity while operating with a largely 20th-century professional identity and toolkit.

Today's organisational complexity arises from the interplay of external pressures and internal dynamics. To engage with confidence and purpose in this environment, practitioners must first have clarity about their role. Role clarity is foundational: it supports effective and ethical practice, promotes consistency, enables the establishment of boundaries, and guides the evolution of the standards, systems, and skills on which practice depends.

When Ombuds step into their role with clarity, confidence, and purpose, the value they bring becomes unmistakable to organisations and their leaders. However, without a clear role definition, or when our role narrative fails to keep pace with a rapidly changing world, the profession risks diluting its distinct contribution, and practitioners risk being pulled out of role. Over time, this can erode trust and confidence in Ombuds programs, placing them at risk and undermining the profession's standing.

The work of shaping a clear, consistent, and contemporary role narrative is grounded in robust, contemporary theoretical frameworks. Such frameworks enable Ombuds to engage with modern organisational challenges while avoiding entanglement in the very dynamics they are meant to help others navigate.

Access to a sophisticated and contemporary knowledge base also provides essential containment for practitioners. A containing environment is a critical precondition to enable meaning making to occur. Meaning making arises from thoughtful reflection and leads to considered action. In an increasingly adversarial context marked by fear and intolerance, this grounding is vital for the work and protective of the worker. It helps Ombuds remain steady, avoid reactivity, and guard against burnout. Reflective practice and a contemporary role definition operate in tandem: the former sustains our capacity to think; the latter focuses our authority, builds our confidence, and creates clarity of action.

Though specific tasks may vary, the core of the Ombuds role remains constant: to create a safe, supportive space that encourages visitors to stay in dialogue to enable reflection and build insight. Insight arises through the difficult work of making meaning from emotionally charged and potentially overwhelming experiences. Central to this process is the ability to build a trusting

relationship grounded in deep listening and genuine understanding of another person's experience. When Ombuds are fully present, they provide the containment visitors need to be vulnerable, explore meaning, broaden awareness, and strengthen their capacity to navigate the challenges of contemporary organisational life (Symington, 2006).

Given the significance of the role and the complexity of the environment, Ombuds practice can no longer rely on personal qualities, experience, or tradition alone. Practitioners require fluency in theoretical frameworks that illuminate the underlying dynamics of the systems in which they work. Contemporary Ombuds practice calls for an understanding of theories that account for complexity, systems dynamics, and group processes, enabling practitioners to discern themes and patterns, contain strong emotions, and avoid simplified reactions and superficial problem-solving. This article provides a case study showing the application of several of these frameworks, not only to support Ombuds in their practice, but also to contribute to the profession's ongoing development (Burton, 2017; Gould et al., 2006; Huffington et al., 2004; IOA, 2025; Rowe & Gadlin, 2016; Lawlor & Sher, 2021).

The purpose of this article is also to begin building a contemporary understanding of the Ombuds role, one that clearly distinguishes the work from that of adjacent organisational functions, and one that firmly anchors the importance of reflective practice in the realities of today's complex conditions. By claiming a clear and sophisticated professional identity, underpinned by protective standards, structured supports, and a robust knowledge base, the Ombuds profession can more confidently articulate its value, and provide essential leadership in an increasingly challenging and uncertain world.

The task ahead is to align our identity and methods with the complexity of our environment, bringing a 21st-century role and toolkit to a 21st-century landscape. The purpose of this article is to commence that journey.

Section 1. The Increasingly Complex and Challenging Environment

“Never has the need for a trusted, independent and neutral program... been greater. Never has the Ombuds role been more important; however, never has managing and maintaining the political, ethical and moral fundamentals of such a program been more challenging.”
(Wright & Miller, 2020, p. 8)

The world we inhabit has become markedly more complex, shaped by a convergence of global disruptions and societal shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep vulnerabilities in government, leadership, and public health, introducing unprecedented uncertainty and transforming how we live and work. At the same time, the escalating climate emergency drives displacement, intensifies inequality, and places immense pressure on communities and institutions alike (Emery & Trist, 1965; Miller, 2023; Wright, 2023).

This complexity is amplified by rapid technological change. Digital platforms, particularly social media, have reshaped communication, creating ideological echo chambers that accelerate misinformation and deepen polarisation. In such environments, misunderstanding and conflict flourish, and difference is frequently met with fear and hostility (Emery & Trist, 1965; Miller,

2023; Wright & Miller, 2020).

These societal shifts are mirrored in political dynamics. A global drift toward nationalism, populism, and isolationism has disrupted long standing international relationships. It has also filtered into workplaces resulting in reduced cohesion, heightened polarisation, and cultures where disagreement and difference are treated as threats to be suppressed (Wright & Miller, 2020).

It is this turbulent environment that makes the Organisational Ombuds profession more critical than ever. Ombuds programs are uniquely positioned to create safe spaces for reflection and to foster dialogue across divides. Yet they operate at the intersection of powerful external pressures and complex internal dynamics, spaces where emotional intensity is heightened and where the foundations of trust, along with the principles of impartiality and independence, are constantly tested (Burton, 2017; Wright & Miller, 2020).

In his 2024 *Year in Review* blog post, Tom Kosakowski highlighted how this turbulence and complexity manifest across the field. He noted that student protests “posed a challenge to Ombuds” and that many practitioners struggled with how to respond. He further observed that “there were no easy answers” to these dilemmas and cautioned that “another social or political issue” would inevitably emerge to challenge Ombuds and their organisations (Kosakowski, 2024, p. 1).

It did not take long for those predictions to materialise. In his 2025 *Year in Review*, Kosakowski again underscored the ongoing impact of protest movements on Ombuds work, as well as describing the additional pressures generated by the new U.S. presidential administration. Together, these developments reinforce the reality that Ombuds are inevitably affected by, and can easily be drawn into, the turbulence of contemporary social and political life. Given this, it is essential for the profession to reflect on what is required to operate effectively and meet the challenges posed by increasingly complex organisational environments (Kosakowski, 2025).

As I have indicated, the field must examine its professional self-image and the tools it relies on to make sense of, and engage thoughtfully with, the environments in which it works. While the International Ombuds Association’s Standards of Practice (SOP) remain foundational, establishing “a professional approach that is unique to the Organizational Ombuds model and distinguishes it from other ombudsman models and approaches”, it is increasingly clear that SOPs alone cannot provide sufficient guidance for navigating the complex social and political pressures present in contemporary society (Rowe & MacAllister, 2025, p. 46).

This paper argues that the profession must go beyond its standards by anchoring itself in a strong, coherent, and contemporary identity, and by cultivating a robust, sophisticated body of knowledge. Without this clarity of purpose and deeper intellectual grounding, the field will become increasingly contested, role distinctions will blur, and practice is at risk of defaulting to reactive, task-oriented responses rather than strategic, insight-driven engagement (Bingham, 2014; Burton, 2017; Muroff, 2024; IOA, 2020; Miller, 2014).

In our 2020 article (p. 4), David Miller and I identify training as one component of “an integrated

system of licensing and accountability,” an essential infrastructure that defines a profession and supports consistent, high-quality practice. Greenwood (1957), in his seminal article “What is a Profession,” identified another foundational attribute: a systematic, theoretical knowledge base. This view is echoed by contemporary bodies such as the Australian Council of Professions (2025, p. 1), which defines a profession as a disciplined group possessing “special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning, derived from research, education, and training.”

A coherent and sophisticated knowledge base would not only support the practical application of the SOPs but also foster a shared identity among Ombuds practitioners globally. It clarifies Ombuds jurisdiction, role, and tasks. I argue that the absence of such a knowledge base has compromised the profession’s ability to define its field clearly, promote its value, and engage confidently with the profound challenges of our time.

Section 2. Defining the Ombuds Role in Complex Systems: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective

Clarity of role is not merely a matter of professional identity; it is the foundation of effective practice. It sets the boundaries of the role, shapes the knowledge we draw upon and the tools we choose, and determines how effectively we engage with individuals and systems. Yet establishing that clarity has been a persistent challenge since the profession’s earliest days (Gadlin, 2000; Miller, 2014; Rowe, 1987; Rowe & Gadlin, 2016; Smith, 2022).

Much has been written about the emergence of the Ombuds role, shaped by both practice and tradition and gaining prominence during periods of significant social upheaval. In particular, the volatile climate of the 1960s saw notable growth as institutions sought a trusted, independent, moderating presence; one that could amplify the voices of the disempowered, foster constructive dialogue, and support leaders in navigating complex and turbulent environments (Bingham, 2014; Burton, 2020; Gadlin, 2000; Rowe, 1987; Rowe & Gadlin, 2016; Smith, 2022).

More than fifty years later, the Ombuds profession continues to grapple with questions of role clarity and identity. In 2017, Burton argued that the challenges of that moment offered a unique opportunity to “define the field before others define it,” issuing a compelling call for “action, definition, and leadership”, a call that remains just as urgent today (pp. 3, 10).

That moment was not fully seized, and the resulting vulnerabilities have become increasingly apparent in today’s complex and contested environment. These vulnerabilities arise not only from external pressures but also from the expansion of the profession and the ever-widening scope of tasks to which Ombuds are now called upon to perform (Rowe & MacAllister, 2025; Smith, 2014).

While the international nature of the profession brings valuable diversity, shaped by varying cultural contexts and regional priorities, this diversity demands more deliberate engagement to forge a shared understanding of the role and greater consistency of practice. Another sign of growing pains is the profession’s openness to practitioners from adjacent fields. While enriching, this broadening risks fragmentation unless anchored in a shared understanding of the profession’s core purpose; it can also undermine our collective ability to “define the field from

within” (Burton, 2017, p. 3).

Some of these risks are now materialising. In the absence of role clarity, I contend that the profession has drifted from its foundational intent. A vacuum has opened, into which powerful external voices have stepped, distorting the meaning and direction of the Ombuds role, just as Burton (2017) warned. One consequence is that the profession finds itself in a defensive cycle, expending significant energy arguing for its legitimacy and worth (IOA, 2025). I believe that the greater danger, however, lies in being pulled even further from our core purpose by the surrounding turbulence. As we navigate this complexity, it is essential to remember that an Ombuds’ authority is derived from the very ideals on which the profession was founded.

A clear example of this drift concerns the contested standard of impartiality, which Gadlin and Pino (1997, p. 17) described as “a cornerstone of the Ombuds profession.” Over a quarter century ago, they warned that positioning the profession as a champion for a cause, “regardless of how worthy the cause is”, risks discrediting the Ombuds as a resource for those who disagree, and creates an expectation that the Ombuds will take a stance “on almost every public issue that arises” (Gadlin & Pinto, 1997, p. 34).

Today, Ombuds programs routinely take public stances in the name of fairness and justice. Yet doing so exposes programs to criticism and retaliation, particularly amidst divisive and destructive culture wars. This practice stands in tension with a more nuanced understanding of impartiality, which is not merely a procedural stance, but an active commitment to creating a space where every voice can be heard, without judgment or agenda.

As we face conditions that mirror, and arguably exceed the intensity and complexity identified by Burton (2017), we are again presented with an opportunity to take up our authority and define our field. The need however is more urgent, the terrain more contested, and the stakes higher.

Defining the field begins with revisiting our professional narrative so that it aligns with contemporary practice. This includes re-examining the boundaries of our professional community, particularly how we welcome colleagues from adjacent fields, and sharpening our core skill set. We must move beyond relying on personal qualities shared across many organisational roles and toward a distinct, rigorous professional identity grounded in theory, reflective practice, and systemic insight (IOA, 2025).

In her 2024 JIOA article, Muroff argues that defining the Ombuds role primarily as a conflict resolver or problem-solver is incomplete, limiting, and ultimately counterproductive. She notes that a narrow definition can undermine the work of individual Ombuds, distort organisational expectations, and impede the evolution of the field. Building on earlier calls from Blair (2017) and others, Muroff promotes reimagining the Ombuds role as “transformational,” with an “activist orientation to systemic challenges” (Muroff, 2024, p. 43).

This reframing has practical implications. As Muroff further argues, integrating contemporary research and theories, such as insights from positive psychology, both refreshes the profession’s narrative and expands its toolkit. This integration enhances a practitioner’s capacity to respond effectively and strengthens the profession’s clarity, credibility, and advancement.

This broader, contemporary narrative aligns with the more sophisticated image the IOA has more recently been promoting: the Ombuds as a “trusted source of insight” (Miller, 2023, p. 1). Crucially, this is not simply branding. Insight can be understood as “a new way of understanding experience which resonates emotionally” (Beckner, 2024, p. 1). This conception sits at the core of a modern Ombuds narrative, one less focused on fixing problems and more centred on helping individuals make meaning of their experience.

Meaning-making recognises that behaviour is often a symptom of complex, underlying dynamics. Supporting people to understand what is occurring beneath the surface requires the creation of safe, reflective spaces where they can pause, be heard, and process emotionally charged experiences. Through this work, individuals strengthen their ability to stay in role, remain in relationship, and maintain a thinking mind under sustained pressure (Huffington et al., 2004).

In environments marked by fear, uncertainty, blame, and reactivity, the capacity to contain emotion and support thoughtful reflection is fundamental. A redefined professional narrative, Muroff’s call for a transformational orientation, and the IOA’s emphasis on insight together point toward a contemporary understanding of the Ombuds role, one that moves beyond assisting people in conflict toward cultivating emotional literacy and building systemic insight. This includes developing an understanding of how organisational dynamics shape systems, processes, and relationships across the operating environment. In doing so, Ombuds support individuals, leaders, and organisations to navigate complexity with greater clarity, confidence, and humanity (Brunning & Perini, 2010; Lawlor & Sher, 2021).

To create reflective and emotionally safe spaces, Ombuds must remain grounded and present, even amid heightened emotion or values-based conflict. Working in this way requires the capacity to navigate systemic and emotional dynamics through self-awareness, effective containing structures, and reflective practice. Contemporary frameworks, from systems psychodynamics and complexity theory, offer essential scaffolding for this work, helping practitioners discern patterns, hold anxiety, and support visitors and leaders in developing genuine insight. These frameworks not only strengthen Ombuds practice but also protect practitioners from being overwhelmed by the very dynamics they are helping others navigate (Amado, 2009; Lawlor & Sher, 2021; Wright & Miller, 2020; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019). Section 3 develops these frameworks and provides a case study that translates them into practical techniques that support Ombuds practice.

Section 3. Foundational Frameworks for Ombuds Practice

To serve as a trusted source of insight and guidance amid complex, emotionally charged organisational landscapes, Ombuds require a grounding in theory that supports reflective, systemically informed practice. Theoretical frameworks provide the structure, containment, and perspective needed to work effectively in these environments, helping practitioners recognise patterns, navigate systemic and emotional dynamics, and design interventions that support meaningful, sustainable change. Because no single theory can hold the full complexity of organisational life, Ombuds must be able to draw from multiple lenses, shaped by a diverse and growing international profession with varying cultural interpretations, organisational

expectations, and practitioner dispositions (Lawlor & Sher, 2021).

More than a decade ago, Smith (2014) described the scope of Ombuds work as “vast,” and that scope has only expanded. Practitioners now engage with deeply personal concerns alongside intricate social, political, and organisational dynamics, often within environments marked by volatility and uncertainty. Unsurprisingly, contemporary research identifies rising stress, fatigue, and burnout within the profession (Muroff, 2026). Against this backdrop, foundational frameworks are essential not only for guiding effective intervention but also for sustaining the psychological resilience and reflective capacity required to do the work ethically and effectively (Obholzer & Roberts, 2019; Witzler, p. 42; Wright & Miller, 2020).

While systems theory has long provided an important lens for Ombuds work, this paper argues for an integrated approach that combines systems theory with psychodynamic and group relations perspectives (Barkat, 2015; Morse, 2010; Rowe, 1989; Witzler, 2014). This integration, often referred to as systems psychodynamics, enables movement between individual and systemic levels of analysis, deepens insight into underlying dynamics, and strengthens the practitioner’s capacity for emotional containment, creating conditions that support reflection, meaning-making, and, ultimately, transformation (Gould et al., 2006; Lawlor & Sher, 2021; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020).

In addition, complexity theory extends and complements systems thinking by illuminating unpredictability, emergence, and non-linear change in contemporary organisational environments (Babüroğlu, 1988; Ramírez & Forssell, 2011). It helps practitioners work with patterns that cannot be planned in advance, adapt interventions in real time, and remain responsive without being reactive, an essential stance when navigating systemic and emotional dynamics.

What follows is a brief summary of key theories and a case example illustrating how the Ombuds role can be taken up through contemporary theoretical lenses, capable of engaging with complexity, emotional intensity, and systemic dynamics. The example does not prescribe a fixed method; rather, it demonstrates the value of a clearly articulated role definition and a coherent professional toolkit. In this spirit, it continues the important conversation initiated by Burton (2017) and advanced by Muroff (2024) about defining our field and updating our knowledge base to meet contemporary challenges.

Systems Theory: Seeing the Whole

Systems theory understands organisations as interconnected, dynamic entities. It supports practitioners to move beyond individual behaviours to consider the broader systemic context in which they arise (Zagier-Roberts, 2019; NIODA, 2025).

Alderfer (1980, p. 269) highlights that boundaries, both physical and psychological, are a system’s defining characteristic and that their permeability is a crucial property. For Ombuds, how individuals and groups manage boundaries is important data that informs a sophisticated analysis of presenting issues.

A systemic lens enables Ombuds to:

- Locate issues within broader organisational systems, structures, and cultures.
- Understand the interaction of roles, rules, and relationships.
- Identify the conditions that support meaningful change.
- Avoid being drawn into surface-level symptoms.

(Lawlor & Sher, 2021; Zagier-Roberts, 2019)

Ultimately, systems theory helps Ombuds remain strategic and grounded, enabling a shift from reactive problem-solving to reflective, system-aware engagement (Lawlor & Sher, 2021; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020; Zagier-Roberts, 2019).

Psychodynamic Theory: Understanding the Inner World

With an estimated 95% of brain activity occurring outside of conscious awareness, understanding unconscious dynamics is critical for Ombuds work (Young, 2018). Through a psychodynamic lens, themes such as conflict, blame, and irrationality cease to be problems that impede the work and instead become important data to be thought about and engaged with (Armstrong, 2004; Halton, 2019; Krantz, 2010; NIODA, 2025).

Psychodynamic theory illuminates how past experiences and defence mechanisms shape responses to difference, power, and conflict. These dynamics underpin workplace relationships, communication, and responses to change, as well as influencing how leaders and staff understand organisational purpose and how they define and take up their roles (Halton, 2019; Lawlor & Sher, 2021; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020).

Proficiency in this theory enhances the Ombuds' capacity to contain emotional intensity through empathic listening and clear boundary setting. It supports recognition of the impact of unresolved personal trauma, organisational trauma, and/or large-group identity on reactions to difference and disagreement. It also provides essential concepts, such as 'splitting', 'projection', and 'transference', that support a more complete understanding of issues that arise in the initial presentation, as well as what may be enacted in the wider system (Halton, 2019, pp. 13–15; Lawlor & Sher, 2021; Stokes, 2019, pp. 28–30; Volkan, 2019).

Critically, this framework protects the practitioner. By understanding and engaging with unconscious dynamics, Ombuds can better recognise their impact, making it less likely they will be drawn into or overwhelmed by these powerful forces. This supports independence, impartiality, and neutrality, while fostering emotional resilience and protecting reflective capacity.

Group Relations Theory: Navigating Collective Dynamics

Group relations theory explores how unconscious dynamics shape collective behaviour. It highlights persistent organisational tensions between task and identity, authority and boundary, stability and change, and individuality and dependence (Huffington et al., 2004; NIODA, 2025; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020; Stokes, 2019; Zagier-Roberts, 2019).

This framework assists Ombuds in deciphering group behaviours operating beneath conscious

awareness. It explains how roles can be unconsciously assigned and taken up, regardless of the role-holder's conscious intent, and draws attention to the influence of group identity, power dynamics, and the relationship between role and task on how individuals relate to one another and to the organisation (Huffington et al., 2004; NIODA, 2025; Stokes, 2019; Volkan, 2019).

The theory is invaluable for working with emotions that groups 'project' onto colleagues, leaders, or even onto the Ombuds. It provides insight into the emotional undercurrents of culture and equips practitioners to help visitors move from reactive responses toward reflective and adaptive functioning (Armstrong, 2004; Stokes, 2019; Zagier-Roberts, 2019).

Complexity Theory: Embracing Uncertainty

Complexity theory recognises that turbulence and uncertainty are inherent features of contemporary organisational life rather than temporary disruptions. It challenges linear assumptions about stability and predictability, common in traditional systems thinking, highlighting instead how non-linearity, feedback loops, and emergent behaviour shape organisational systems. (Baburoğlu, 1988; Ramirez & Forssell 2011; Turner & Baker, 2019)

For Ombuds, this perspective is crucial. When people feel overwhelmed by challenging environmental conditions, they often default to maladaptive strategies such as polarisation, rigidity, withdrawal and blame. Such responses are understandable as they help to manage strong emotions by promising clarity and control. Yet they also narrow attention, suppress learning, and fragment relationships, the very capacities needed to adapt in complex conditions (Baburoğlu, 1988; Ramirez & Forssell 2011; Turner & Baker, 2019). It is these defensive responses that become the ground of Ombuds practice.

A complexity lens supports Ombuds to help visitors maintain their "thinking mind" under pressure by staying in relationship, engaging in dialogue, and building a more thoughtful understanding of the challenges at hand. Rather than seeking premature certainty or control, Ombuds can assist people to approach uncertainty with curiosity, connection, and constructive engagement. This encourages adaptive responses, including collaboration and reflection, that enables individuals and groups to navigate complexity in a less reactive way (Ramirez & Forssell 2011; Turner & Baker, 2019)

Section 4. Case Study: Conflict during Leadership Transition

This case study draws on themes identified in Nossal & Wright (2015), illustrating how integrated theoretical frameworks can be used to understand and intervene constructively in complex organisational problems.

Presenting Issue: Complaint of Managerial Bullying

A member of a long-standing team approached the Organisational Ombuds with concerns about their new manager, Sarah. Accompanied by a colleague, they described Sarah as "aggressive," "dismissive," and "bullying." They reported feeling humiliated in meetings, micromanaged, and excluded from decision-making. Their narrative painted a picture of an autocratic leader

uninterested in staff feelings or expertise.

While the case initially appeared to be a straightforward instance of managerial misconduct, a systems-psychodynamic perspective invites us to view such problems as surface expressions of deeper organisational and psychological dynamics. Rather than limiting the work to resolving the immediate complaint, a contemporary understanding of the Ombuds role shifts attention toward uncovering systemic patterns, anxieties, and role pressures that give rise to these behaviours. From this stance, the task expands beyond addressing the symptom to fostering insight across the system, helping leaders and staff understand how systems, culture, experience and unconscious processes shape the very issues that reach the Ombuds office.

Initial Reflection: Beyond the Surface Narrative

The Ombuds' immediate task was to contain emotional intensity while resisting the pull to provide vindication or take sides. The team sought validation, but the Ombuds remained mindful of the risk of being pulled out of a neutral, impartial role.

Early conversations revealed recurring themes: nostalgia for the past, vilification of the new leader, and externalisation of blame. Staff showed little capacity for self-reflection, convinced all dysfunction stemmed solely from the new manager.

By moving between individual and systemic analysis, the Ombuds formed a preliminary hypothesis: the reaction to Sarah was not only about her behaviour; it reflected anxiety and grief triggered by the leadership transition, intensified by how the change was managed.

Deepening the Analysis: Uncovering Group and Systemic Dynamics

The Previous Manager: A Permissive Parent Figure

Further exploration revealed the previous manager, James, had led for years with a permissive style, rarely enforcing deadlines, avoiding difficult conversations, and tolerating underperformance. While this endeared him to staff, it fostered a 'closed system' characterised by collusion, low accountability, and resistance to challenge. The team developed an inflated view of performance and defensively resisted change. (Alderfer, 1980).

Replacing James was necessary; however, senior leadership gave little thought to the complexity of the transition. They failed to acknowledge the team's history, consider the impact of replacing a long term manager, or understand the implicit contract created by years of tolerated dysfunction. The team's dependency meant his removal was experienced as both loss and betrayal, prompting regression into 'fight-flight' behaviour and uniting the group against Sarah as a perceived existential threat (Stokes, 2019).

The New Manager's Unsupported Position

When the Ombuds spoke with Sarah, she described feeling "set up to fail." Hired to "fix" the team, she was given little understanding of its history or culture. Leadership provided a mandate for reform but insufficient guidance and support, leaving her isolated.

A number of factors may have contributed to Sarah's authoritarian stance; in adopting it, she inadvertently reinforced the team's unconscious "bad manager" narrative. She became the scapegoat for anger and anxiety about change, loss, and accountability. She felt bullied from below by the team and persecuted from above by leadership, whilst the system was trapped in a cycle of mutual blame and victimhood (Halton, 2019; Stokes, 2019).

Organisational Shadow: Leadership's Avoidance of Responsibility

At a systems level, senior leadership's avoidance was a primary contributor. Underperformance was allowed to persist; James was removed abruptly, without a considered process; Sarah was appointed with minimal guidance or support; and the situation was framed as a "personality conflict."

This avoidance created a system where the team projected fear of accountability onto Sarah, Sarah projected her sense of failure onto the team, and senior leadership disowned its role in creating and sustaining these dynamics (Armstrong, 2004; Hirschhorn, 1997; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019).

From Blame to Systemic Insight: Potential Interventions

Had the Ombuds accepted the initial presentation, the work might have defaulted to an informal facilitation between Sarah and the visitors, perhaps coupled with coaching for Sarah. A contemporary role narrative opens a broader inquiry to deepen understanding of underlying dynamics. Taking this approach revealed:

- The team's resistance to change and projection of anger.
- Sarah's defensive, authoritarian response to a lack of support and the experience of scapegoating.
- Leadership's avoidance of responsibility.

A comprehensive diagnosis is a prerequisite for transformative intervention. The goal then evolves from resolving the presenting conflict to enabling the system to gain insight into its own dynamics. Indeed, the pressure to accept a "personality conflict" narrative and provide a superficial solution can itself be understood as organisational avoidance, a defence against leadership reflecting on its responsibility for systemic dysfunction. Recognising this pattern helps Ombuds avoid colluding with it (Blair, 2017; Halton, 2019; Hirschhorn, 1997; Huffington et al., 2004).

Potential interventions arising from the diagnosis include:

- Coaching support for team members (individual and group) to build self-awareness, system awareness, and conflict competence.
- Coaching for Sarah to increase awareness of triggers, deepen understanding of change management complexities, and support a shift from authoritarian control to a containing leadership style (Obholzer & Roberts, 2019).
- Engaging senior leadership to foster insight into their role; and to reframe conflict as data that supports organisational learning, not as a problem to be silenced (Armstrong, 2004; Lawlor & Sher, 2021; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019).

Whether implementing such interventions falls within the Ombuds' remit depends on how the role is defined in the organisation. Nonetheless, the frameworks underscore the complexity of addressing conflict and dysfunction in defensive cultures, particularly when leadership behaviour is integral to the dynamics (Blair, 2017; Hirschhorn, 1997; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019).

Case Study Conclusion

This case illustrates how presenting issues often conceal deeper systemic and unconscious dynamics. By applying theory-informed frameworks, the Ombuds avoided being drawn into binary blame, an ever-present risk in conflict. Instead, the Ombuds identified and surfaced projections and splitting, shifting analysis from individual pathology to the interplay of individual, team, and organisational dynamics (Krantz, p. xxxii; Obholzer & Roberts, 2019; Stokes, 2019).

For Ombuds practitioners, such frameworks are indispensable. They enable movement beyond surface narratives to foster transformative change rather than transactional outcomes. By integrating systems psychodynamics and complexity theory, Ombuds can interpret conflict across multiple levels and intervene in ways that generate lasting organisational learning. This analysis articulates a more sophisticated systemic role for the Ombuds, helping people understand how organisational dynamics shape systems, processes and relationships across the operating environment. This is much like Rowe's (2008, p. 11) description of the Ombuds role as "helping reflect the system back to itself."

5. Conclusion

To practise effectively in today's complex and emotionally charged organisational landscape, Ombuds practitioners require three essentials: clarity of role, robust systems that support individuals and safeguard the profession, and access to a clearly defined, evolving and contemporary knowledge base. Without these, Ombuds risk being pulled off task and out of role by the very dynamics they are tasked with helping others navigate.

This article has argued that the profession's next critical step is to articulate a contemporary role narrative that is explicitly supported by theory-informed practice. In other words, a 21st-century understanding of the role must be matched with a 21st-century toolkit. The knowledge base should not be narrow or prescriptive; it must reflect the breadth and depth of practice, drawing from diverse fields to build a coherent whole. Theoretical frameworks offer more than intellectual insight: they provide containment, structure, and meaning-making tools that help Ombuds remain grounded, thoughtful, and effective amid complexity, uncertainty, and emotional intensity (Blair, 2017; Burton, 2017; Wright & Miller, 2020).

The frameworks discussed here are those that have proven foundational in the author's practice through the upheaval of a pandemic, repeated organisational restructures, challenging leadership transitions, the loss of executive champions, and traumatic workplace dynamics. Practising through such conditions reinforces an important truth: no practitioner can maintain a thinking mind in such environments without supportive systems and conceptual tools that both make



sense of, and offer protection from, the wearing nature of complex contemporary dynamics. While these frameworks have been instrumental for the author, other practitioners will rightly identify different theories that resonate with their practice and context. This diversity should be welcomed. What matters most is that, as a profession, we consciously cultivate a shared body of knowledge and a coherent role narrative that reflects the complexity of our work and advances our collective practice.

As the Ombuds profession responds to the intensifying challenges of contemporary organisational life, we must invest in the knowledge, reflective practices, and role clarity that sustains us. By doing so, we define the field from within and align who we are with how we work. Only then can we take up our roles with the clarity, confidence, and authority that this moment demands (Blair, 2017; Burton, 2017; Wright & Miller, 2020).

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Fred Wright, MAppSci(OD), MSW, GradDip(Crim), BA. has over 45 years' experience in public sector administration in a range of operational and senior management positions across Victorian Government Departments including Justice, Human Services, and Environment. In 2011 he managed a successful pilot project that led to the establishment of the first Organisational Ombudsman program in a government department in Australia. Since this program was established, Fred has consulted to the establishment of Ombudsman programs in other branches of government in Victoria, Australia.

Fred has recently stepped down Chair of the International Outreach Committee and as Co-Chair of the Asia Pacific Regional Advancement Committee of the IOA. He has also recently stepped down as a board member of the National Institute of Organisational Dynamics (NIODA), a not for profit educational institute undertaking research and providing education in leadership, management and organisation dynamics and from the role as Chair of Group Relations Australia, a professional association where members seek to develop the field of group relations and systems psychodynamics.