



A Book Ombuds Can Use: A Review of *How to Be an Inclusive Leader*

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ABSTRACT

In this review of Steve Broidy's *A Case for Kindness: A New Look at the Teaching Ethic*, I draw from Broidy's ideas for building a "kindness-oriented teaching ethic" to similarly recommend a kindness-oriented ombuds ethic. My review will touch on Broidy's definition of kindness, extend that definition into recommendations for Ombuds work, and also touch on Visitor needs in our work as Ombuds.

KEYWORDS

Ombuds, kindness, ethics

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is grateful to the *Journal of the International Ombudsmans Association* for providing a copy of *A Case for Kindness: A New Look at the Teaching Ethic* for this review.



Ombudspersons may feel that we must walk a careful line between kindness and rational process. As a college instructor of nearly thirty years, I can attest that the same is often true for teachers, and perhaps for similar reasons. In *A Case for Kindness: A New Look at the Teaching Ethic*, Steve Broidy lays out a rationale for balancing these seemingly competing interests and makes recommendations that, in many ways, may be useful for us as practicing Ombuds. In this review, I will comment on Broidy's ideas and apply them to our role as organizational Ombuds.

Broidy begins by examining and distilling the usage history of the term kindness and its relationship to education. He notes that, while learning is the goal of teaching, the teacher/student relationship is the medium in which learning occurs (Broidy, 2019, p. 2). Kindness, as Broidy discovers, is a key aspect of the teacher/student relationship. Something similar might be said for the work of an Ombuds, that conflict resolution of various sorts might be the goal, but the medium through which that goal is achieved is the Ombuds/Visitor relationship, and kindness, as defined by Broidy, is a key aspect of that relationship (Broidy, 2019, p. 4).

Broidy goes on to explore the historically vague and poorly defined nature of kindness, examining the various ways in which it has been characterized and its relationship to educational history in general. He notes, for example, that kindness has often been conflated with related, but nonsynonymous terms such as beneficence, benevolence, mercy, empathy and goodness (Broidy, 2019, p. 5). He then draws upon those ideas and the logic inherent in them to develop a concept description of kindness that is useful to a teaching (and Ombuds) ethic. He defines a kindness orientation as involving:

“(a) a continuing sensitivity to some other’s need; (b) emotions/feelings in response to that need that may, variously, be ones of determination to help, have compassion, and/or have empathy; (c) a disposition to take action to mitigate the other’s need with regard to the welfare of others affected by (the recipient’s) actions; and (d) a reasoned priority of doing so. Further, for such a sensibility to result in actions that are recognizable as kind, the one acting must have and deploy relevant knowledge and skill needed to mitigate the need (Broidy, 2019, p. 59).”

Relatedly, Broidy notes that, “a teaching ethic that focuses primarily on individual welfare, but in the context of groups affected by an ethical judgment...serves best both individual students and the larger community (Broidy, 2019, p. 62).” I would suggest that the same is true for an Ombuds ethic and our Visitors. In determining how best to assist a Visitor, we must consider both the needs of the Visitor and of the larger community or institution in which the Visitor is embedded.

Much as Broidy suggests for teachers, Ombuds must not only be skillful in practice, but must also be guided by a strong ethical, values-driven stance, where kindness is part of the values system. Ethics and values without skill makes one ineffectual as an Ombuds, and skill without values simply leads one to become, as C.S. Lewis (2001) argued, a “clever devil.” If kindness should be one of those core values, then how to develop it appropriately becomes a key question. Again, Broidy makes recommendations for the teaching profession that seem to easily translate for Ombuds. For me, several thoughts emerge from Broidy’s recommendations that seem particularly useful to Ombuds:

1. Develop a practice of regular self-reflection leading to higher awareness (Broidy, 2019, p. 72). The more aware we are, the more intense will be our emotional experience, and the more likely we will be to extend ourselves in kindness to another.
2. Practice regular self-care (Broidy, 2019, p. 72). The more intense our emotional experiences, the higher the risk of emotional fatigue, and its challenges for those involved in emotional work.



3. Make use of skilled coaches (Broidy, 2019, p. 73). Ombuds might best be served by coaches who are, themselves, Ombuds who practice with a kindness oriented Ombuds ethic. To that end, regular conversations with other Ombuds about particularly challenging experiences that may arise in our Ombuds practices, professional gatherings with opportunities for skill-building (such as the annual IOA meetings and trainings), and other such formal or informal connections would be helpful.
4. Similarly adapted from Broidy's recommendations, as we set up Ombuds policies, procedures, and structures within our organizations, we should consider how best to adopt Ombuds, administrative, and technological practices that will support a kindness oriented Ombuds ethic (Broidy, 2019, p. 74). For example, on occasion, I have taken advantage of nearby landscaped gardens to suggest "walk and talks" with Visitors who seem nervous about meeting in the more formal atmosphere of an office. In my experience, such walk and talks can help a Visitor relax enough to discuss their concerns fully and openly.
5. Problem-based learning (Woods, 1994) within a local (or broader) Ombuds community may also be beneficial (Broidy, 2019, p. 74). For example, after completing an extensive first aid training course several years ago, I now receive a monthly e-newsletter that includes a "what would you do" scenario drawn from a real-life experience and contributed by a trained practitioner. This allows me to virtually practice the skills I received at the training and explore how I might meet that need. As Ombuds, we can offer similar thought exercises with colleagues, whether within our own organizations, or more broadly in our profession. In similar settings, I have been part of groups where individual Ombuds raised real challenges they have faced in working with Visitors, described how they handled them (or proposed to), and then invited thoughts and ideas from the group. Suggestions and insights such as how to calm a frustrated Visitor, or how to better support a Visitor in taking needed action have proven beneficial.

All Visitors come with perceived needs, most of which are grounded in reality. To act kindly, much like Broidy recommends to teachers, an Ombuds must recognize those needs in their Visitors (Broidy, 2019, p. 78). For that Visitor to recognize the Ombuds' ensuing actions as kind, the Visitor must also see and acknowledge that need. This presents several challenges and opportunities to the Ombuds. First, there is the practical problem of determining when a need is real – that is, does the perceived need represent something that should be addressed (Broidy, 2019, p. 79). Second, not all perceived needs directly concern the situation for which the Visitor came to the Ombuds – they may represent future needs, or present needs only tangentially related to the present situation (Broidy, 2019, p. 79). Likewise, the need felt by the Visitor may, from the broader perspective of the Ombuds, not represent the "true" need of the Visitor. Finally, any need held by a Visitor may not be solely their problem (Broidy, 2019, p. 79). Being embedded in a broader organization or community means resolution of that need will likely involve others to a greater or lesser degree. The need on the part of the Ombuds for humility (to recognize they likely do not have all the answers), to ask careful questions (to better understand and help the Visitor understand), and to work with patience and forbearance all seem crucial to really helping the Visitor achieve the best possible solution to their problem.

Broidy concludes *A Case for Kindness* by arguing that he has made "a case for kindness as the central focus for teaching relationships (Broidy, 2019, p. 94)." Likewise, I believe that a case can be made for kindness as a central factor in successful Ombuds work. Broidy quotes John Dewey, the American philosopher and educational reformer: "Helping others, instead of being a form of charity which impoverishes the recipient, is simply an aid in setting free the powers and furthering the impulse of the one helped (Dewey, 1969)." I can think of no more ideal outcome for our work as Ombuds than to achieve this same goal. One Visitor at a time, we can strive not only to help them resolve their immediate difficulty, but to become more knowledgeable and capable, thus making our services unnecessary to them in their future challenges. To that end, and despite it



being embedded in a different profession, reading *A Case for Kindness* would be well worth the time spent by any Ombuds.



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