



Organizational Ombuds' Sources of Power and Influence

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the sources of power—and the influence that derives from power—that organizational ombuds (OO) use. The article presents a standard list of ten sources of power and shows how these are affected by the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice. Under IOA Standards, ombuds are designated to be independent, confidential, impartial/neutral—and *informal*. Each IOA Standard is supported by the other three. Near-absolute confidentiality, in particular, requires the other three Standards, especially the IOA Standard of informality. And informality is vital for ombuds effectiveness. Because OOs do not make formal management decisions for the organization, other sources of power are much enhanced. These other sources of power—and the influence engendered by these sources—contribute greatly to ombuds effectiveness. Different cases may call for different sources of power at different times. In addition, ombuds may use many sources of power synergistically—that is, using many of them together.

KEYWORDS

organizational ombuds, sources of power and influence, negotiation theory, ombuds effectiveness, power

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Power in organizations is often thought synonymous with decision-making authority. Because organizational ombuds (OOs) practice to a unique quartet of Standards of Practice that excludes authority to make formal business or policy decisions for the organization (International Ombuds Association, 2022),¹ many people wonder how an OO can be effective. The answer lies in the fact that there are many other sources of power which are enhanced by the four pillars of the IOA Standards of Practice: confidentiality, independence, impartiality, and informality. Taken together, the four Standards of Practice permit an OO to operate off the record, as a “zero-barrier” office. And zero barrier practice, in turn powerfully enhances the effectiveness of the OO office².

There are dozens of lists of “sources of power.” I explore this question using a list of ten Sources of Power in Negotiations that I used when teaching negotiation and conflict management at the MIT School of Management (See Table 1, “[Ten Sources of Power and Influence](#).”). This framework describes sources of power that ombuds can draw on—on behalf of their constituents, and in working to support systemic change. These also are the sources of power (and the influence that accompanies them) that OOs use on behalf of the Ombuds Office and profession, within their organization, and within their own profession. I include within my negotiation theory framework powerful insights from Robert Cialdini (1984), Roger Fisher (2006), and Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro (2005).

Although ombuds do not have formal management decision-making power for their organization beyond the staffing and operations of their own offices, they do have some positional influence. Ombuds do not have formal powers to reward and sanction but their work may sometimes have indirect influence on rewards or sanctions. All the other sources of power and influence listed below—one by one or used together—frequently characterize ombuds work.

Different cases frequently call for different sources of power at different times. In addition, ombuds may use many of the sources of power below synergistically—that is, using all or many of them together. An ombuds may not even be aware of which source of power is most effective at a given moment. In practice it might be impossible to know in a particular case exactly “what worked.”

1. Positional Influence. An OO does not have formal authority to make or change or set aside a management decision or rule—or to mandate redress. But most OOs have access to any person in their organization- and to much of the information collected by the organization. OOs report to top leadership, which provides some status, notwithstanding the profession’s designation (and claim) of relative independence. Thus, while OOs do not have authority in the sense of making management decisions about the issues visitors raise, they may have considerable positional influence. As an example, most OOs, most of the time, receive a response to their phone calls.

2. Rewards. OOs do not have formal reward power. But they have some indirect and intangible reward power. In their professional conversations and reports, many OOs find ways to appreciate and affirm good work by members of the organization. The OO’s office is configured in a way

¹ International Ombuds Association Standards of Practice include independence, confidentiality, impartiality, and informality. Informality means that the OO has no ordinary managerial decision-making power outside of the management of the ombuds office; no power of redress for visitors; does not keep identifiable case records for the employer; and does not accept notice for the employer or participate in formal processes (such as formal grievance processes) in the organization. It also means that no constituent can be compelled to visit the ombuds.

² “The Unique—and Effective—Quartet of Standards of Practice of Organizational Ombuds: Each Standard is Necessary—and Requires the Other Three Standards” (PDF). Rowe, Mary P., and Bruce MacAllister. Cambridge, MA: MIT Sloan School of Management, March 2024. Submitted to Journal of the International Ombuds Association (JIOA).



which permits learning quickly and easily about good things happening in the organization. Many OOs are expected to look out for new ideas and share good ideas wherever they crop up in the organization, as well as looking out for disruptive issues and sources of conflict. Most OOs pride themselves on responsiveness, in an era when swift responsiveness is rare. They can share good ideas promptly, if and when they have permission to do so. OOs often write “systemic reviews.” These reviews may describe what is going well, as well as descriptions of problems. OOs can give credit widely where credit is due—for example, when they discover a manager doing well with some vexing issue and have permission to speak of the accomplishment.

3. Sanctions and Force. An OO does not have formal authority to sanction or coerce, and OOs do not serve as witnesses or adjudicators in formal investigations. But OOs do have some indirect and intangible influence with respect to sanctions. Most OOs communicate to leadership about new issues, serious problems, and patterns of unacceptable behavior. And, as mentioned above with respect to informal reward power, many OOs write systemic reviews about specific issues. These functions sometimes lead to further management review, investigations, and/or sanctions.

Part of the work OOs do is to help their constituents understand all the formal conflict management options and channels in the organization, and they may do this often, as constituents review options in the OO office. OOs frequently support constituents who choose to undertake a formal action that might result in sanctions for an offender. And in professional conversations with visitors to the OO office, an OO may ask direct (and hopefully fair) questions of someone who may have behaved in an unacceptable way. (This situation is not uncommon. As neutral or impartial conflict management professionals, OOs regularly are sought out by persons who feel wrongly accused—and will support them in seeking a fair process for their concerns.)

There also are cases when the OO is the first to hear of someone who is on the path to violence or other criminal behavior. As senior professionals, most OOs have instant access to appropriate authorities in the rare cases when formal investigations and power-based actions are judged by the OO to be urgent—and where the ombuds either has permission to speak, or, after concluding that there is imminent risk of serious harm, decides to contact relevant authorities.

4. Information. The power of information is central to ombuds work (Rowe, 2021). Organizational ombuds are almost unique in organizations in their breadth of outreach and therefore in their access to information. By design, the OO office is configured as a “zero barrier” office to be safe and accessible for constituents who wish to consult and seek options (Rowe, 2009). Constituents can consult an OO anonymously and off the record, and often speak freely. The IOA standard of near absolute confidentiality helps constituents manage risk and helps the OO learn about what’s going on in the organization.

Many ombuds receive constituents of every rank from the bottom to the top of the organization, with every type of work-related concern. OOs receive calls from aggrieved constituents—and also from people who feel wrongly accused; from supervisors who are concerned about someone or some issue; and, very regularly, from bystanders and the bystanders of bystanders (Rowe, n.d.). Ombuds are a resource for many diverse affinity groups and learn steadily from them. Constituents regularly bring news of new issues, and good ideas that need traction, as well as complaints and concerns. Many OOs receive visitors and information from every cohort and every unit of their organization—occasionally around the clock. Ombuds often are the only professionals in their organization with so wide a purview.

The different functions of an ombuds provide OOs with steady streams of information from and about other offices. OOs make referrals and receive referrals from every office in their conflict management system and from line managers; ombuds work hard to know all the formal and informal resources for the concerns that come in. OOs do not do formal investigations but



regularly “look into” situations informally. OOs are among the relatively few in an organization who try to “keep up” with a broad range of rules and regulations and policies relevant to work-related concerns. In addition, ombuds usually are authorized to talk with anyone in their organization and to ask for most kinds of information relevant to their work.

These aspects of an ombuds’ job mean that OOs usually have great breadth and depth of information to help individuals, and also the organization, in ways that depend on current data. For example, ombuds are expected to offer options and make timely, informal recommendations about policies and procedures. Much of their work involves good management of *issues*, in addition to assisting *individuals* in conflict (Rowe, 2023). Ombuds are alert to patterns in what they hear—and also to anomalies in their caseloads. OOs thus have many opportunities to alert their leadership and other constituents to potentially disruptive new issues—where a new case is not just an anomaly but perhaps also a harbinger of serious new concerns for certain employees and/or the organization (Rowe et al., 2022). And in those cases where a concern comes in from many constituents, the OO’s power to inspire management action may be enhanced by the “power of numbers”—a concept that Cialdini called “social proof” (Cialdini, 1984).

5. Expertise. Professional expertise, a form of what Cialdini called “authority” (Cialdini, 1984), is another source of influence for ombuds, twinned with information. Ombuds are experienced in working with individuals, work groups and affinity groups, anonymous visitors and bystanders, leadership, and employees of all ranks. OOs develop skill in listening to people of different backgrounds. Most OOs have a deep commitment to the core value of inclusion—a platform for building consensus and community. Most have training and experience in the functions of an ombuds—and they develop skills in working with all other professionals in the conflict management system of the organization.

Many ombuds are generalists. However, many also have particular gifts that are sources of power and influence. Some OOs listen and pick up people’s hidden interests exceptionally well. As examples, some ombuds are especially skilled with teams. Some work seamlessly with many different affinity groups. Some are adept at bringing about needed organizational changes to address systemic issues raised by constituents (Rowe, 2023). Some are particularly good at helping individuals deal directly with their concerns in a way that provides lifelong skills to the individual. Some have language skills or personal experience that help to build “swift trust” (Meyerson et al., 1996). And some are exceptionally skilled in working remotely. Some ombuds are very skilled at restorative justice practices, a gift especially in demand today.

For OOs, it is a core function to help develop options and a *choice* of options for their constituents—especially for people who have no hope. Each of the functions and each of the particular gifts of an OO may lead to a successful option for a visitor. And each such success helps to broaden the expertise of the OO.

6. An Elegant Solution. The ability to identify a solution to a problem that provides the most value and least harm to the most stakeholders—accomplished at the least cost—is a source of power that is often overlooked. An ombuds can sometimes piece together bits of information relevant to a particular issue, and listen in depth and over time to the interests of all who are stakeholders in a situation. Because they are familiar with so many aspects of an organization, an ombuds can sometimes uncover new options for an unexpected and sustainable solution.

Elegant solutions are rare in life, but ombuds work hard to find them, and where elegant solutions can be found, they offer the ombuds power to influence an outcome in a solution whereby most stakeholders gain at least a little or at least do not lose much. Elegant solutions are often built on other sources of power: a deep knowledge of the context of a concern, accurate information about the interests of each stakeholder in a concern, trusting relationships, and conflict



management expertise. One reason that elegant solutions are rare is that most managers do not have time to develop them and are highly focused in silos. Ombuds, however, can and do pay attention—"as long as it takes"—to understand a context, realistically available resources, and the interests of those in conflict. Ombuds also can work with anyone in the organization at any level who can help; they thus can sometimes help to create a team approach to an elegant solution.

Some elegant solutions involve only a few people, as when each party in a context-dependent conflict is offered a different desirable job—and everyone affected by the situation is happier and more productive. Some elegant solutions are built on systems changes inspired by the concerns and good ideas of a group. These may ensue from a "generic approach" by the OO (Rowe, 2024). For example: people on crutches and in wheelchairs are painfully hindered by bicycles on the handicap ramps. The employer: posters the ramps, confiscates bikes that are on the ramps, and provides accessible and safe places for the bikes.

7. Moral Authority (Charisma, Referent Power). Ombuds often work to develop moral authority.

One of the hardships of being a designated neutral arises when ombuds really wish they could lose their temper. However, a formidable commitment to self-discipline can help an OO earn a considerable measure of moral authority and charisma. The unusual nature of the OO office itself sometimes inspires a bit of awe and occasionally will help angry parties to settle down. Ombuds are usually attentive listeners and practiced mediators who are hard to provoke, slow to judgment, and committed to affirming the dignity of those in the office. As an example, when an ombuds affirms the *feelings* of an angry visitor but asks the visitor if they really wish to *do* something that may be destructive or rash—or whether it would make sense to consider the pros and cons of various other options—moral authority and the ability to inspire are sometimes an important source of influence.

Moral authority is particularly needed in organizations to support procedural justice and fairness. Moral authority helps the OO to have a voice on behalf of issues that need to be addressed in the organization. Fact patterns and evidence of problems are important to support legal compliance *and distributive and corrective justice*. And an ombuds can sometimes help constituents and the organization find the information needed for these purposes, as appropriate. However, the OO also needs a receptive audience in the organization about matters of *procedural justice*. Moral authority (including an explicit commitment to fair processes) helps the OO to be heard, when appropriate. As an unusual example, an OO successfully pleaded for more time-flexibility for religious observances for a few members of an otherwise unrepresented faith in particular large department. The plea was made on the grounds of *fairness*—that members of well-represented faiths were *de facto* given flexibility by the whole community and that this flexibility should be available to all.

8. Relationship Power. Many OOs interact with hundreds of constituents each year and are constantly interacting with other human services professionals, conflict managers, affinity groups, and leaders in their organization. Few other senior professionals have comparable opportunities to develop trust. Many an ombuds has helped leaders at all levels with their own dilemmas and their core emotional concerns (Fisher & Shapiro, 2005), as part of helping employees of every rank. It helps for an OO to be embedded in the organization otherwise in long contact with constituents, and to be included as an observer or resource for committees and workgroups (Rowe, 2013).

Building relationships is an example of using Cialdini's concepts of the powers of "reciprocity" and of "likability" (Cialdini, 1984). Being a skilled listener, a mediator, hard to provoke, slow to judgment, and committed to affirming the dignity of each person can provide the ombuds with power and influence in times of need. Relationships with leaders and supervisors at all levels are



essential for ombuds to be able to help constituents—and for ombuds when they deal with the organization on behalf of the Ombuds Office. Trusted relationships support the OO in emergencies—when needing to call a leader who is on vacation. And in delicate situations—when an OO is the best person to be an intermediary between very angry managers.

9. Commitment Power. Many ombuds never give up. One of the dilemmas of modern life is how fast it changes, how short memories are, and how little time managers have to concentrate on an issue. A brilliant report may be written about some issue by a manager or committee—and put on a shelf. An OO may keep that report and its recommendation on their desk for ... "as long it takes." Ombuds focus on issues, together with individuals, with affinity groups, and with leadership—day after day and sometimes year after year. "Commitment and consistency," as Cialdini described them (Cialdini, 1984), are sometimes winning ingredients, and many an ombuds has seen major changes slowly emerge simply by using all the other sources of power and never giving up. As an example, looking backward over 42 years, I have occasionally, laughably tried to calculate the "average time" to get a change in policies, procedures or structures. Getting the first "Presidential pronouncement" on (all forms of harassment) took months in 1973. Getting a well-articulated policy into Policies and Procedures took five years. Equal pensions for women took five years (and, happily, were promulgated along with some increases for men).

10. BATNA (*the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement*) (Fisher et al., 2006). In negotiation theory, a BATNA is a fallback position; having a BATNA means having an alternative, a "Plan B," a "way out." The presence or absence of good alternatives for action—for complainants and/or respondents, and for the organization—may create a source of power for the ombuds. That is, an ombuds can often offer options that are perceived as better or less bad than the alternatives faced by those in conflict. An ombuds can sometimes support those in a conflict to develop a new solution—and occasionally even an elegant solution—when all *other* possible outcomes seem worse to one or more of the parties. In this situation, technically, the source of power for the OO is that the BATNAs for others are poor.

The concept of a BATNA can also be of use to a visitor. As an example, ombuds can often help a constituent who is deeply frightened and feels trapped just by helping them develop a BATNA. The ombuds may be able to help a constituent discover unrecognized interests that offer new options and potential BATNAs. Or an ombuds may help in resolving an issue by suggesting additional decision-makers in place of decision-makers who seem to be fighting tooth and nail.

The "lack of better alternatives" can also be a source of power for ombuds in discussion with their leadership about their own Terms of Reference or Charter. For example, an ombuds may receive strong support for near absolute confidentiality of the Ombuds Office by exploring with leadership what might happen if many concerned people did *not* come forward to the OO with their concerns (Rowe, 2009). Similarly, an ombuds asking for a budget increase might ask leadership to explore what might happen in the organization without a fair, accessible, "zero barrier" office to help people come forward about unacceptable behavior.

CONCLUSION

Thinking about OO sources of power (and resultant capacities for OO influence) may be helpful to employers. These discussions can help employers to understand how OO practice is effective for the *organization*, at the same time as OOs are serving *visitors*. As one example, the unique quadrant of the IOA Standards of Practice permits a very wide catchment of information for the OO. The OO's information about workplace problems, and about how things work in the organization helps visitors. Timely information about what is happening in the organization serves



the employer. And reflecting about *how* ombuds get things done can be reassuring to nervous supervisors just by underscoring the fact the OOs do not have ordinary managerial decision-making power. Thinking about OO sources of power also illuminate for an employer the importance of recruiting for ombuds with high integrity, conflict management expertise, problem solving skills, relationship skills, dedication, discretion and self-discipline.

Communicating with visitors about what an ombuds *can* do—and helping them to understand what OOs do not do—may help with visitors who are hoping for personal advocacy, vindication or redress in the ombuds office. Discussions with visitors about the many “sources of power” can also be helpful to those who think they “have no power.” Visitors can be supported to think about their own valuable information, their own relationships, their own skills in problem-solving, their own commitment to improvements, and their own BATNAs (other opportunities and fallback positions). Visitors can be supported to develop their own sources of power—“rather than giving someone a fish, one can help them to learn how to fish.”

Thinking about all the sources of power may also be useful to ombuds for themselves. It can help OOs in self-evaluations: in assessing why things go well in one case and not another. It can help ombuds who are consulting with each other in attempts to help each other with difficult situations. It can help to comfort OOs who are asked to help with an impossible situation to see things realistically. It can help in teaching skills to visitors. It can help OOs in setting goals: which are the sources of power that might be useful in the next case? Which are the sources of power that I need to develop? Which sources of power work, in which context, alone or together?



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Table 1
Ten Sources of Power and Influence

- 1. Positional Power/Legitimate Authority:** authority derived from laws and policies, and/or from official status
- 2. Rewards:** including tangible and intangible rewards
- 3. Sanctions (and Force):** including tangible and intangible sanctions, and coercion
- 4. Information:** including open and private knowledge
- 5. Expertise:** including understanding how to make things work, extensive knowledge and ability in a particular field
- 6. An Elegant Solution:** a solution that provides most value and least harm to the most stakeholders, accomplished at the least cost; often an unexpected answer to a dilemma or problem
- 7. Moral Authority, Charisma, or Referent Power:** authority premised on principles, or faith, or loyalty, rather than laws and policies; on charisma; and/or on a personal ability to inspire and influence others.
- 8. Relationship Power:** authority, loyalty and influence among family, friends, colleagues, perceived in-groups
- 9. Commitment:** power derived from never giving up, from unyielding persistence, from “digging in one’s heels”
- 10. BATNA, the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement** (Fisher et al., 2006): a fallback position, having an alternative, a “Plan B,” a “way out.”