From Conflict to Connection: Continuing to Explore the What, Why, and How of Positive Psychology for Ombuds

JULIE A. MUROFF

ABSTRACT

Following The What, Why, And How Of Positive Psychology (Muroff, 2024), this paper discusses another application of positive psychology to the work of organizational ombuds. Consistent with the prior paper, the purpose is to acknowledge and facilitate the work of ombuds beyond the exclusive focus on conflict resolution, to advance the wellbeing of ombuds and our visitors, organizations, and field. Specifically, this paper proposes a novel framework for ombuds casework based on self-determination theory. By using the framework, ombuds can help visitors satisfy their core needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness by strengthening connections to themselves, their organizations, and their colleagues. The framework is named *SeE Others,* as a mnemonic for those connections to self, environment, and others. The framework matches each of the three self-determination needs with two options for positive psychology interventions.

KEYWORDS

positive psychology, ombuds, self-determination theory, positive organizations

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a sequel to the author's prior publication, which proposed the strategic integration of positive psychology into the work of organizational ombuds (Muroff, 2024). As detailed in that paper, ombuds' use of research in *positive psychology*, the science of wellbeing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), ultimately can promote the wellbeing of ombuds, our practices, and our field in many ways, without encroaching upon or substituting for the role of mental health experts (Muroff, 2024). In particular, the application of positive psychology to ombuds' practices can support a broader value, scope, and impact of ombuds' work that extends beyond conflict resolution. The first paper characterized that broader narrative for the ombuds role as both accurate and compelling for several reasons. For example, conflict resolution is not a necessary or sufficient element of every ombuds case; and it may not be possible, appropriate, or desirable for ombuds to accomplish it in every case; and associating ombuds exclusively with conflict can reinforce stigma and other barriers to ombuds' accessibility and visitors' engagement (Muroff, 2024).

The first paper focused on one application of positive psychology research to the work of organizational ombuds. Specifically, that paper explored how ombuds work aligns- and can further align- with the *PERMA* model of positive psychology, which offers five measurable elements of wellbeing that enable flourishing: (1) positive emotions, (2) engagement, (3) relationships, (4) meaning, and (5) accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Notably, that discussion of how ombuds work facilitates flourishing acknowledged the relevance of conflict management and resolution, yet emphasized that ombuds are not necessarily, exclusively, or appropriately limited to that function (Muroff, 2024).

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

This paper builds on the foundation of the first paper by proposing another application of positive psychology research to the work of organizational ombuds. The framework is based on *self-determination theory*, which describes three core psychological needs that all individuals must meet to optimize their wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Those core needs include: *autonomy,* or self-control*; competence,* involving knowledge, skills, and achievements; and *relatedness* or interpersonal bonds (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Satisfying the three self-determination needs is one way to address PERMA, optimizing wellbeing.

Self-determination theory is a promising anchor for ombuds' engagement with positive psychology for two main reasons. First, research indicates that the satisfaction of self-determination needs tends to have a stronger influence on wellbeing than external factors, such as wealth or status- even in professions, such as law, that are associated with prioritizing those external factors (Krieger & Sheldon, 2015). That research aligns with findings that internal or intrinsic motivation generally can be more compelling than external or extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Given those findings from a strong research base, self-determination theory is well-established and should be relevant across the diverse populations and organizations that ombuds serve.

A second benefit of self-determination theory is that it facilitates a new narrative for ombuds work beyond the exclusive focus on conflict resolution. Specifically, self-determination theory can shift the focus of ombuds work from conflict to connection. To that end, self-determination theory focuses on the human drive for connections that ombuds help our visitors satisfy: connections to self (autonomy); environment, i.e., the organization (competence); and others (relatedness). A mnemonic to capture those connections is to *SeE Others* (Self, Environment, Others). That mnemonic can remind ombuds of the objectives to help visitors feel seen, i.e., to feel that their perspective has been listened to and understood, even if not agreed with; and in turn, for visitors to elicit that feeling in others, promoting wellbeing throughout our organizations.

THE SEE OTHERS FRAMEWORK

The SeE Others framework offers a toolkit that includes two positive psychology strategies or interventions for each of the three self-determination needs.

AUTONOMY

First, regarding the self-determination need for autonomy, ombuds can reinforce visitors' connections to self by facilitating optimism. *Optimism* is a mindset that generally anticipates and interprets life events to be positive (Seligman, 2006). Yet an optimistic mindset is not a simple or superficial orientation; it is a deliberate strategy that remains flexible to achieve an accurate and appropriate perspective on one's circumstances (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). For example, it is optimistic to consider a performance review as an opportunity to demonstrate one's value to the organization, and to prepare for that outcome by summarizing specific achievements and milestones and conducting relevant market research. That active approach of engagement and accountability contrasts with a passive, if not naïve, assumption that the review will go well.

Optimism aligns with the self-determination need for autonomy in several ways. In particular, optimism reinforces a sense of control and choice over one's *attribution style,* which describes how individuals explain negative life events, including: whether individuals blame themselves or others; whether they view the adversity as temporary or permanent; and whether they experience the adversity as pervasive or discrete, relative to their general life circumstances (Seligman, 2006). As illustrated by the sample case discussed below involving colleagues in conflict, ombuds can help visitors consider optimism as a strategy to take control of their circumstances. In that way, ombuds can encourage visitors to deliberately change their mindset and to understand the link between that change and improvement to their wellbeing.

On that note, optimism is an important element of autonomy for ombuds to cultivate because it is associated with social, psychological, and physiological benefits to wellbeing. For example, optimism is linked to the pursuit of new connections and experiences (Reivich & Shatté, 2002), and to strong, supportive relationships and social networks (Scheier & Carver, 2018). Additionally, optimism is associated with a problem-focused approach, which involves acting on goals, having confidence in success, and persevering despite setbacks (Carver et al., 2010). For visitors and ombuds seeking additional incentives, optimism also is associated with physical and medical benefits, including reports of lower risk of cardiovascular disease (Rozanski et al., 2019).

To help visitors reap those benefits, ombuds can capitalize on research that optimism can be learned through evidence-based strategies that empower positive changes in attitude and actions, such as Seligman's (2006) *ABCDE model* of learned optimism. Ombuds can guide visitors through the steps involved in that model, which account for **a**dversity, **b**eliefs, **c**onsequences, **d**isputation, and **e**nergization (Seligman, 2006). As an example, consider a visitor who presents with subclinical feelings of hopelessness related to an ongoing conflict with a colleague. The ombuds can guide the visitor through the steps of the ABCDE model, to encourage the visitor to reassess the challenge. Specifically, the ombuds can support the visitor in reframing the adversity by examining the visitor's beliefs or explanations about the conflict. The ombuds can then flag the consequences of those beliefs, including the visitor's emotions. Finally, the ombuds can encourage the visitor to identify another perspective, explanation, or action that disputes his original beliefs, which can help to energize the visitor's mindset and actions.

That type of exercise can help ombuds and visitors to surface underlying concerns and interests, and to identify how visitors may have contributed to the problem and can work towards progress. For instance, in the case described above, the visitor may discuss feelings of being undermined by the colleague, which triggered the visitor's efforts to avoid the colleague and exacerbated the

tensions that persist between them. The ombuds then can guide the visitor through reality-testing the reasons and limitations behind the visitor's position. That process may include asking the visitor to identify examples of when the visitor and colleague got along on a personal or professional level, or to brainstorm an action towards that goal. The purpose of disputation is not to dismiss all negativity or to idealize the visitor's circumstances. Instead, the objective is to achieve greater accuracy and flexibility in the visitor's perspective, and ultimately, to (re)energize the visitor to improve the dynamic or to make other positive changes to his circumstances (Seligman, 2006).

Overall, learned optimism is designed to cultivate a more accurate, positive, future-oriented outlook. In particular, the goal is to transform how one thinks, feels, and acts when navigating adversity (Seligman, 2018). To promote further progress, a visitor may engage the ombuds to facilitate a discussion with the colleague at issue, and/or the visitor can authorize the ombuds to talk directly to the colleague to gain clarity on the colleague's perspective on next steps.

On a similar note of transcending limiting beliefs, ombuds can consider a second positive psychology strategy, *real-time resilience* (Reivich & Shatté, 2002), to target the self-determination need for autonomy and the corresponding connection to self. The strategy of real-time resilience involves the problem-solving process of taking control of adversity, not only to overcome it but also to flourish through and beyond it (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). The phrase "real-time" refers to the deliberate, consistent practice of the strategy outlined below, to the point that it can be invoked on demand.

Real-time resilience links to the self-determination need for autonomy by empowering visitors to exercise self-control. First, through real-time resilience, visitors can improve the accuracy and flexibility of their thoughts by treating their beliefs as theories to test critically with reality (Beck & Dozois, 2011), using the four prompts detailed below. Second, real-time resilience serves as an antidote to the *pessimistic explanatory style* of viewing problems as uncontrollable and blameworthy (Reivich & Shatté, 2002), which can decrease effective problem-solving and undermine wellbeing (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Instead, real-time resilience aligns with optimism, as a more accurate and flexible mindset that informs constructive action (Seligman, 2006).

During casework, ombuds can model and teach real-time resilience. The cases that are best suited to that strategy involve situations that are relatively important and stressful to visitors, when their negative self-talk interferes with their problem-solving. For example, an ombuds can offer to share the strategy while helping a visitor plan for a major presentation that will influence the visitor's status in his organization.

When the visitor reveals a negative narrative in his mind, anticipating that he will fail in this presentation just as he failed in his previous presentation, the ombuds can help the visitor to: (1) reframe his explanation for the outcome of the prior presentation by shifting from helplessness to *agency* or control, focusing on actions that he can and will take to improve (Seligman, 2006), e.g., acknowledge that he would have benefited, and now will benefit, from more opportunities for practice sessions and feedback; (2) use evidence to ask what else is true about the past or current circumstances to identify additional opportunities for action, e.g., recall aspects of the prior presentation that went well, to incorporate into the new presentation, and make revisions to sections that were unclear; (3) plan to problem-solve by disrupting *rumination* or immersion in negative self-talk, e.g., referring to oneself by name during self-talk can increase one's focus (Kross, 2021); and (4) prepare to take deliberate action, not just to mitigate harm but to thrive (Reivich & Shatté, 2002), e.g., the visitor can continue to use the ombuds along with other supportive resources in the organization, such as mental health counselors, supervisors, and colleagues, to build comfort and confidence in the new presentation.

Ombuds can reinforce those four components of real-time resilience in many ways. In particular, ombuds can prompt visitors to consider: what a more helpful way to view their situation is; and what else about their situation is true; and what outcome is more likely than the (exclusively) negative one they presume; and what specific way(s) they can act to create a more positive outcome (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Those prompts relate to the foundational question in real-time resilience, of whether one's beliefs about adversity are helpful or harmful to one's circumstances (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). By guiding visitors through real-time resilience, ombuds can empower visitors to assume further control and accountability for their problem-solving and wellbeing.

COMPETENCE

Regarding the self-determination need for competence, ombuds can strengthen visitors' connections to their environments- specifically, to their organizations- by helping visitors explore *character strengths*. Those strengths are positive traits, demonstrated in feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, that boost wellbeing (Niemiec, 2019). The purpose of focusing on character strengths is to reorient visitors to what is positive in themselves and others. For example, ombuds can prompt visitors to identify the strengths of those they wish to emulate and to discover or focus on the strengths of those who trigger conflicts or concerns. That exercise can fuel visitors' progress in achieving a more accurate and flexible perspective, consistent with learned optimism and real-time resilience.

Character strengths can be tied to the self-determination need for competence in several ways that reinforce visitors' connections to their environments/organizations through skill-building. For example, visitors must invest effort to develop and enhance their character strengths (Niemiec, 2019). Ombuds can support that investment by brainstorming options with visitors, such as journaling about using character strengths at work. Additionally, ombuds can explain to visitors that the expression of character strengths requires balance, achieved through sensitivity to the relevant circumstances; visitors must apply the appropriate character strengths to the correct degree to adapt to specific situations (Niemic & Pearce, 2021). For example, ombuds can work with managers to moderate their expression of leadership so they are not perceived as micro-managers, and so they can reinforce the growth and autonomy of their reports. Accordingly, ombuds can use character strengths to help visitors refine the skills that will contribute to more positive and constructive work environments.

To facilitate the use of character strengths in casework, ombuds can guide visitors through the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA)*. The VIA is an evidence-based survey that generates a unique profile for individuals, indicating the relative prominence of 24 character strengths that map to six core virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In particular, ombuds can use the VIA to reveal visitors' *signature strengths*, the top five character strengths that are essential to visitors' identities and that are energizing and easy for visitors to express (Niemiec & Pearce, 2021). For instance, ombuds can prompt visitors to provide concrete examples of how they demonstrate their signature strengths at work, and to appreciate the character strengths that they observe in their colleagues. That type of exercise may be especially relevant to visitors' performance review discussions with their supervisors and/or reports.

Job crafting is a second positive psychology strategy that ombuds can offer during casework to address visitors' need for competence and to enhance visitors' connections to their environment/organization. Through the process of job crafting, ombuds can guide visitors in critically examining the various tasks within their job, reflecting on how they feel about those tasks, and evaluating how they allocate their time on those tasks (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

That analysis can inspire visitors to reimagine and reframe certain aspects or boundaries of the responsibilities or social interactions involved in their work.

Ultimately, job crafting can enhance wellbeing by increasing the alignment of visitors' current jobs with their interests and/or values, which can foster a greater sense of meaning and connection to their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). For example, visitors may pursue job crafting during ombuds sessions to identify specific tasks and interactions that cater to their signature strengths. As discussed in the first paper, that match between one's tasks and skills can ignite *flow*, which fuels a cycle of engagement and accomplishment (Muroff, 2024). Even if it is not possible for visitors to actualize their job-crafted ideal in their current roles, the process can help to clarify or create the type of job that could be a better fit in the future.

Job crafting is associated with several other benefits that are relevant to the self-determination need for competence. For example, job crafting has been linked to improvements in employee engagement, retention, and performance (Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). Additionally, job crafting is associated with a more positive sense of meaning and identity that employees derive from their jobs, along with increases in employees' wellbeing (Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). Thus, job crafting can serve as another means to transform the narrative of ombuds work through positive psychology, shifting the focus from what is wrong to what is or can be better.

RELATEDNESS

Regarding the third self-determination need of relatedness, ombuds can help visitors improve connections to others- specifically, to colleagues at work- by modeling and facilitating *high-quality connections*. Those connections describe interactions with colleagues that foster positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral experiences at an individual level (Dutton, 2003). Such interactions also have positive implications at a systemic level, which may include strengthening employees' sense of belonging and community within an organization (Dutton, 2003). The benefits of high-quality connections can be especially compelling for visitors who are new to an organization, and who engage ombuds to smooth their transition and maximize their first impressions.

One component of high-quality connections is *respectful engagement*, defined through interpersonal interactions that both reflect and reinforce mutual value (Dutton, 2003). Ombuds can teach visitors to demonstrate or increase respectful engagement in several ways. For example, visitors can learn to be more deliberate about: minimizing distractions during interactions; emphasizing their appreciation for colleagues; clarifying topics for further discussion or improvement; prioritizing empathy; and expressing expectations and needs clearly, including preferences about communication and collaboration (Dutton, 2003).

A second element of high-quality connections that promotes relatedness is *task enablement,* the facilitation of another's success or performance on a task or goal (Dutton, 2003). Ombuds can model and facilitate task enablement by sharing- and encouraging visitors to share- useful information and insight about their organization (Dutton, 2003). For example, ombuds can refer visitors to their organization's mental health resources and encourage visitors to share that information about resources more broadly, e.g., managers may choose to post a list of resources in high-traffic areas, such as breakrooms.

A third aspect of high-quality connections is trust. Generally, *trust* is established and sustained through interactions that demonstrate confidence in the good faith and autonomy of the participants (Dutton, 2003). Ombuds can help visitors nurture trust in their interactions by emphasizing the benefits of having and assuming positive intentions; being forthcoming with

relevant and appropriate information; and requesting and responding to input in a positive way (Dutton, 2003). Ombuds also can model those behaviors during our interactions with visitors, to promote *psychological safety,* the security to take interpersonal risks without the overriding fear of negative consequences (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). That kind of security is a priority in ombuds work, especially given the potential for visitors to disclose sensitive information that could have negative implications, such as concerns about inappropriate workplace behavior.

As an additional means to cultivate high-quality connections and relatedness, ombuds can explore the role of play. In this context, *play* refers to opportunities to learn from others in ways that are atypical for conventional work settings yet appropriate and beneficial to the wellbeing of those involved (Stephens et al., 2012). For instance, ombuds can discuss the prospect of incorporating games into visitors' interactions with colleagues during or beyond work hours. Among other options, taking a walk, ideally outdoors, can boost creativity and wellbeing (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014**)**.

Research supports several benefits of play that challenge the assumption that play distracts or detracts from work. Those benefits include the potential to: reduce physical and psychological stress (Skead et al., 2018); enhance cognitive function and performance (Ratey, 2008); increase staff morale and energy levels (Brown, 2009); and cultivate deeper social bonds among colleagues (Stephens et al., 2012). Although those possible benefits are compelling, of course ombuds and visitors must be mindful about reconciling the terms of play with their job requirements and with the specific policies, culture, and expectations of their organizations.

On a similar note of strengthening interpersonal connections, *active-constructive responding* (Gable et al., 2004) is a second positive psychology strategy to address the self-determination need for relatedness. That term describes reacting to the good news of others in a way that reinforces the social bond and wellbeing of the listener and the speaker (Langston, 1994). Instead of just offering a platitude such as, "that's nice," an active-constructive response by the listener acknowledges why and how the news is important to the speaker, which reinforces the positive emotions associated with the good news. The strategy is important for ombuds to model and reinforce for visitors, especially given research that reactions to positive event disclosures can be more predictive of (relationship) wellbeing than responses to negative event disclosures (Gable et al., 2006).

There is promising empirical support for the potential of active-constructive responding to promote relatedness and wellbeing. Specifically, active-constructive responding is strongly and consistently associated with relationship commitment and satisfaction (Gable et al., 2006). Active-constructive responding also can facilitate forgiveness, to help relationships flourish through challenges (Gable et al., 2006).

Ombuds should note, however, that those benefits can be thwarted by barriers to active-constructive responding. Those barriers may include the jealousy or low self-esteem of the responder (Gable et al., 2006). For example, a manager who is insecure about his own status in an organization may not be authentic or effective in an active-constructive response when his report shares the news of a positive interaction with the company's president.

Despite those notes of caution, there is reason for ombuds and visitors to be optimistic about the potential for active-constructive responding to strengthen professional relationships and relatedness within organizations. For example, a comprehensive review of data from 239 employee–coworker dyads across different organizations indicated that active-constructive responding by leaders is associated with increased perceptions of fairness by their reports and decreases in workplace incivility (Lee & Jensen, 2014). That finding can be especially relevant to ombuds cases that focus on helping managers improve communication and morale within their

teams. In those cases, active-constructive responding can be a strategy for managers to demonstrate sincere interest in and appreciation for what is going well for their reports, and to encourage that kind of supportive behavior among their team members and across the organization.

Table 1: The SeE Others Framework

Connections	**Self-Determination Need**	**Positive Psychology Interventions**	**Implementation Examples**
Self	Autonomy	Learned Optimism	ABCDE model of learned optimism
		Real-Time Resilience	4 questions/ prompts
Environment	Competence	Character Strengths	VIA survey + strengths-spotting
		Job Crafting	Maximize use of signature strengths
Others	Relatedness	High Quality Connections	promote respectful engagement, task enablement, trust; consider play
		Active-Constructive Responding	reinforce the positive emotions and implications of others' good news

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY TO SEE OTHERS

As a general implementation strategy to SeE Others, organizational ombuds can be mindful of the three self-determination needs to better understand and address the issues that visitors raise in casework. For example, a visitor who expresses concern about her annual performance review may prompt the ombuds to identify the visitor's need for competence and to consider interventions involving character strengths and job crafting. As the visitor shares more information, such as revealing that she does not get along with her supervisor, the ombuds may detect the visitor's need for relatedness and introduce the strategies of high-quality connections and/or active-constructive responding. Further, when the visitor emphasizes that her supervisor is a micro-manager, the ombuds may consider interventions such as learned optimism and real-time resilience, to address the visitor's need for autonomy. Ombuds can check in with visitors to confirm which need(s) and approach(es) to prioritize.

If, how, and when an ombuds communicates to visitors about the SeE Others framework can be a case-specific decision that is based on the personalities of the ombuds and visitors, along with the dynamic between them. One option is for the ombuds to provide a brief explanation of self-determination theory and/or the SeE Others framework. The ombuds' level of detail can cater to the questions and interests of each visitor. The ombuds can then invite the visitors' perspective. Alternatively, ombuds can take a less direct approach. For instance, the framework can serve as

a playbook to guide ombuds as cases evolve, instead of directing a specific agenda to teach visitors.

As indicated throughout the discussion of the SeE Others framework, self-determination needs are addressed in the context of the environments or systems in which individuals are embedded (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Accordingly, in addition to considering the self-determination needs of visitors during casework, ombuds can explore systemic implications. In particular, when employees believe that their work environments meet their self-determination needs, their motivation to accomplish specific tasks is optimized (Vallerand et al., 2008). That motivation can drive employees' investment in their organizations- which in turn, can influence organizations to further invest in their employees (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2021). To that end, ombuds can collaborate with organization leaders and members, through casework and systemic work, to help organizations better address employees' self-determination needs. Depending on the specific interests, culture, and resources of each organization, ombuds may consider recommendations to launch or refine employee appreciation/incentive programs, values programs, and/or new employee orientation and professional development programs.

CONCLUSION

The application of positive psychology research to the work of organizational ombuds can strengthen the potential, narrative, and impact of the ombuds role, ultimately advancing ombuds' practices and field (Muroff, 2024). In particular, self-determination theory can spark a shift from ombuds' exclusive focus on conflicts to a more expansive role that facilitates connections and wellbeing within and beyond ombuds' organizations. Specifically, ombuds can use the SeE Others framework as a guide for positive psychology interventions that can reinforce visitors' connections to themselves, their organizations, and their colleagues. By strengthening those connections, ombuds can promote the wellbeing of our visitors, organizations, practices, and field.

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AUTHOR BIO

Julie Muroff has focused her career on empowering others to manage conflict and change through her work as an ombudsman, attorney, executive coach, mediator, facilitator, and presenter. Currently, she is the founding Ombuds Director at Janelia Research Campus/Howard Hughes Medical Institute. Previously, Julie worked at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for fifteen years in several roles, including Acting Ombudsman/Director of the Center for Cooperative Resolution and Acting Chief Counsel. Her prior roles were in law firms, academia, and nonprofits. Julie holds a master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology in addition to her undergraduate degree in Psychology and her law degrees. (muroffj@janelia.hhmi.org)