We're Human, Too: Conflict Among Ombuds

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ABSTRACT
Ombuds professionals are skilled in helping others navigate conflict. However, ombuds also experience conflict, and they even experience conflict with each other. We explore the phenomenon of conflict among ombuds, a topic largely underexplored and absent from current scholarship. Drawing on conflict theory, organizational psychology, and the International Ombuds Association's guiding documents, we examine how ombuds can manage conflict with other ombuds. We outline practical strategies, including applying the conflict resolution tools we teach to our visitors, cultivating psychological safety and resilience, receiving support from other ombuds, setting boundaries, and deciding to submit a formal report. We identify techniques other professions use when experiencing conflict with each other, and we make recommendations for future research and data collection. We hope to normalize the fact that ombuds will experience conflict with each other, and they are uniquely equipped at managing those conflicts and getting back to the important work at hand.

KEYWORDS:
ombuds, dispute resolution, negotiation, mediation.

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One of the primary reasons organizations have ombuds is to help people through conflict. Ombuds use mediation, coaching, training, and facilitated dialogue to equip their visitors to navigate difficult situations that can arise with colleagues, supervisors, direct reports, employees, professors, students, and trainees. As a person people turn to, an ombuds can experience the pressure of maintaining their composure or absorbing others' expectations of their behavior. But because they are human, ombuds experience conflict, too, and they even experience conflict with other ombuds.

Conflict among ombuds can take many forms. For example, an ombuds might feel that they are being assigned an unfair distribution of cases compared to the other ombuds in their office. Or ombuds who are contracted from the same organization might be placed on a team together and experience conflict over how best to support their client. Conflict can also arise in partnerships between ombuds from different organizations. For example, two ombuds may decide to write an article together and disagree over the division of responsibilities for researching and writing the paper. Finally, members of professional organizations, such as the International Ombuds Association (IOA), the Coalition of Federal Ombuds, and the East Coast Ombuds Group, may have different opinions about how the organization should be run. In all of these scenarios, the conflict may include more than two people and be complex, layered, and intractable.

To our knowledge, the prevalence of conflict between ombuds has not been established. Conflict among ombuds is unique because ombuds deal with conflict on a regular basis. For this reason, when others hear about conflict arising among ombuds, their initial responses are often unhelpful. For example, when one author started speaking to colleagues about a conflict they experienced with another ombuds, they heard, "How ironic!"; "The ombuds need an ombuds!"; and "I thought you all were supposed to know how to handle conflict!" Some listeners just laughed. While the irony is not lost on an ombuds in conflict with another ombuds, the situation is not to be taken lightly. When someone's work and professional identity center around conflict resolution, understanding, and productive communication, it can be difficult to accept when conflict creeps in. Shame, sadness, and anxiety can be common.

The first step in resolving conflict among ombuds is to overcome denial. It is normal for all humans, even those who resolve conflict for a living, to experience conflict, especially with their colleagues. Acknowledgement of the conflict can help the ombuds move toward addressing it and recognizing its impact. This entails surveying the damage done and anticipating the damage that still might occur. Is the conflict only personally disappointing, or are there further implications? Is the conflict impacting the reputation of the office or its service to visitors? Is the conflict causing violations to the IOA Standards of Practice (International Ombuds Association, accessed November 5, 2025)? Finally, it is important for ombuds to avoid complaining to colleagues and visitors about an interpersonal conflict they are having with another ombuds. Complaining to colleagues who also work with the one you are in conflict with only sows division and distrust.

PRACTICE WHAT WE TEACH

Once the conflicted ombuds is past the initial reaction of denial and is ready to address the conflict, several strategies are available, with or without external guidance and support. The first and most obvious strategy for the ombuds in conflict is to employ the same tools they use with visitors. As a thought experiment, the ombuds might imagine what they would tell or suggest to a visitor who had the same challenge they were experiencing. If a visitor were struggling with a colleague, the ombuds might advise them to consider the other person's perspective, understand their underlying motivations, and ask open-ended questions. Active and full-spectrum listening enables one to listen to not just what is being said but also possible underlying feelings, overarching values, and tone.

The ladder of inference (Senge, 1990), is another helpful tool to elucidate how people select and interpret data and draw conclusions based on their own unique experiences, backgrounds, and personalities. The ladder rises from a place of available or observed data to specify how data are selected, how data are interpreted, and how conclusions are drawn. At the top rung of the ladder, someone takes action based on their walk up the ladder and their own process of selection, interpretation, and sensemaking. Our individual worldviews impact what happens at each rung of the ladder, and because those worldviews are unique, we do not follow the same paths from the pool of data to conclusion and action (Senge, 1990; Kern et al., 2020; Fiester, 2024). For example, an ombuds might text their colleague after hours to remind them about a visitor's meeting they have the following morning. To the sender, the text was a considerate reminder, and based on their experience, sending texts after hours is okay as long as a response is not expected. To the recipient, the text might have felt heavy-handed, and the timing disrespectful and boundary crossing. The different interpretations of the text message are based on each colleague's past experiences and work preferences.

When misunderstandings like this occur, it is helpful to "walk people down" the ladder of inference to the place where everyone has the same data and then ask questions to understand how a colleague's ladder of inference differs from your own. The colleagues in the previous example could return to their shared data—the text message—and ask each other about the intent, impact, and interpretation of the message. The goal here would not be to determine who had the "correct" interpretation but to understand each other's perspectives and disentangle the miscommunication. Furthermore, the "AND Stance" strategy reminds the ombuds that it is not important to choose whose ladder of inference is valid; one person's ladder can be valid AND another person's ladder can be valid at the same time (Stone, 2010). Instead of settling the question of who is right and who is wrong, the ladder of inference and the "AND Stance" prioritize understanding each other's perspectives, even when disagreements persist. These disagreements do not have to immobilize colleagues: they can be acknowledged and set aside as the colleagues decide to move forward regardless.

Another strategy that ombuds offer and can use themselves is separating intent and impact (Stone, 2010). When colleagues can express the negative impact of a word or action without conflating it with the other person's intentions or identity, resolution can occur and everyone's dignity can be preserved. Good intentions can still result in negative impact, and that can be acknowledged, addressed, and apologized for without condemning someone's character. Ombuds also help visitors reframe their situations from "me versus you" to "us versus the problem." This framing allows colleagues to focus on solutions and productive collaboration rather than personal animus or hurt feelings. The "us" in the reframed situation does not have to be two people who enjoy spending time outside of work together or who consider each other to be friends. It can be two people who are committed to shared goals and being courteous to each other, regardless of the past or personal feelings. Colleagues do not have to like each other in order to be productive and collaborative together.

Even after using all of these strategies, the conflict might persist. An ombuds might then advise visitors to focus on what the visitor can control and let go of what they cannot control. Harris (2008) encourages a focus on and recommitment to one's personal values (Parks-Leduc et al., 2015; McKee, 2017). Personal values can include kindness, honesty, efficiency, and creativity, to name just a few examples. Knowing which values one prioritizes is a crucial component of self-awareness. What values are important to you personally? What values are important to you professionally? Are these lists different or the same?

When a professional is surrounded by outcomes that they have no authority to change or improve, living by their values is a simple but powerful way to cope. For example, recall the earlier example of an ombuds who texts a colleague after hours and reminds them about a

visitor's meeting the following morning. Maybe that misunderstanding escalated, causing hurt feelings, unfair assumptions, and impossible communication. Perhaps the colleague is unwilling to engage in conflict resolution. Of all people, ombuds know they cannot force anyone to the table of dialogue and reconciliation. In that situation, the ombuds cannot control their colleague's words or actions and may not be able to do anything else to resolve the situation. However, one thing they can do—one thing someone can always do—is check in with themselves to determine if they are living by their values. Maybe this ombuds values kindness and resolves to treat their colleague with kindness regardless of how the situation progresses. Living according to values is always in one's control and can at times be the only sliver of agency and empowerment in a difficult situation. As conflict resolution and communication experts, ombuds have knowledge of and experience with strategies that promote collaboration, reconciliation, and understanding. When in conflict themselves, they can turn these strategies inward.

CULTIVATE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

In addition to applying conflict resolution strategies to their own conflicts, ombuds can work to cultivate psychological safety in their professional environments (Edmondson, 2018). Psychological safety is a concept that allows team members to give and solicit feedback, admit their mistakes, ask questions, raise concerns and challenges, and disagree productively, including by optimizing the adaptive lessons learned. Psychological safety requires the buy-in of all involved, and someone willing to take the necessary steps can introduce psychological safety into the dynamic and invite teammates to join in. One colleague admitting mistakes with no negative ramifications may make it more likely that other colleagues will admit their own mistakes. In addition, psychological safety can be created among team members by establishing shared expectations (also called team charters or team covenants) for how they will work together. These charter or covenants (the nomenclature is less important than the concept) are a list of agreements for how team members are going to manage workflow, interact, communicate, solve problems, and hold each other accountable (Johnson et al., 2022; Mathieu & Rapp, 2009). A final piece of psychological safety is accepting that after working hard to introduce safety, a colleague might not be willing to reciprocate psychologically safe practices. That situation—in which a colleague does not respond in the way you want them to and you feel out of options—leads to resilience.

When psychological safety cannot be established, resilience can be cultivated in the face of difficult and unchanging circumstances. Resilience is a personal trait or cluster of traits that enables someone to bounce back from a difficult situation. One study found 104 different definitions of resilience (Sinclair & Britt, 2013), so the research is plentiful, if varied. Some definitions of resilience focus on positive growth and others on adaptation, some on the capacity to be resilient and others on the demonstration of resilience. Britt et al. (2016) defines resilience as "the demonstration of positive adaptation in the face of significant adversity" (p. 380). Personality traits such as confidence, hope, and optimism can contribute to an individual's resilience, as can clusters of traits. Hardiness is a cluster of traits that comprises commitment, or a sense of meaning and purpose; control, or the desire to and belief that you control your own life; and challenge, or the inclination to learn, grow, and change (Kobasa, 1982; Bartone & Stein, 2020; Baka & Prusik, 2025). Strengthening resilience involves tending to self-care, purpose, inner drive, flexibility, and strong relationships. Ultimately, resilience involves moving forward and past difficult circumstances. If conflict resolution with a colleague has not been successful, for example, resilience might help the ombuds cope and remain productive.

"OMBUDS" EACH OTHER

Ombuds in conflict can also turn to ombuds colleagues outside of the conflict for support and processing. On an informal level, some ombuds meet regularly to check in on one another, hear

what is going on, and help brainstorm options. In other words, they "ombuds" each other or provide peer review or peer support. These arrangements might be explicit or implicit and can vary in regularity, but they are always confidential. The IOA also has an established mentoring program that matches experienced ombuds with practitioners newer to the field. These relationships can provide guidance, support, and professional development, and can often extend beyond the parameters of the formal program. Similarly, some groups of ombuds engage in reflection circles. These vary in size and format, but they provide an opportunity for ombuds to bring questions, concerns, or predicaments to other practitioners for their feedback. Of course, sharing information about one's organization to someone outside of the organization can create a professional risk of disclosure and should be done only when trust and confidentiality exist among the practitioners.

Furthermore, for the past several years, the IOA has provided ombuds services to its members. Naturally, the IOA Ombuds follow the IOA Standards of Practice and can be a resource for guidance, brainstorming, coaching, mediation, and facilitation. None of the above options specifically addresses the situation of ombuds in conflict with other ombuds, but they are avenues an ombuds can take to process and decide on their next steps.

PRACTICE JOB CRAFTING

Because professionals spend a lot of time at work and often feel strongly about the work they do, workplace conflict can be inconvenient and upsetting. It can challenge our sense of self and personal identity and can therefore reach beyond the job. Conflict at work also adds to the job demands a practitioner experiences, thereby increasing their workplace stress. Organizational psychology, an important and complementary field, presents different models of workplace stress and strategies for coping with that stress. One model of workplace stress, created by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), is called the Job Demands-Resources model, or JD-R model (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007; Boehnlein & Baum, 2022; Baka & Prusik, 2025). The JD-R model says that an employee's collective job *demands* create stress and strain, which can eventually lead to physical and mental health problems and negative outcomes for the organization such as absenteeism and turnover. For example, if employees have to lift heavy things daily, they might experience muscle strain that could eventually become an injury. On the mental health side, if a professional feels ignored or belittled by a colleague, they might experience shame, fear, and anger, which can lead to depression and anxiety. These impacts can lead to turnover, absenteeism, and a less well workforce.

At the same time, the JD-R model says that an employee's collective job *resources* motivate them, which can lead to positive individual and organizational outcomes such as productivity, profitability, and employee engagement. Job resources include autonomy, feedback, support, and even tangibles such as adequate annual leave. When employees have sufficient resources, they feel more motivated to do the work they need to do, and the organization benefits. These two, interconnected processes are detailed in Figure 1 (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

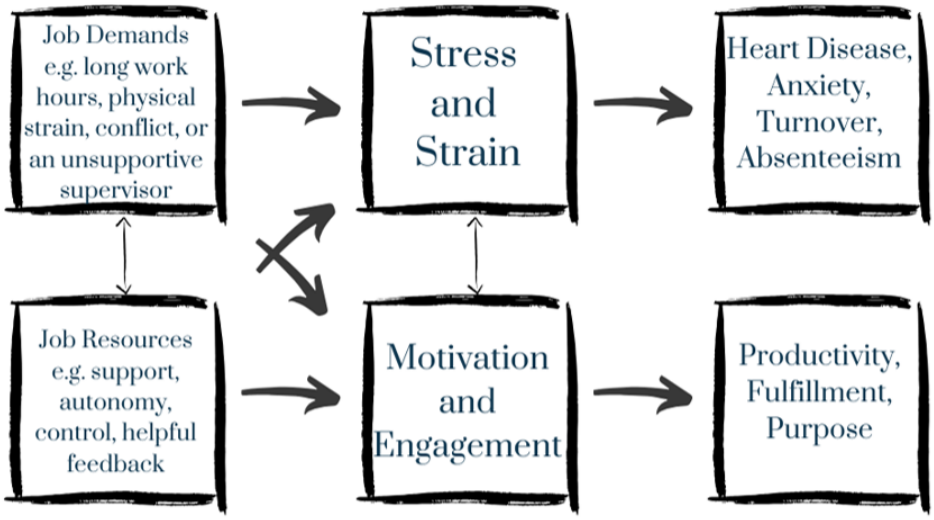

Figure 1 . Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model of workplace stress. Adapted from Bakker and Demerouti, 2007.

Because an employee's job demands and job resources are largely out of their control, job crafting is a way to turn a stressful situation at work into an opportunity to learn and develop. Conflict with another ombuds, for example, might not resolve in the ideal way or timeframe, if at all. Job crafting encourages a professional to take action by enhancing their job resources on their own. Starting graduate school, engaging in training, volunteering on a committee, and writing a journal article are all ways to job craft. If the job itself is not providing what an employee needs, where can the employee meet that need elsewhere? For example, two ombuds who are in conflict and not providing each other peer support may turn to ombuds outside of their organizations (while still protecting confidentiality) to process and brainstorm. Job crafting helps professionals find meaning, fulfillment, and support, even outside of their job duties or official hierarchy, to enhance or make up for what they are experiencing at work. Conflict with another ombuds does not have to be the end of the story; it can be a turning point for an ombuds to reflect on what they want and need and to seek it elsewhere.

USE REAPPRAISAL TO COPE WITH STRESS

For some ombuds, a conflict with an ombuds colleague might not register as stressful at all. The idea that stress is in the eye of the beholder forms the foundation of Lazarus' (1993) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Gross, 2015; Grandey & Sayre, 2019). To Lazarus, stress is not just an automatic response to a stressor but a transaction between the person and their environment. Presenting to a room of 250 people, then, is not inherently stressful. It is stressful only if the presenter appraises it to be stressful. Lazarus introduced three levels of appraisal when determining whether stress exists. First, primary appraisal is when someone determines whether something is stressful or problematic. Primary appraisal can happen instantaneously and can be accompanied by emotional and physiological responses. Secondary appraisal is when someone looks around to see what coping mechanisms and resources they possess to adapt to and overcome the stressor. Finally, reappraisal occurs after some time has passed and the individual looks back on the stressor and is able to identify meaning and growth from the experience. Having conflict with other ombuds can be discouraging and inconvenient. It can also lead to learning, growth, and development.

SET BOUNDARIES

Ombuds who are in conflict also need to decide how much time, energy, and emotional output they will spend on the situation. If attempts to resolve the conflict are rebuffed or unsuccessful, establishing boundaries can help the ombuds cope and move forward. For example, if two ombuds working on the same IOA committee were friends before the conflict erupted, it might be helpful for those individuals to draw a boundary around their professional and personal lives. They might decide not to move forward with a personal relationship while remaining productive professional colleagues.

It is also important for ombuds in conflict to set boundaries with the other ombuds around them. For example, if two ombuds are in conflict in an office of three, the third ombuds needs to know whether they are expected to mediate between the other two. Depending on the internal hierarchy and interpersonal relationships, the team might decide that it is appropriate for them to ombuds each other; alternatively, they might decide that within the office, no one has a responsibility to lead conflict resolution for the others. Finally, an ombuds in conflict can set a boundary regarding the point at which they plan to report the situation to a more formal channel.

WEIGH REPORTING OPTIONS

When conflict erupts between ombuds, they ideally will employ all the tools in their toolkit to address it, including active listening, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence. They also might try to establish psychological safety to bring up concerns. If it becomes clear that the conflict is not resolving in the informal manner that they are accustomed to, the ombuds might build up their own resilience, turn to other ombuds for support, or job craft to enhance their own job resources. After some time, the ombuds might be able to reappraise the situation with more context, identify what they have learned, and set boundaries for what they are willing to share and what they need to protect. If these strategies are not successful, and the conflict is impacting the reputation of the ombuds office, adherence to the IOA Standards of Practice, or the ombuds' well-being, an ombuds might consider reporting the situation through a formal channel.

Imagine two ombuds who report to the same institutional leader are in dispute over their respective stakeholder groups. Perhaps the office serves all populations generally, and these two ombuds have a different understanding of what populations they each need to focus on. One feels that the other is encroaching on their territory; the other feels that the first, who is not their supervisor, is trying to control and direct their work without authority to do so. After challenging interpersonal interactions, one ombuds colleague hears from a visitor that the other ombuds colleague has been complaining about them. This situation, while personally upsetting, also threatens the professional reputation of the ombuds office, and the ombuds colleague decides to make a formal report or seek additional assistance. One potential formal option is Human Resources. Ombuds and Human Resources should be partners in their organizations, and they should understand each other well enough to recognize their boundaries and refer people to one another when appropriate. Whether ombuds can or should reach out to Human Resources about conflict in their own office has not been examined thoroughly, as far as the authors know. More research should be done on this topic. Other reporting options include the Equal Employment Opportunity Office, Title IX, and the Office of Institutional Compliance.

In general, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to formal reporting. One person's threshold for filing a formal report might occur after the second incident, whereas another colleague might allow behavior to continue for years before approaching a formal reporting mechanism. The severity of the concern, the impact on the individual, the prevalence of the behavior, and the employee's objectives are all considerations when deciding whether and where to report a concern. An important consideration that may weigh on the ombuds' mind is that the reputation of the ombuds office might suffer if conflicts are reported through a formal channel. The ombuds

office is comprised of people who should be skilled in active listening and coaching, but these skills may be called into question when it emerges that conflict exists within the office. For example, a human resources specialist may think: “Why should I refer employees to the ombuds office if they cannot even resolve conflicts amongst themselves?” At the same time, an ombuds who is a supervisor may want to engage Human Resources to receive support in addressing performance or disciplinary concerns with their staff. The reputational costs should be weighed by the practical need for the expertise Human Resources—or another one of these formal options—provides. The expected benefits might be worth the expected risks.

Furthermore, reporting the situation does not have to engage a formal reporting mechanism. Ombuds might bring concerns to their supervisors—both within and outside of the ombuds office—for support and resolution. Many ombuds offices report to presidents, CEOs, chiefs of staff, provosts, chancellors, and directors of operations. The effectiveness and wisdom of bringing a conflict to these individuals depend on many considerations, including whether the two ombuds in conflict are in a hierarchical relationship, whether they report to the same supervisor, what the relationship with the supervisor is like, and whether there is psychological safety in that relationship. When bringing someone at this level into the conflict, the person reporting the situation should also prepare to share only what is necessary and to bring potential solutions to the conversation. That way, the leader can efficiently and effectively guide the ombuds in resolving their situation. If two ombuds are both contracted by the same organization, the contracting organization might be able to help resolve a conflict within the contract team. As contract ombuds teams increase, so does the potential for conflict within and among the teams.

When conflict occurs between people in different organizations, the reporting options are different. The IOA Ombuds can be involved in informal conflict resolution like mediation or facilitated dialogue. If the conflict is occurring within a committee, the chair or leader might be able to help, especially if the conflict involves disagreement over the tasks to be completed, the process for doing things, or the overarching goals of the group. Finally, the IOA has formal Concern and Complaint Policy and Procedures (International Ombuds Association, 2023) for a specific set of behaviors, including incivility, harassment, and retaliation. The measures to address these behaviors include, among others, a letter of reprimand or termination of the respondent’s IOA membership. Even after informal resolutions are attempted, an ombuds may decide not to report the situation to anyone with the authority or responsibility to address it.

Finally, it is ironic that ombuds who report conflict through a formal channel may experience fears that are typical of ombuds visitors. For example, if an ombuds reports the inappropriate behavior of another ombuds to their supervisor (who may or may not also be an ombuds) or to Human Resources, they may fear retaliation, such as changes in work assignments or even termination. An ombuds’ decision to file a formal complaint may depend on the scope and procedures of the non-retaliation policy.

LEARN FROM OTHER PROFESSIONS

Ombuds are not the only helping professionals who may struggle to accept that they are experiencing conflict amongst themselves. Some professions address the occurrence of conflict through their ethical standards. Psychologists, for example, are directed to attempt to resolve a conflict with other psychologists through direct dialogue first, then to consult with a supervisor or outside individual, and then, as a last resort, to report the conflict through a formal reporting mechanism (American Psychological Association, 2017). Psychologists have ethics and licensure committees that can address disputes formally if informal resolution fails. Similarly, in the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) Code of Ethics for licensed social workers, social workers are expected to fulfill responsibilities toward their colleagues, including treating them with respect, avoiding “unwarranted negative criticism,” and cooperating for the wellbeing of clients (National

Association of Social Workers, n.d.). The NASW Code of Ethics also warns against exploiting clients in disputes with other social workers or even bringing them into the conflict through conversation. No explicit guidance is given regarding conflict amongst mediators in the Model Standards of Conduct for Mediators (American Bar Association, 2005). However, a general closing statement advises that "[A] mediator should demonstrate respect for differing points of view within the field, seek to learn from other mediators and work together with other mediators to improve the profession and better serve people in conflict."

Beyond these formal standards and codes, studies across social work and psychology sub-disciplines highlight the importance of communication, teamwork, role clarification, and shared mental models in preventing or resolving conflict within these communication and conflict resolution-based professions (Simons et al., 2022). Ombuds can adopt multiple ideas from these other professions in how to handle conflict with fellow ombuds. First, an emphasis is placed on documenting all interactions, communications, and attempts at resolution. This documentation can be helpful if a dispute about timing or sequencing arises later and in the event the situation escalates to a formal process. Second, these professions advise against pulling clients or visitors into a conflict with other professionals. For ombuds, this would mean declining to discuss any concerns about their ombuds colleagues with visitors or potential visitors. Third, the colleagues in conflict should engage in discussions to clarify each other's roles and responsibilities. In the event these have not been clear since the beginning of a relationship, a clarifying conversation can ensure the colleagues are on the same page about what they are expected to do and what they can expect from each other. Finally, other helping professionals highlight the importance of attempting direct, informal resolution before bringing someone else into the situation or before reporting it formally (Barsky, 2025).

While the IOA Organizational Values and Community Norms addresses honesty, integrity, empathy, and respect, these are guidelines and not standards. Thus, updating the IOA Standards of Practice to include ombuds' responsibilities toward fellow ombuds and resolution pathways when conflict between ombuds arises should be considered. Ombuds are not the only professionals who help people through conflict and also engage in conflict themselves, and much can be learned by how these other professions direct their members to engage.

POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Because so little data exist on conflict among ombuds, this topic warrants future exploration. It is currently unknown how many ombuds deal with conflict with fellow ombuds. To begin addressing this research gap, we propose that the IOA Ombuds create a central clearinghouse and gather data concerning conflict among ombuds. Potential fields for data collection might include type of ombuds (organizational, classical, etc.), IOA Uniform Categories, internal or external to the institution, number of people in conflict, and the relationship between the people in conflict (co-workers, volunteers on the same committee, contractors, etc.). This effort would also allow the IOA Ombuds to better understand the reasons these conflicts occur and identify the coping mechanisms that have the most success. Another focus of this effort could be on how Human Resources offices are involved, if they are at all, and how ombuds can protect the Standards of Practice while also resolving their own conflicts. If an update to the Standards of Practice is considered, research could be done on the potential impact of different clauses. Conflict among ombuds is a fertile field of developing research.

CONCLUSION

Ombuds are human. They can have—and even cause!—hurt feelings, bruised egos, miscommunications, and regret. While they are uniquely positioned to assist their visitors with these struggles, that does not mean they do not experience them, too. And when working with

other ombuds, internal or external to their own organization, conflict is going to happen. This inevitability does not diminish the skills and abilities of the ombuds; it is simply a fact of the workplace environment. Resolving conflict with other ombuds has the added challenge of higher standards and expectations, given the greater communication and coaching skills that are a part of ombuds training and experience. Fortunately, in addition to the standard options that are available to others, organizational ombuds have the ability to reach out to their network of ombuds when conflict arises. Conflict with other ombuds does not have to immobilize an ombuds nor derail them from guiding their organizations to greater communication, reconciliation, and peace. Of all people, ombuds themselves know how liberating it can be to put a conflict to rest and re-focus on the work ahead.

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