



Is it time to Call the Ombuds? How Organizational Ombuds Help Increasingly Complex Organizations

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Today, a growing number of corporations, non-profits, government agencies and world-class university systems are experiencing the disruptive power of social, political, economic and technological change.

A younger generation is joining the workforce, challenging long-held management and organizational norms. Technology continues to change professional interactions, personal relationships and our perceptions of others. An unprecedented volume and variety of information is shared, consumed and internalized in entirely new ways. And more than ever, communities reflecting a greater diversity of backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, values and viewpoints are making their voices heard and driving the demand for progress.

Add to these trends the challenges associated with COVID and return-to-office policies, gender equity issues, the #MeToo movement, a tumultuous reckoning over race, and other potential stressors, and there has perhaps never been a more complex or fraught time for those who manage organizations or the people they employ.

In this complex environment, executives and other leaders remain under increasing pressure to manage costs, pursue growth, achieve mission objectives and avoid risk – while demonstrating measurable effectiveness.

From Fortune 500 companies to renowned academic institutions to government entities, an ever-growing number of organizations are turning to organizational ombuds as sources of information, insight and guidance.

These often unseen and heralded individuals – found in workplaces around the world – act as constructive problem-solvers who provide valuable insights toward building communities, organizations and workforces built on fairness, justice, equity and inclusion.

But what exactly is an ombuds¹, and what do they do? The short answer is this: ombuds and their offices offer a safe place for confidential communication and the ability to discuss

¹ The type of ombuds referenced in this article are organizational ombuds.

resources, options, and processes – before an employee chooses to take action with regard to a professional conflict, problem or challenge.

Supplementing traditional HR, legal and compliance channels and departments, an ombuds acts as a no-barrier, first-stop for employees, as well as executives, managers and others seeking guidance, information and insight from a trusted advisor who is independent, impartial, informal and always confidential.

An ombuds is not part of management, but also does not represent the individuals they work with. An ombuds does not take sides, instead working to develop options to address or surface issues that support empowerment and fair process – for individuals seeking assistance, and for the organization that employs them. Their work allows people to quickly resolve conflicts and get back to the business of pursuing their personal and professional goals.

What does this mean for leaders? For organizations and organizational leaders of all types, ombuds help survey the terrain, assess risk, monitor trends, help address challenges, and surface and identify issues the C-Suite needs to know about. In doing so, they often help organizations avoid litigation and costly damage to brands and reputations.

In its most recent survey of practicing organizational ombuds, the International Ombuds Association (IOA) found that ombuds routinely deal with serious workplace issues that entail high potential costs, and major gains or losses of possible benefits for “all constituents involved ... and for their organizations.”²

The IOA found that serious cases reported by ombuds in 2022 included sexual and racial harassment, disrespectful treatment and bullying, retaliation, unspecified ethics issues, safety issues, potential suicidal and homicidal behavior, gross negligence, research and financial misconduct, various forms of sabotage, insider threats, national security issues, and a variety of other integrity concerns.

“Savings in costs in a single high-risk case — if the case is handled effectively — may more than offset all the costs of an ombuds office,” their research concluded.

With the cost of workplace conflict estimated at \$359 billion per year³ and more than \$144,000 per day lost to interpersonal conflict, miscommunication and poor decision-making, the impetus for effective conflict resolution has never been greater.⁴

In fact, IOA members report that “serious cases” are becoming even more complex. Today those cases often include multi-race-and-ethnic concerns, complex gender issues, multi-generational concerns, cases across units, cases involving conflicting rules, more cases with

² International Ombuds Association 2022 Practice Survey © 2022; Communicating the Value of the Ombuds: Data about the Most Serious Cases, © 2022 Mary Rowe, Timothy Hedeon, Jennifer Schneider, and Hector Escalante.

³ *CPP Global Human Capital Report*, July 2008, pg. 3. Based on average hourly earnings of \$17.95, seasonally adjusted, non-farm workers. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2008.

⁴ *Harvard Business Review*, “Putting a Price on People Problems at Work,” by Tanya Menon and Leigh Thompson, August 23, 2016.

groups, and cases with bystanders. Organizational ombuds also reported more cases requiring consultation with compliance officers and counsel – driving the impetus for systemic responses.

Informing leaders who can driving positive, system change is central to the ombuds' role in creative problem-solving that can create and sustain strong and resilient communities and effective organizations. To the end, their work empowers individuals and their organizations to overcome disputes, conflicts and barriers that stand in the way of reaching their full potential.

How do they do it? It varies. An ombuds may conduct training and education, and coaching and facilitation for organizations and individuals facing challenges large and small. These may include workplace and employee conflicts, whistleblowing and compliance issues, or ethical, legal and policy violations.

For individuals, ombuds offer coaching, mediation and dispute resolution, but they don't just wait for problems to occur. Ombuds also identify systemic issues that keep leaders up at night to help them make informed business, policy and management decisions. They build and strengthen productive and effective relationships between organizational departments and professionals and perform outreach to diverse constituencies and stakeholders about alternatives to traditional conflict resolution.

But fundamentally, for the individuals who visit their offices, they provide a safe place to go for information and confidential guidance – a service becoming highly sought-after in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty and accelerated change.

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