

# MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE OMBUDS ROLE: IDEAS THAT WORK

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of the Ombudsperson is rewarding and challenging. Seeing a person move through a tough situation, regain confidence and increase productivity, and helping them find the inner strength that we, as the Ombuds, knew existed is definitely one of those rewards. Helping the organization move through a trying period by assisting its leadership to understand the concerns and issues its workers perceive is another. Yet another reward comes at those times when you know that, but for the existence of your office, a serious issue such as fraud or sexual harassment might have remained buried within the organization, only to manifest itself later in a less manageable way. Along with these rewards come the challenges. Issues of self-care, ombudsman career development, and gaining the confidence to competently manage the incredibly wide range of issues that present themselves to us as practitioners of the art of Ombudsmanry arise often.

The purpose of this article is to share ideas from practicing ombuds peers who have found useful tools or techniques to address some of the things that confront us daily in our role. I hope that you will find these tips and approaches thought-provoking and potentially adaptable to a situation that may confront you in your practice.

## IDEAS THAT WORK



### THE LETTER

Often, visitors approach us when they perceive that they have been the victim of harassment or when they have been deeply offended by another. In these situations, one of our greatest concerns is in helping them clarify their own thinking about why they are upset. What actually happened to prompt the reaction they are now feeling? What would help the visitor perceive that the situation is corrected? And, what are the alternatives when the visitor feels that they are in a situation where the other person involved has more positional authority, physical power, or organizational support?



Some years ago, **Mary Rowe**, Ombudsperson and Professor at MIT, developed an approach to help her visitors sort through their thoughts and explore the range of “rage, grief, or confusion” that the visitor might be dealing with. This approach involves suggesting to your visitor that they draft a letter to the other person involved. Mary observes that visitors find it “easier to deal with ... [their] ... feelings and with the offense ... [when they] ... first sort out the facts from the feelings.” She finds that this approach also helps her visitors bring

clarity to their thinking about options for resolving the situation. This approach helps visitors “get the anger outside” themselves and helps them remember the facts. In her significant experience, Mary finds that having the visitor draft a letter to the person who has offended them may be “...the best possible preparation for all the major options open to ... [the visitor].”

Mary suggests that the visitor should not initially worry about form and format for the letter, but simply get things down in a stream-of-consciousness approach. The letter can then be reworked through a number of revisions and drafts. Ultimately, the letter may serve as an important communication tool between the visitor and the person viewed as causing the harm. Yet sometimes, the letter is never sent. It can serve as a useful tool to help the visitor clarify their own thoughts and perceptions *without ever being mailed*.



### PROTECTING ANONYMITY WHILE STILL SURFACING IMPORTANT ISSUES TO MANAGEMENT

Ombuds often encounter organizational issues that surface as the root cause of chronic mistrust, low morale and lost productivity. Often the sources of the problem are widely known to those in the work unit, but the workers do not feel the safety, trust, or confidence needed to come forward with the issues to management. When a visitor caught in this

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9...

## IDEAS THAT WORK CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8...

situation approaches the Ombuds, often our task is to help the visitor develop an approach to surface the issue, while providing them with a sense of safety and assurance that they will not be singled out in the process.

**Janis Schonauer**, Ombudsperson at Alliance Capital Management Corporation, describes a technique she has found very helpful in organizational situations where individual visitors with concerns about their work environment may worry about being singled out as “troublemakers.” Jan has experienced great results with a technique wherein she distributes 3x5 cards to each member of the team in a collective setting. She asks each participant to help her build the agenda for a meeting by writing down on the card the single most important thing that should be covered in the meeting. Once each person has their item written down, she asks them to pass the card to the person next to them. She then tells the group that if the person agrees with the item on the card as a major concern, they should put a checkmark on the card. The cards are passed around to the entire team for review and the opportunity to vote. Jan has discovered that this approach serves as a great way to provide an outlet for the quieter members, encourages equal input from everyone, and serves as a means for team members to validate and calibrate their perceptions. Once the cards have been circulated, Jan says that she finds that it is “easy to add the most frequently identified items to the agenda and to eventually come up with a list of issues that the group ... [gives] me permission to pursue with the department leadership. They saw that there was agreement and anonymity.”



### THE MAGIC WAND

People who have worked with me will know that this is one of my pet tools. Often when people become embroiled in conflict they become position-focused and intent on proving to themselves and others that the wrong they believe they have been subjected to indeed occurred. In my experience, the person who dwells on the past often has difficulty envisioning the future and bringing into focus what a path forward could look like. If left unchecked, this person can slide into a self ingrained belief system of victim status.

Sometimes the simplest tools can be among the most effective. On the wall in my consultation room (a room with over-stuffed chairs, and coffee table), I have a magic wand mounted. It is easily removable and, depending on the situation, I can take it down and literally hand it to the person — or at least point to it and ask them “If we could waive this wand and tomorrow the situation was completely corrected, what would that look like?” It has been a great tool to introduce the person to a guided imagery process designed to gently pull them out of their “retrospective focus” and into a forward-looking, “resolution focus.”

## ANCHORING TO FUNDAMENTALS

In preparing to write this article, **Anni Townend**, ombudsperson, organizational consultant and writer, reminded me of an important aspect of our work — sticking to the ombuds principles and standards of practice that distinguish our profession. Anni very cogently observes that “[m]y approach to ombudsing is very much embodied in the TOA Standards of Practice, namely confidentiality, neutrality and informality — and, of course professionalism. [Sic]” While we may find that specialized tools work well in certain particularly challenging situations, we should never forget that perhaps the most effective tools we as ombuds possess are the tools that are integrated into the core of our practice. Among these tools are remembering the fundamental tenets that make an ombuds program effective for the visitor. As Anni reminded me, among these are systems which ensure utmost confidentiality, a comfortable and welcoming meeting environment, effective listening skills and an outstanding ability to engage with our visitors in a trustworthy and confidence-building manner. While we should constantly endeavor to expand our range of competencies and specialized tools and skills, we should not forget that there is no substitute for excellence in our core competencies.

I wish to extend many thanks to **Jan Schonauer**, **Mary Rowe** and **Anni Townend** for their generous response to my call for contributions to this article. I was overwhelmed with their great ideas and found that the challenge in writing this article was less in developing the ideas, than selecting among the many excellent approaches and tools which were so generously shared! ●