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PORTIA

Mary Rowe

It is not a “Crisis Committee”.... but one might want a “Portia” anyway

In the context of considerable interest in crisis committees, I was asked to write for OO colleagues about a work group at our university, named “Portia.” Portia is not a crisis committee, though it probably helps with crisis prevention. It is a problem sharing and problem-solving group that helps to build trust. It helps keep our conflict management system coordinated. Portia has been very important to me and to others; I will describe the group and try to explain why.

Introduction

Portia is a group that meets for an hour, most Thursday mornings at 8am, with a simple breakfast funded by the Office of the Provost and presided over by a former Associate Provost who also held a named chair as a Professor of Humor.

Portia is not a formal committee at all; it does not make decisions. No one keeps minutes; everyone agrees not to quote any discussion in Portia. It functions as a group of respectful equals; there is little sense of hierarchy and not much pontificating. One nice thing about Portia is that almost everyone who has served on it considers it the most engaging, “non-committee” work-group they have known.

Who

The group at Portia varies a bit, year by year. It usually is comprised of senior managers: in mental health, HR, student affairs (graduate students and undergraduates), the general counsel’s office, the Chair of the Faculty, the Chair-Elect of the Faculty, the Chair of the Committee on Discipline, the university police, the Institute Chaplain, the ombuds office—and any previous member of Portia who would like to come. At present, six are faculty members, two of whom are Deans. Four are



Vice-Presidents. One is a Chaplain. Ten are members of Academic Council (the senior internal governance body of our university.) As mentioned, the chair is an emeritus faculty member. Sometimes there are six people in attendance. Sometimes there are sixteen. And any senior member of the administration may ask to come, ad hoc, to raise an idea or an issue.

Topics

Any issue of the day is grist for discussion, whether painful or cause for celebration. (Good news is always welcomed.) What are the effects on the university of all the new external partnerships? What did we think about Diversity Day with its exceptional presentations? What is happening with Title IX? Can universities do better in supporting students, staff and faculty in distress? Are we facing new forms of conflict of interest where students and faculty are constantly starting new companies? What will happen to universities at a time of MOOCs (on-line learning)? If one has a topic that one would like to have discussed, one should come in a little early and quickly put the topic on the board. First come, first served. Portia usually does not talk about individuals, although anybody might raise an *issue* arising from a case or concern. (The ombuds do not, of course, discuss confidential cases, but ombuds might ask for historical information or other perspectives about generic scenarios.)

Where did Portia come from?

Portia¹ was invented in an era of recurrent tensions in 1990. The university has a long and fortunate tradition of convening ad hoc—and usually productive—problem-solving meetings when tensions

¹ I thought of “Portia” because of the idea, from Portia’s famous speech in the Merchant of Venice, that there are values that transcend hierarchy (and, in addition, there is also the thought that “Portia” means “gates,” or “entrances” in Latin, thus an “opening” to finding options).

“The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,
Upon the place beneath.
It is twice blessed.
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
It is mightiest in the mightiest,
It becomes the throned monarch better than his crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
An attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings,
But mercy is above this sceptred sway.”



arise. (The air we breathe is “*Design the future.*” There is a lot of interest in building community.) It was easy to talk, in the 1970s and 1980s, with several Vice-Presidents, and a then Associate Provost, about the issues of those years. There were many problem-solving groups focused on the various issues. A few turned into formal committees, though many were short-lived. In particular, the erstwhile Associate Provost, who now still presides over Portia, pulled together group discussions about vexed harassment issues. As so often happens, he and others helped resolve, or stabilize, such issues in the context of lively group discussions.

In the late 70s and all through the 1980s, I wished for—and regularly asked several senior officers for—a standing work group about a range of conflict management issues. Then another issue, and another, appeared in the aftermath of a painful case in the Committee on Discipline. The Associate Provost and another faculty member, who was a well-known natural mediator, reviewed the situation and came up with a number of recommendations. One was:

Periodic meetings should take place between the Chair of the COD and the Chief of Campus Police, the Dean for Student Affairs and certain key individuals, such as the Chair of the Faculty, (the ombudspersons) and other members of the faculty or the administration who show particular concern, to discuss issues that might lead to points of strain so that advance consideration can be given. These meetings would enable the faculty and administration as well as the Campus Police to keep in closer cooperative touch with one another and thereby help to avoid the possibility of alienation that always exists in difficult situations.²

The Associate Provost then implemented the recommendation. I was very happy about it. One might learn from this that it may make sense to propose a Portia at a time of painful tensions. However, all organizations exist, permanently, with a lot of tense situations. Thus almost any time may be a good time to start a group like Portia.

² From Jay Keyser, *Mens et Mania*, MIT Press, 2011, p. 171.



What does Portia do?

What Portia does—as I think of it now, as a theorist of conflict management system design—is to help keep our conflict management system (CMS) coordinated. Portia strongly supports our CMS.

In the 1970s I came up with the (oxymoronic) idea of an “Integrated Conflict Management System”—an “ICMS.” I was influenced by the ideas around me at MIT, about neural networks and systems theories. And this was originally why I wanted a standing group like Portia—to help “integrate.” My (overly) imaginative term—ICMS—is now widely in use around the world, which, of course, delights me. But I think in real life the best we can do is to help to *coordinate* a CMS. And help all CMS managers, and those whom they serve, to keep up with a rapidly changing world. I learned that conflict management systems do not lend themselves to “integration.” (There are some technical reasons why this is so, that a colleague and I have discussed in a new article³.) But people who run an organization *can* get to know each other over food, with camaraderie, and on a very wide range of issues.

Day by day, members of a group like Portia refer people to each other, consult with each other, invent new options, help each other do the best that can be done with tough problems, grieve with each other, console each other, help each other to learn from excellent outcomes, rejoice with each other. The chair of Portia wrote to me:

“1. Portia functions first and foremost as a problem-solving group. Perhaps this is why it has worked so well for so long at an Institute whose fundamental way of teaching revolves around problem sets. For its members this committee is a sounding board for those who have problems that need solving. Members will run potential solutions by the group to see what the group's reaction will be. Are the solutions sensible? What are the pitfalls? Do you have any better ideas?”

“2. Portia functions as a place where solutions to problems may be formulated. You can go there with a problem but not have any idea what to do about it. Because its members are made up of people with a tremendous amount of problem solving experience, it is a great place to shop for solutions.”

³ “The Ombudsman in a Conflict Management System,” Mary Rowe and Howard Gadlin, in *The Oxford Handbook of Conflict Management in Organizations*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, 2014.



“3. Portia functions as an encounter group allowing its members to find a place where they can

‘discharge,’ as it were. Get some of the stress they are confronting off their chests.⁴”

Another faculty member said Portia was the only committee he had served on, that “did problem solving in real time.⁵” This is an important notion—that a “Portia” *saves time*.

Modern organizations are full of silos, people from very different backgrounds, increasing pressure, and unexpected issues. They are in action 24/365; new people come or are promoted; policies change; there is always much to learn. People in all cohorts not only have different ideas, in conflict with each other, but they have different ideas *about* conflict. Portia is a little oasis with time to consult and think. It may have helped prevent a number of crises.

In addition, when a crisis does come, perhaps unexpectedly on a weekend... the managers who deal with the issues may have a higher degree of understanding with each other, and an easier milieu to discuss the aftermath, if they know each other. In this sense, Portia does “help with crises”—not in the sense of making decisions, but rather in the sense of “being there,” reliably and consistently, when someone wants to ask a question.

And for Ombuds?

For ombuds, a Portia is a godsend. We are, as independent neutrals, *outsider*-insiders. We do not participate in the governance meetings of our organization. At a Portia we can learn a lot about where the organization is going, and ask for wisdom. We can ask for advice—or at least options (!) We learn how we may be able to help our CMS—and all its stakeholders—better than we knew the week before.

And we contribute a lot where we believe that systems need improvement. Ombuds have much to share. In modern organizations *there are few, if any, senior managers other than ombuds, who are in a position to see—and hear from—the whole organization, every day, from every cohort, about any issue.*

⁴ Personal communication with Jay Keyser, February, 2013.

⁵ Keyser, op. cit., p. 172.



The Journal of the California Caucus of College and University Ombuds

Because we are confidential, neutral, independent, and have no management power—and because we welcome all cohorts and all issues, across all organizational boundaries—we may learn more *across* the whole organization than anyone else. We learn much more than hotlines. We may be the next-best device for helping scared people in our universities to surface terrible problems. (Of course line managers who are perceived to be trustworthy are the best device.)

And what of our Standards of Practice? Ombuds must, scrupulously, maintain confidentiality in such a group. However, we can and should identify new issues, and offer ideas about systems' improvement, to those who manage our organizations. As independent neutrals who practice informally, the MIT ombuds do not serve on university crisis committees or any other decision-making body, though we may sometimes serve as resources to such committees. Portia, by contrast, is not a university committee.

Ombuds do frequently find themselves impartially examining the interests of many different stakeholders, and offering options, in discussions in Portia—but so do the others who attend. (If anything, Portia is a group where nearly everyone asks from time to time if the emperors are wearing clothes.) And, in discussing problems together with other senior managers, on behalf of all of our stakeholders, ombuds can learn better how to pursue our profession.

Mary Rowe is an organizational Ombudsperson working at MIT for 41 years. She loved coming to Asilomar and wishes that she would be able to come back.