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**Abstract:** Ombuds who work as solo practitioners are likely to face certain challenges such as isolation and managing a workload singlehandedly, as well as benefits such as functioning with considerable autonomy. This article sketches reflections from an ombuds who established ombuds offices at two US-based research universities, and is intended primarily for ombuds who are new to or considering entering the field as a solo practitioner. The article shares one practitioner's experiences, lessons-learned, and hopes for the future. The perspective is offered as pointers for the reader's consideration, rather than as a list of "do" and "don'ts".

**Key Words:** solo practitioner, ombudsman, reflections, job fit, vision, isolated

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**Abstract:** The act of mentoring dates back to ancient Greece and continues to evolve based on the community involved. In this article the mission of the IOA Mentoring Program as well as history and matching process of seasoned mentors with inexperienced mentees are discussed. The article continues by exploring the future of the mentoring program and the need to continue to expand and develop processes for the growing ombuds community. Lastly, the relevance of the IOA Mentoring Program and the benefits it offers to an array of constituents (individually and institutionally) are examined.

**Key Words:** Ombudsman, Mentoring, International Ombudsman Association

# The Solo Organizational Ombudsman Practitioner...and our need for colleagues...*a conversation*

MARY ROWE AND BRIAN BLOCH

## ABSTRACT

It takes a village to produce a successful organizational Ombuds.

## KEY WORDS

Organizational ombudsman, solo practitioner, continuing education, compassion fatigue

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mary Rowe has been helped by hundreds of ombuds, including, especially — in the present decade — those who work with JIOA and other IOA committees, those who are part of ECOG, and those with

whom she has written articles. She owes a special debt to Toni Robinson, Clarence Williams, and Thomas Zgambo, her MIT Ombuds Office colleagues of the present and past.

Brian Bloch is indebted to Arnold Zack for introducing him to the ombuds profession and to Mary Rowe who has served as Brian's mentor for over a decade. As with Mary, Brian has gained so much through his work with the JIOA editors/associate editors: David Miller, Alan Lincoln, Laurie Patterson, and Tom Sebok. Finally, Bob Cohen, Brian's co-director at ISKCONResolve, has been a tremendously insightful colleague.

## The conversation begins... Mary Rowe

When I was first appointed in 1973, I often felt lonely, even though I liked my job. I will try to explain why I liked my job and why I felt alone. My initial job description was to see if I could "help make human beings more visible" at MIT. I really liked this concept and challenge and opportunity. The job description was a major reason why I accepted the job.

I also was content with the structure of the job; I was happy to be formally instructed by my first bosses, the President and Chancellor of MIT, to keep near-absolute confidentiality, and to serve independently from all line and staff structures. I also was (wryly) relieved to learn that I would have no managerial decision-making power, since I knew so little about the job; for this reason, practicing "informally" also came easily.

However, I quickly found that “making human beings more visible” is not an easy task, let alone for just one person. I found that my skills, (such as they were, if any) were only those of a single human being. Most people at MIT were male, most were Caucasian but some were not; some were born outside the US; all the world’s great religions were represented, each with its own spectrum of differences. The first language for many appeared to be mathematics. What did I know about all the points of view of all humans?

In addition, I was not yet formally designated as a *neutral* but I quickly learned that I was expected to be impartial. I learned this when I gave my new boss an overview of the point of view of a woman who had come to my office. My note was completely factual as a description of her point of view. I prided myself on my (appearance of) objectivity. However...my new boss wanted to know the other side of the story. Oh. Right.

What does it actually mean to “know” the experience of another person when each of us has been socialized into just one set of demographics; how would I learn to understand all points of view? I knew I needed help. In my first months on the job, I asked for a counterpart, preferably a man and preferably someone of color. And I began to collect ideas about solo practice vs. having a colleague in ombuds practice. In the event, over forty years, it has been much easier for me to work together, with a succession of extraordinary colleagues, than it has been when I have practiced alone.

It seems to me obvious that large institutions need more than one organizational ombudsman (OO) practitioner if possible. It provides the possibility of gender and race diversity, not to mention diversity by age, religion, nationality, language, experience and different pockets of wisdom. Each OO is likely to have his or her own network of helping resources, and inside and outside colleagues, whose wisdom can be consulted. The office will have more than one set of skills for coaching and training and case analysis. “Multiple-ombuds” means that our visitors have a *choice* of practitioner, which adds meaning to the idea of having options in the ombuds office.

I quickly learned that having a colleague provides *back-up* for vacations and illness, and less burden on the family of the OO practitioner. Having a colleague provides fail-safe in an emergency. Having an OO colleague helps to prevent burnout, by providing gallows humor and consistent encouragement. It is more fun.

One of the quintessential values of an OO is *responsiveness*, in a universe where instant response is desired, because of the internet. Responsiveness is also important since many helping services and managers are so slow to respond. Immediate responsiveness may also actually be needed, in serious situations, by managers, as well as by employees and students. Two OOs can provide much more responsiveness. Two OOs plus an assistant who is in charge of the calendar, who also can move appointments, can make sure that most callers are acknowledged within a day. This emergency room responsiveness, which matters so much to those whom we serve, almost certainly saves money for our employers in serious cases.

Having more than one ombud helps a lot in communicating about the office. Inevitably, the caseload depends in part on word of mouth. Word of mouth spreads geometrically. The outreach of people who “know people who called the ombud” spreads much faster where there is more than one practitioner.

In addition there is some evidence that different ombuds “attract” different kinds of cases. This is not just a matter of demographics, (e.g., women visitors who think they prefer to see a woman — or a man). One OO will, perhaps without really noticing it, become a bit of a specialist in disability cases, or high-maintenance-super-star cases, or with respect to intellectual property problems, or with very complex, multi-issue, cross-boundary cases with multiple cohorts. Then the mysterious word of mouth will bring that practitioner many more of those cases. Having these different lines of practice helps to deepen and widen the outreach of the office, and also to spread skills between or among the OOs.

Obviously one wonderful gift, for any ombud, is having someone with whom to consult on a case. This can be incredibly important where facts are missing or mutually contradictory, or where there are no relevant policies, or policies that are mutually contradictory, which is a common circumstance in an OO office — and the individual OO has to rely on his or her own judgment. Talking with a colleague helps to support one’s efforts in maintaining neutrality. Having a colleague also helps to protect ombuds confidentiality. Ombuds will breach confidentiality in time of imminent danger. But — *is* this an emergency? An OO colleague can help in making critical decisions and may see alternatives other than breaching confidentiality. Working with another person in the office means there can be less stress on each practitioner, to practice well.

Ombuds are among the few people, in any large organization who “see” and hear from an entire organization. Having more than one person learning about the organization, collecting information and working on systems change, greatly increases the range of information and wisdom that the office can develop about how the organization works. And about how the whole conflict management system could work better.

As with any profession, an ombud needs to keep learning. Having a colleague means that one has an on-site teaching partner. The other OO sees things differently, asks different questions, finds different situations humorous, and comes up with new options — and does so, all the time. Different OOs interpret the office statistics differently and see different kinds of ways to help a system to do better. Looking back I remember vividly many essentials of ombuds practice that I have learned from my close colleagues; reciting even a short list would take many pages. (My present and erstwhile colleagues are probably even more aware of what they have tried to teach me, that I still need to learn.)

In writing this I am also very aware of all I have learned from OO colleagues in other organizations. About 1980 I discovered that there *were* other institutions with ombuds. I will never forget what it meant to discover that I was not alone.

OOs from the Midwest Ombuds Group, California Caucus of College and University Ombuds, University and College Ombuds Association, Corporate Ombudsman Association, The Ombudsman Association, International Ombudsman Association, Association of Canadian College and University Ombudsmen, East Coast Ombuds Group, and many OOs around the world, have been very generous with wisdom and support — and with specific skills training and ideas. I am very grateful not to have had to practice altogether alone, since 1980, even in the years when my organization had just one ombud.

## **The conversation continues...Brian Bloch**

While I agree wholeheartedly with Mary Rowe's analysis above, we as ombuds are used to helping visitors look at all sides of a situation. In that mood, I offer some possible downsides to the multiple-ombuds office.

### **MAKING DECISIVE DECISIONS**

Although an organizational ombudsman does not have a decision-making role in the organization, they certainly make many decisions about their work. Collaborating with a colleague can make decisions better. It can also take longer and even lead to internal conflicts if the ombuds don't agree on a particular decision or even more generally, on the mission of the office.

### **CONTRASTING STYLES**

We know that ombuds have varying ways of practicing their profession. Some place more emphasis on addressing systemic change than others. Some can be quite directive while others are strictly facilitative. Some ombuds mix more with management than others. Additionally, it is only natural that one ombud will have different personality traits than their co-ombud. While this can lead to a highly effective ombuds office, it can also create challenges if the ombuds differ with each other on serious matters.

### **EXPENSES**

The IOA website includes several articles about how to communicate the effectiveness and usefulness of an ombuds office. However, it remains a challenge to demonstrate the on-going value of the office. This task becomes even more challenging if a solo-ombud asks for an additional ombud with the budgetary requirements that entails. Many organizations have only enough money for one ombud.

## **COLLEAGUES ARE AVAILABLE OUTSIDE**

Rowe convincingly points out the various merits of having a colleague with whom to consult. While it is not the same as having a full-time colleague, she also mentions that ombuds are very willing to give time to their fellow ombuds in other organizations. This is one of the great benefits of being in the ombuds profession. For the many years I ran a solo-office, I estimate that annually I shared over 750 emails with fellow ombuds who listened, offered advice, and in general allowed me to develop in this profession.

## **The need for spending time with like-minded Ombuds**

Whether you are in an ideal situation with multiple-ombuds—or are a solo-ombud—there is a real need for regular association with like-minded OOs. I was reminded of this recently when the editors of this Journal had a robust e-mail exchange about compassion fatigue and its role in the life of an OO. We compiled a list of its symptoms as well as a list of its causes.

We then turned to practical ways to address an ombudsman's compassion fatigue. At the top of the list was "Having a colleague or significant other to talk to while remaining within the boundaries of confidentiality." Additionally, we listed: "Looking at our other options (what might we have done differently), and thinking out loud with a colleague about that." We also mentioned, "Reading up on the profession and studying best practices," (which is another way of associating with OO colleagues).

Being able — regularly — to share thoughts and experiences with colleagues is invaluable. OOs have a challenging job. We can be affected by self-doubt. We are exposed to unfairness. We struggle to remain neutral when a party is acting inappropriately. Our patience and compassion are put to the test, especially when we deal with complaining visitors who are "self-made orphans." We are often exposed to the worst parts of the organization we work with. We may struggle with emotional fatigue and depersonalization.

The wisdom, reassurance, guidance, and friendship of fellow OOs is a necessity for OOs who want to remain effective in their work and balanced in their life.