

What Is an Organizational Ombuds?¹

Organizational ombuds help both people and organizations. They help people resolve conflict and surface issues by providing information, offering coaching and guidance, and assisting people in developing options for taking action. They also help organizations by providing feedback to an organization's senior leadership about systemic issues and trends in the organization without disclosing the identities of or any confidential communications with those who consult with the ombuds (commonly called "visitors").

The ombuds (or ombudsman or ombudsperson) concept is relatively new in the United States, having first been introduced in the early 1960s and subsequently evolving in divergent ways in government, colleges and universities, and business organizations. As a result, there are other types of ombuds who function differently from organizational ombuds, but these differences are not well understood, with the result that many people believe or assume erroneously that all ombuds are the same, when they are not. This has led to confusion about what an organizational ombuds is and does. Because this book is focused solely on *organizational* ombuds, however, it is important to begin by summarizing what organizational ombuds programs are and what they do and do not do.

The work and structure of organizational ombuds programs are based on compliance with four key practice principles: **independence, impartiality, informality, and confidentiality**. These principles are embodied in the International Ombuds Association's (IOA's) Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

Ombuds programs that comply with the IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice operate independent of management, reporting to the highest level possible in the organization. Though most frequently embedded in an organization, they can be created as external resources under a contract with an organization. They are designed to be neutral and impartial, neither part of management nor advocating for employees or other groups served by them. They advocate only for fair process. They are a valuable ADR (alternate dispute resolution) mechanism, using tools such as mediation, facilitated conversations, supplying information, and coaching to help people resolve conflict. As such, they operate informally. They do not maintain business records for their organizations, and they are not a "formal channel" of the organization to be used to notify the organization if someone wants to assert a claim against it. Because organizational ombuds are independent, impartial, and informal, they also can have the superpower of being confidential—which both makes them distinct and unique compared to formal channels and makes them a safe place and ideally suited to help people resolve conflict or surface issues that they are unwilling or afraid to bring to formal channels.

The practices of organizational ombuds programs grounded on these principles have transcended the organizational settings in which they operate. Organizational ombuds—whether in corporations, universities, or government—now function in remarkably similar ways.

Even though the practices of organizational ombuds have coalesced around the IOA Standards of Practice, a final point about these ombuds is important: ombuds services today can be delivered in a wide variety of ways that can be adapted to the needs of an organization and the context in which they operate. Ombuds can be employees or external services providers, they can be full time or part

¹ Taken, with permission, from *A Practical Guide to Organizational Ombuds: How They Help People and Organizations*, by Charles L. Howard, 2022.

time, they can be created in multinational corporations and small organizations, and they can be created in virtually any organizational setting. While the daily work of an ombuds might vary somewhat depending on the organization and the constituents served, organizations should understand that they can design a program that complies with the IOA Standards of Practice to meet virtually any organization's needs and objectives.

For simplicity and clarity, let me summarize what organizational ombuds do and do not do.

Organizational ombuds DO the following as a confidential resource:

- Assist people at all levels in the organization as an easily accessible (“no-barrier”) resource
- Listen to people to help them sort or frame issues to navigate situations
- Serve as a source of information or a sounding board for visitors with sensitive or confidential concerns
- Explain process, policies, and procedures and advocate for fair process
- Provide assistance on a full spectrum of issues
- Provide a safe place where people can develop options **BEFORE** taking action to address their concerns
- Help people consider and evaluate formal and informal strategies to resolve conflict or report misconduct
- Provide coaching on virtually any organization-related matter, including on how visitors can best articulate concerns
- Provide mediation and facilitated conversations with the permission of the participants
- Provide trend and reporting of systemic issues to senior leadership of the organization both on an “as needed” basis and through annual reports
- Serve as an early warning “listening post” for the organization to identify emerging issues
- Maintain confidentiality, except in very limited situations such as where the ombuds determines there to be an imminent threat of serious harm or the visitor gives permission and the ombuds agrees to make a disclosure
- Provide conflict resolution training and education for the organization
- Complement formal channels—such as managers, human resources, and compliance personnel by helping people who will not or who are afraid to go directly to those channels

As important as it is to understand what organizational ombuds do, it is just as important to know what they do not do. **Organizational ombuds DO NOT:**

- Have authority to receive notice of claims against the organization
- Have management responsibility except for their own office
- Have authority to conduct investigations or engage in fact finding
- Have authority to make management decisions or policy
- Advocate or take sides between management and employees or leadership and other constituencies
- Maintain business records of confidential communications for their organization
- Serve as a substitute for formal channels
- Testify or produce documents with respect to confidential communications in formal, legal, or administrative proceedings.

With this overview of what organizational ombuds are and do, let's move on to answering important questions about organizational ombuds.