



# Overcoming Groundhog Day: Changing Organizational Culture while Institutionalizing the Ombudsman Role

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## ABSTRACT

Coaching individual visitors is an indispensable and foundational task of the organizational Ombudsman role. Yet many of the conflicts brought by visitors could be avoided through intentional efforts to change dysfunctional workplace cultures and behaviors at a deeper level. Low morale, disengagement, high turnover, workplace bullying, discrimination, sexual harassment, sabotage, and embezzlement are all symptoms of dysfunctional organizational cultures (Raines 2019). It is imperative that Ombudsman diagnose the health of their organization's culture and design appropriate interventions to prevent unproductive conflict. As a side benefit, many of the tasks related to culture change initiatives raise the profile and secure the institutionalization of the Ombudsman office, highlighting the unique set of processes, skills, and attributes unduplicated by other units in the organization. Without attention to the root causes of organizational conflict, many Ombudsmen experience the 'Groundhog Day Phenomenon,' meaning they encounter a

never-ending repetition of similar problems and parties day after day.

## KEYWORDS

Ombudsman, culture change, leadership, systemic conflict, institutionalization, assessment



## INTRODUCTION

Being an Organizational Ombudsman (OO) can be lonely and OO practice can be exacting. For Ombudsmen, employee relations specialists, and many organizational consultants, every day can feel like the 1993 Bill Murray movie “Groundhog Day”: same problems, different people<sup>1</sup>. Or worse yet, we are confronted by the same problems *caused* by the same people. It feels like we are running in place, stuck on the ‘Gerbil Wheel of conflict’ (Beer & Packard, 2012). Each day organizational Ombudsmen meet with visitors seeking help to solve problems that might be preventable if only their organizational culture were positive, united, and repellent to toxic workplace behaviors. When dysfunctional organizational cultures exist across an organization or within specific units, predators are free to engage in inappropriate behaviors like sexual harassment, bullying, and disengagement (Raines, 2019). Disengagement and alienation run rampant when problems remain unresolved. While listening to, coaching, and assisting individual visitors is a foundational part of the Ombudsman role, it is akin to putting out fires while neglecting fire prevention. Most Ombudsmen could list the changes needed to liberate their organization from the emotional, financial, and inhumane costs of most types of recurring, unproductive workplace conflict. This article charts a path toward relatively inexpensive, positive culture change initiatives in and for organizations. As a side benefit, these tasks raise the profile of the Ombudsman’s office and create a constituency committed to their continued success<sup>1</sup>. This helps inoculate Ombudsmen’s offices from elimination due to leadership change, budget cutbacks, or vindictively dysfunctional yet powerful individuals within the organization. According to Peter Drucker (and others), “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”. Until our organizations create affirming, healthy, mission-focused cultures, Ombudsmen will continue to experience Groundhog Day at work.

It should be noted that each organization defines the roles and duties of their Ombudsmen, with some organizations limiting their tasks to meeting with and coaching visitors through individual or small group conflicts. In other cases, Ombudsmen offer feedback to the organization’s leadership, offer needed training, conduct assessments pertaining to morale and conflict, and generally engage in a broader range of activities designed to assess, prevent and manage conflicts. Ideally, for preventable conflict to be prevented, organizational culture will need attention and grooming by managers and leaders at all levels. If an Ombudsman is contractually limited or prohibited from engaging in the full range of conflict prevention and management tasks, then she or he may be able to use the information in this article to persuade others to take on these efforts, possibly including human resource professionals and C-suite leaders.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Culture is the foundation of organizations, even though they may not be aware of it or attend to it regularly. A strong, supportive foundation bolsters innovation, engagement, and mission attainment. Dysfunctional, soul-crushing, inhumane cultures assure mission failure. The following definition of organizational culture provides a useful starting place for the arguments made herein: “...values and behaviors that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization. Organizational culture includes an organization’s expectations, experiences, philosophy, and values that hold it together, and is expressed in its self-image, inner workings, interactions with the outside world, and future expectations. It is based on shared attitudes, beliefs, customs, and written and unwritten rules that have been developed over time and are

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<sup>1</sup> Groundhog Day is a North American cultural tradition observed on February 2nd of each year. On this day a groundhog is released from its den and if it sees its shadow and returns to its den, then folklore predicts a 6 more weeks of winter. If it does not see its shadow, then folklore predicts an early spring. The 1993 movie by the same title shows a weatherman caught in a time loop, forced to relive the same day until he gets it right. The title of this paper reflects the déjà vu feeling some Ombudsmen have when faced with the same recurring challenges brought by different visitors because the roots of the conflicts often remain unaddressed.



considered valid. Also called corporate culture, it's shown in (1) the ways the organization conducts its business, treats its employees, customers, and the wider community, (2) the extent to which freedom is allowed in decision making, developing new ideas, and personal expression, (3) how power and information flow through its hierarchy, (4) how committed employees are towards collective objectives, and (5) It also extends to production-methods, marketing, and advertising practices, and to new product creation." (Business Dictionary, 2018).

An organization's culture begins at the top. According to public opinion, there is a serious lack of trust in executives to listen to and address issues (Redmond & Williams, 2004). This means that many executives will never hear about issues that are truly affecting organizational culture. An Ombudsman's office can help change that perception by providing a safe, retaliation-free place to bring concerns where the guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality encourages employees to bring problems to light (Redmond & Williams, 2004). Ombudsmen's offices provide an invaluable service to leadership by sharing information about problems within the organization, thus making them a "catalyst for change" within the workforce (Redmond & Williams, p. 3, 2004).

The literature is practically devoid of research, which examines the links between the role of the Ombudsman's office and culture change. One partial exception is Howard Gadlin's work, which calls for an "Activist Ombudsman" model with a broader range of interventions than many organizational Ombudsmen typically consider (2014). Shereen et al. articulated a research agenda for the Ombudsman field, which included the need for better systems of data gathering methods to analyze the financial and extra-financial impacts of Ombudsmen, and generally to communicate the value of their role (2018). This agenda does not explicitly include a call to study the ability of the Ombudsman role to impact organizational culture, but some authors suggest this important linkage (Raines, 2019).

Why is organizational culture so important? Organizational culture impacts mission achievement, profitability, innovation, employee retention and motivation, and even brand image (Raines, 2019). Most organizations fail to measure their culture, yet they consistently measure the effects of culture, such as employee turnover and litigation costs. Whether leaders attend to it or not, organizational culture will evolve. Like a garden, it can grow vegetables and flowers that nourish people, or it can grow weeds that waste precious resources and choke out desired outcomes. A great strategy won't succeed in a dysfunctional culture, but a mediocre strategy could triumph when followed by a team with a strong culture (Merchant, 2011).

What about firing dysfunctional team members? "Fire them all" simply does not work as a stand-alone strategy to address an unhealthy workplace culture. Discharging abusive or predatory employees must remain an option when they do not change their behaviors after coaching, but it takes more to change workplace culture.

"If a high-performing employee is placed into a poor culture, she will leave or take on the behaviors of the low-performing employees already there. This is done as a survival mechanism since it is too frustrating to give 100% to a team, boss, or organization that gets in the way of its own success on a regular basis. So, the first rule of culture change is that you cannot hire your way out of a bad culture. You must proactively change culture from the inside out. The only exception may occur when the top leaders are replaced with the clear mission to change a dysfunctional organizational culture. This usually results from a crisis or scandal" (Raines, 2019; 162).

Uber, Papa John's, VW, Wells Fargo, and the Weinstein company (to name a few) experienced leadership turnover due to high profile scandals in which company leaders were either directly culpable, or they did not act to stop bad behaviors. Their organizations have become infamous examples of dysfunctional cultures leading to brand damage and even corporate bankruptcy (for some). Wells Fargo has used this public relations nightmare to rebrand its organization, with a promise to create a more ethical culture. Time will tell. For the rest of us, the key is to measure



the health of our organizational cultures and take steps to proactively shape them so that brand damage and high-profile change is not necessary.

Bullying is only one symptom of negative workplace culture, but it costs U.S. business more than \$180 million per year (Farrell, 2002). Chronic, unaddressed bullying and repeated mistreatment of an employee is a factor in at least 50 percent of resignations according to employee exit-survey data (Namie & Namie, 2003). It's worth noting that a bully in one organization may behave well in a different organization or when placed in a low power position in a dysfunctional culture, she or he may ironically become the target of bullying. This doesn't mean that bad behavior should be tolerated; just the opposite. No one in the organization should tolerate inappropriate behavior, yet firing offenders without addressing the culture that allowed their behaviors to flourish will likely yield disappointing results.

The "10-80-10" rule refers to the idea that ten percent of employees will be ethical and refuse to engage in sabotage, steal, violate common ethics, or otherwise engage in negative behaviors because they have a strong moral compass. The other ten percent will undertake these negative behaviors every chance they get because they lack a strong moral compass. To keep them in line, the organization must monitor employee behavior and sanction violators. What's more critical is the eighty percent of employees whose behaviors are influenced by the workplace culture. In a positive environment, employees avoid malfeasance because they care about their performance, and the mission and their peers hold them accountable. Culture swings the 80%.

## **PREVIOUS LITERATURE ON INSTITUTIONALIZING THE OMBUDSMAN ROLE**

At the 2019 conference of the International Ombudsman Association in New Orleans, a roundtable session focused on the closing of Ombudsman offices with an eye to improving understanding about how to protect, insulate, and institutionalize the Ombudsman role in order to improve its viability even in difficult economic times or through a period of leadership change (<https://www.ioaconference.org/>). The consensus was that the important work of meeting with visitors, coaching, and the pursuit of informal dispute resolution (all critical tasks) had the unfortunate side effect of limiting the visibility of the Ombudsman's office. There were concerns that a more active and visible role might bring its own risks or scare away some visitors. However, the takeaway was that the Ombudsman should take critical steps to document and share the benefits of their work to the organization leaders in ways that protects confidentiality.

Few, if any, articles exist which explain how Ombudsmen may institutionalize and protect their offices from closure. This article hopes to help fill this gap, with the full acknowledgment that more work needs to be done on this important topic.

Ombudsmen are sometimes tempted to keep a low profile to avoid attracting attention to their role and its impact, due in part out of concerns about keeping the confidences and anonymity of visitors. Yet this low profile means the Ombudsman's office rarely has the impact, visibility, and coalitions of support needed to ensure its continued existence. A number of Ombudsmen offices have been closed, usually citing budget cuts or a perception that these tasks could be carried out by other units in the organization (for example, BP Closure 2011; Smith College 2009). Diane Levin notes, "It never ceases to amaze me how all too often dispute resolution programs – the very programs that actually save organizations' relationships, time, and money – are the first casualties of budget shortfalls and cutbacks. More evidence that our work continues to be undervalued and misunderstood" (Levin, 2009). Similarly, another Ombudsman notes: "The benefits – avoided litigation and improved climate – are hidden. The real mistake is assuming that other programs like HR, EEO, or EAP can fill in for an Ombudsman. Although these programs



may be familiar with the organization's culture, they cannot bring confidential, neutral, independent, and informal expertise to conflicts" (Kosakowski, 2009).

Mary Bliss Conger finds that "the idealized model [of ombudsman work] purports only to be minimally prescriptive (*the what*) and not at all descriptive (*the how*), leaving 'considerable daylight' between lived and ideal experience" (2019, p. 56). One of the reasons for the space between lived and ideal experience is what Conger calls "the three myths" (2019, p. 63). There are three common misconceptions – or myths – that leaders tend to have about ombudsmen: they are redundant, they compete with leadership, and they create more risk. These misconceptions can be addressed by educating leadership and others in the organization about the unique and supplemental role of an ombudsman; by building trust with all departments and leadership; and by relating to them what the ability to report means specifically and statistically to the ombudsman's organization (Conger, 2019).

No other office does what the Ombudsman does, AND most could do more to deepen their impact by working to bring positive culture change to their organizations, with the side benefit of creating a coalition of support for the office of the Ombudsman.

## **METHODS AND SAMPLING**

The information in this article builds on more than twenty years of working with public, private, and not-for-profit organizations as both an internal and external conflict management and collaboration specialist. While some private organizations prefer to remain anonymous, the authors have worked with many federal and state government agencies, hospital chains, insurance companies, accounting firms, universities, multi-national corporations, United Nations bodies, Chambers of Commerce, coalitions of mental health networks, literacy non-profits, family businesses, physicians' professional associations, and courts at nearly every level. For each organizational intervention or training, the authors gather a list of commonly occurring conflicts from participants. Many of the sources of conflict are surprisingly consistent across organizations (e.g., workload distribution, overwork, communication, conflicts in preferred work styles, lack of trust and accountability, intercultural management challenges, and constant change), while others uniquely reflect the challenges facing each organization due to market forces, leadership changes, and/or organizational culture. This can be done by administering a survey before the first meeting or by passing out 3x5 cards during the first group meeting and asking participants to write one recurring problem they face on each card. Then, the Ombudsman or organizational consultant can sort these into thematic categories, share them with the participants, and assure them that their time together will be spent addressing these concerns. This gets their attention.

The arguments in this article are built on more than two decades of organizational work, mediating more than 16,500 cases inside and outside of the court system, engaging in scholarly research, authoring three books and more than 55 peer-reviewed articles. From this body of experience, and based upon a review of the relevant literature, this article presents suggestions for Ombudsman seeking to deepen the impact of their work while institutionalizing and protecting their jobs and offices from the buffeting winds of leadership change and budgetary challenges. By addressing the root causes of conflict in organizations, raising the profile of their work, and building a coalition of support across their organizations, Ombudsmen can make systemic changes to create more effective and humane workplaces.

## **INSTITUTIONALIZING AND PROTECTING THE OMBUDSMAN ROLE**

Figure 1 shows a hierarchy of tasks commonly undertaken by Ombudsman, with the lowest levels of the pyramid occurring the most often. As Ombudsmen engage in higher-level tasks, the potential benefit to the organization increases, as will the visibility of the Ombudsman's office and its personnel. Historically, many Ombudsmen have sought to limit the visibility of their offices in order to insulate them from the winds of political change or a lack of support, which might occur if organizational leaders view them as a threat to their ability to carry on "business as usual." The C-suite leaders, as well as other upper managers, may believe the Ombudsman is there primarily to help front-line employees vent or seek resolution when they feel their supervisors or co-workers are treating them badly. By keeping a low profile, Ombudsmen often fail to show their value to the leaders who determine whether their office continues to receive funding and political support. More importantly, keeping a low profile means that Ombudsmen are likely to engage in the lowest level tasks shown in Figure 1, thereby spending their time primarily addressing the symptoms of conflict rather than addressing the underlying causes of conflict<sup>2</sup>. It's like a physician giving an aspirin for a fever instead of looking for the underlying cause of the illness; it seems to help for a little while, but then the patient gets sicker. Helping individual visitors is important, AND by putting aside time for higher-level tasks, the Ombudsman can make the deeper changes required to reduce the number and severity of organizational conflicts while creating affirming and effective workplace cultures.



Figure 1

Are you ready to bring an end to Groundhog Day? Specifically, how can Ombudsmen protect and institutionalize their roles while getting to the root causes of repetitive conflict? The good news is that impactful changes are not particularly expensive nor complicated. Table I outlines the core tasks used to protect and institutionalize the office of the Ombudsman while addressing the root causes of recurring conflict in the workplace.

*Table I Tasks for Protecting & Institutionalizing the Office of the Ombudsman*

1. Record and Report The Activities & Impacts of the Ombuds office (and conflict trends)
2. Create an Advisory Board
3. Conduct a (Conflict &) Collaboration Culture Assessment with Input from Key Stakeholders
4. Become the “Boss Whisperer”: Jointly Craft a Plan to Address the Cultural Roots of Conflict
5. Intervene to Address Cultural Roots of Conflict

#### STEP 1: RECORD AND REPORT THE ACTIVITIES & IMPACTS OF THE OMBUDSMAN'S OFFICE

The literature is replete with articles and resources to help Ombudsmen track, record, and report how they use their time and to measure the impacts of their offices (Gadlin, 2010). At a minimum, most Ombudsmen can catalog how many visitors come each year, the type of problems they bring (e.g., harassment, “bad boss,” discrimination, and similar problems), and the service provided by the Ombudsman (e.g., coaching, facilitating a problem-solving conversation between parties or units, referral to external mediation or arbitration, training, reporting trends to organizational leaders). Ombudsmen can ask each visitor to complete an online evaluation of the services they received. Use this data to create an annual or semi-annual report, based on aggregate rather than individual data. Make this report available to organizational leaders and everyone else in the organization through the Ombudsman's website. This isn't new information or advice, yet anecdotal evidence indicates that many Ombudsmen are not gathering and using this information for full effect (Bingham et al., 2018). Use this information to understand the root causes of conflict. This will be key to designing specific interventions.

#### STEP 2: CREATE AN OMBUDSMAN'S ADVISORY BOARD

The purpose of the Advisory Board is to improve the flow of communication between the Ombudsman's office and key organizational stakeholders using face-to-face meetings occurring at least twice per year, preferably quarterly. For example, the Ombudsman can use this time to share information about conflict trends she<sub>3</sub> sees across the organization or to get feedback and build consensus around proposed initiatives to address the sources of systemic conflict. Board members can share their observations about the sources of conflict and make requests for training, interventions, or needed policy changes. These meetings allow the Ombudsmen to educate key stakeholders about the purpose, tasks, and impacts of the Ombudsman office while allowing the stakeholders to inform the Ombudsman about conflict trends or concerns.

These meetings also allow the Ombudsman to build the interpersonal rapport and support needed to sustain the office during difficult times, including tight budget years, when their offices may become preferred targets for cutbacks or closure. Building rapport is important. The goal is



to produce true change rather than simply integrating different departments within the organization. Mary Rowe states that “conflict management systems do not lend themselves to ‘integration,’ but rather, to coordination, where groups can become familiar and therefore create an environment ripe for problem solving” (2013, p. 25). A well-coordinated group, which provides a safe place for addressing conflict, could become a valuable asset to the organization. Unlike group cohesion, which encourages conformity, a feeling of psychological safety in a group encourages risk-taking, because members feel safe sharing ideas (Edmonson, 1999). Coordinated, cohesive, and open advisory boards can help insulate the Ombudsman office and personnel from the ire of any individual key stakeholder, which may be piqued during any specific conflict resolution efforts.

Board composition will vary depending upon the mission and structure of each organization, but most will include the directors of the offices of human resources and legal affairs. Additionally, if it is a unionized workplace, then a union leader will be indispensable. In a university setting, additional members would include the Provost, President, leaders from the Faculty and Staff Senates as well as someone from Student Government, campus police, and residence life (dorms). The goal is to include at least one consistent representative from all major stakeholder groups, including someone who represents front-line employees, middle management, and upper management. Representation of all stakeholder groups is critical to ensure others view the advisory board as legitimate, unbiased, and to keep it from becoming perceived as a tool for organizational leaders to control the Ombudsman’s agenda.

Bylaws or other guiding documents are useful to describe the purpose, composition, and scope of the advisory board’s activities and power. Bylaws also protect the Ombudsman’s office from undue pressure, which may occur if one difficult personality or particularly strong agenda takes hold on the board. Typically, effective advisory boards range in size from 4 to 8 members. Larger boards become unwieldy and prone to internal strife or disengagement.

### *STEP 3: CONDUCT A (CONFLICT &) COLLABORATION CULTURE ASSESSMENT WITH INPUT FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS*

Before designing any specific interventions, the Ombudsman needs to conduct a conflict and culture needs assessment. This is a survey of the sources of repetitive conflict within the organization, yet it may be better entitled a ‘collaboration culture assessment,’ since the use of the word ‘conflict’ tends to put leaders on the defensive. It is much easier to convince leaders to assess the ‘effectiveness of teams’ than to get them to endorse a ‘conflict assessment,’ although these are the same thing. Framing matters.

While external experts often charge tens of thousands of dollars for this work, it can be done well with just a few short questions posed via anonymous survey technology. Start by asking each member of the organization (or a representative sample of a large organization), to describe the culture of the organization as a whole (step 1) and then the organizational culture of their specific work-unit (step 2) using three descriptive words. Common positive answers include: affirming, positive, healthy, effective, invigorating, collaborative, friendly, collegial, results-oriented, etc. Common negative words often include soul-crushing, hostile, mean, inhumane, competitive, uncaring, cluster-#@%! , (Raines, 2019). Also, consider, “On a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is ‘never,’ and 5 is ‘definitely,’ how likely are you to recommend this company as a place to work for a friend seeking a job?” Consider this follow-up: “What could the organizational leaders do to improve this score?”. The scaled question is helpful because it can be used to create a baseline reading of the organization’s cultural health. Once the culture change efforts are underway, a re-test can be used to measure changes. There are many more potential questions one could include on an organizational cultural health survey to understand better the root causes of conflict, disengagement, litigation, turnover, and poor mission achievement. These sample questions



show the affordability and simplicity of conducting a conflict culture needs-assessment. While more thorough, externally conducted evaluations may be helpful, do not hesitate to gather information when and where possible. This information will be indispensable in efforts to influence company leaders to make needed changes (see step 4 below).

Additionally, be sure to interview advisory board members to gain their perspectives about the sources of recurring conflicts. They may also have data which proves useful to the assessment effort, such as the number and types of lawsuits and formal complaints filed against the organization (e.g., in the US, this would include claims of discrimination filed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), employee turnover, or regulatory compliance failures. They will appreciate being heard, and knowing their perspectives are valued. Their buy-in will be required when it comes to implementing needed changes, so use this process to get some one-on-one time with them to deeply listen and build rapport.

#### *STEP 4: BECOMING THE BOSS WHISPERER<sup>2</sup>: JOINTLY CRAFTING A CULTURE CHANGE PLAN*

Denial and defensiveness tend to keep organizational leaders from ‘seeing’ the greatest challenges to their organizations until it is too late. Leaders at Wells Fargo, Enron, Uber, and Papa John’s Pizza are examples of what happens when they allowed the growth of toxic workplace cultures. In turn, these cultures allowed bad behaviors to go unchecked, or worse yet, encouraged them, eventually resulting in significant damage to their brands, careers, and companies. Convincing organizational leaders to get on board with culture change initiatives is not as easy as it should be, but very important. Take this opportunity to become a ‘boss whisperer’ who gently and effectively assists leaders to see the things that were previously invisible to them...the darker parts of the organization’s culture that they have been trying hard not to see. Here’s how.

Schedule a meeting with the organization’s highest-ranking decision-maker. This will be a negotiation, so appropriate preparation is key. Their time is short, so begin by building rapport and then dive in. Arrive with a list of requested action items or resources needed to bring change. Consider bringing printed bullet points to share and to keep the meeting on track. As with all negotiations, all parties need to make their interests clear. Be aware they have both organizational interests (e.g., mission achievement, profits, share price increase) and individual interests (e.g., promoting their reputations and careers). Ask them to share their interests and be sure to frame any proposals and requests in ways that speak to *all* of their interests. This is key to becoming a ‘boss whisperer.’ Surface and speak to all the interests in the room.

In all difficult or important conversations, be sure to convey “intent before content.” The Ombudsman should begin with an explanation of his/her interests and motivations before conveying the content of the message. For example, “Joe, my hope is to see your new initiatives become wildly successful and take our organization and your reputation as a leader to new heights. In order for that to happen, I believe we need to address problems with low employee morale and high levels of disengagement. Could we brainstorm ways to address organizational culture concerns with an eye toward ensuring that your new initiatives aren’t hampered by these challenges?”

Find out what they are afraid of as well as their aspirations. Leaders often make decisions designed to minimize the risk of a negative outcome, but their ability to accurately assess the sources of risk are somewhat aligned with their scores on the Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode

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<sup>2</sup> The term “Boss Whisperer” has been used by multiple previous authors and does not refer specifically to any one source.



assessment or other similar conflict styles tool (Thomas and Kilmann, 2016). This means that leaders who score high on accommodating or avoiding conflict styles are more likely to downplay the existence of organizational conflict and external threats (Raines 2019). Those scoring high on the competitive mode are likely to believe no one else, but they can fix the problems that exist. They tend to be control-oriented and authoritarian, which often alienates team members. This information can be used for optimal impact. Coaching them on delegation skills may help lay a positive foundation for success in your efforts (Raines, 2019; 282-3).

Using the information gathered in earlier steps, summarize the organization's goals, threats to those goals, and a path forward. The goals of the organization should include mission-related points as well as those more focused on internal housekeeping. For example, a large urban foodbank had these goals: "Feed hungry people in a cost-effective, efficient manner AND create an inclusive, positive, impactful work environment for everyone." Then, identify threats or obstacles to achieving those goals using the data gathered in earlier steps. Do employees characterize the workplace climate in ways that are primarily positive or negative? Describe trends in turnover, engagement, productivity, and talent acquisition. Is the organization struggling to hire, keep, and motivate good people? Why? You cannot change the national economic environment, but you can make your organization a destination workplace, meaning the kind of place people feel valued through affirming relationships and impactful work.

Many leaders discount bad news, refusing to believe downward trends are real or that negative reports are accurate. You can chip away at this denial by conveying the strategic use of this information, which can benefit them if they are the leader who is seen as having turned things around. Tell them that high-conflict environments provide much 'low hanging fruit,' meaning that small changes make a disproportionately large impact. Depersonalize it. Conflict is a normal part of everyday life at work and home. The goal is to harness its power to bring constructive rather than destructive change. Use metaphors and analogies: Every garden (and organizational culture) grows something, whether we tend to it or not. It can grow weeds, or it can feed people. Lastly, chart the path forward. Create recommendations to improve the organizational culture over the near term (3-6 months) as well as the longer-term (1-2 years). Describe the resources needed to bring these changes (more on this later) and make a specific request for those resources. The return on investment is huge since a positive culture will provide fertile ground for the success of more mission-focused goals (e.g., number of widgets produced, patients treated, clients served, share price, brand image, etc.).

#### *STEP 5. INTERVENE TO ADDRESS CULTURAL ROOTS OF CONFLICT*

Coaching visitors is foundational to the Ombudsman role. Listening, skill-building, conveying compassion, and referral to resources often allow individuals to build the internal capacity and confidence to better manage their conflicts both inside and outside of the organization. It is the yeoman's work of peacebuilding (along with parenting, of course!). Additionally, through their meetings with visitors, Ombudsmen are better able to understand the patterns and sources of systemic conflict in their organizations, which helps provide the data needed for earlier steps in this process. Yet, if the majority of an Ombudsman's time is spent meeting with visitors (Levine-Finley, 2014), they are likely to remain stuck with the Groundhog Day experience of reliving similar narratives and problems daily. To get off that hamster wheel of conflict, Ombudsmen must set aside time to engage in tasks more closely associated with conflict prevention. Culture change is the highest-level conflict prevention activity for Ombudsmen. Therefore, the remainder of this article will focus on specific tools for bringing positive culture change through low-cost activities, which have the side benefit of raising the profile and showing the indispensability of the Ombudsman's office and its personnel.

#### **TOOL A) CREATE SHARED EXPECTATIONS IN AND ACROSS TEAMS.**



Conflict comes from unmet expectations (see Google's, Project Aristotle). A few years ago, Google completed a large study designed to uncover the secret of effective teamwork. They compared the effectiveness of various types of teams: hierarchically organized teams compared to flatter structures, diverse and non-diverse teams, teams that socialized outside of work and those that did not, teams that worked virtually compared to in-person teams, teams with similar educational fields and cross-field teams, intergenerational teams. They found that none of these variables consistently created successful teamwork. What did? Shared expectations. If one expects his/her team to be friends, then s/he is disappointed when they do not want to socialize outside of work. If one expects a strict hierarchy to be maintained, then one isn't particularly upset when directions are given rather than assistance requested. Shared expectations arise over time through the painful process of trial and error. This is true in marriage, in work, and our communities. By facilitating a conversation designed to create shared expectations amongst team members, Ombudsmen can address existing conflicts and prevent future ones. Try these three simple steps:

1. Normalize and show optimism: "Anytime two or more people work or live together, conflict is a normal, healthy and to be expected. I have faith that if we (or you) work together, we can find a solution that works for us both (or everyone)".
2. Conflict comes from unmet expectations: "I would like each of you to share your expectations of how this would have gone (or will go). Let's make our implicit assumptions explicit by sharing our vision of how...this project would get done, how we would communicate, how we would address problems that arose, etc."
3. Negotiate shared expectations: "Let's propose, discuss, and seek consensus about our (or your) expectations so we can work effectively together now and in the future." Work with the parties to create a list of shared expectations. Common expectations may include (a partial list):
  - a. We will give negative feedback (criticism) privately, rather than in front of others.
  - b. If we cannot meet a deadline, we will communicate that in advance and work to minimize the negative impact on others' work.
  - c. If a decision made in my unit impacts the work of other units, then I will discuss it with them in advance whenever possible.
  - d. We will not give directions to employees who report to other supervisors without the approval of that supervisor.
  - e. We will admit our mistakes rather than hide them.
  - f. We will apologize as needed and receive apologies with grace.
  - g. We will invite constructive feedback regularly.
  - h. We will take turns traveling and divide travel resources equally.
  - i. We will not punish people who stop the assembly line due to a problem they found.
  - j. We will hold each other accountable for deadlines and deliverables, using humor and kindness whenever possible.

After assisting a group of two or more employees in the creation of shared expectations, it is a good idea to check back in one month to revisit them. What is working and what needs to be improved? Convey that new habits take time to take root, and everyone should expect setbacks and mistakes along the way as old habits rear their heads from time to time. Encourage the parties to openly discuss their progress, admit their setbacks, and support each other's growth. Each time a conflict occurs, encourage them to go back through these three simple steps to depersonalize the dispute, uncover hidden assumptions and expectations, and create shared expectations going forward.



## TOOL B) WHO ARE WE NOW, AND WHOM DO WE WANT TO BE IN THE FUTURE?

This is the most critical expectation for each individual unit, as well as the entire organization. Creating a positive organizational culture begins with open, honest, inclusive, and constructive discussions of “Who we are and whom do we want to be.” Leaders must balance their vision with the collective vision of their employees at every level (Raines, 2019). To create a shared and legitimate answer to the “who are we and whom do we want to be” questions, Ombudsmen can facilitate discussions with groups of employees at every level of the organization. If done in a large group setting, this works best by asking employees to break into groups of 5-8 and brainstorm a list of values statements that answer each of these two questions (Who are we now and whom do we want to be?). Then have them report out to the whole assembly, while the Ombudsman captures these on flip charts or a projected screen. With the help of the group, gain consensus on 4-7 values which represent “whom we want to be.”

Then, the real work begins. Keep these values in a shared space. Encourage employees to filter every policy, product, process, and interpersonal interaction through these values. How do these reflect who we are and whom we want to be? If not, explicitly discuss how to get from where we are now to where we want to be. This is the real work of culture change. It is not expensive, but it takes courage and commitment. Best of all, it brings hope to employees who have lost hope. Those who have become jaded, disengaged, or even actively obstructionist often gain hope through the process of giving input on these questions and processes. Change generally comes faster than expected, as organizational members begin to change the culture, beginning first in their teams and expanding outward in the organization as a whole.

## *TOOL C) CULTURE CHANGE STARTS WITH EACH PERSON IN EACH UNIT.*

Each person shapes the organization’s culture every day. As every therapist will confirm, “You can only change what you think, say and do.” Do not wait for others to change while lamenting the status quo. No one is coming to save the organization. Roll up your sleeves and get started changing the organization and motivating others to do the same.

Even organizational leaders may be daunted at the prospect of culture change for fear; it is a slow and painful process. Be forewarned, those who currently benefit from the status quo culture want others to believe this is more true than it is. It need not be true. Change can come over a period of months, years, or not at all, depending upon the process used.

Change begins when employees in each unit openly discuss and reach consensus about the norms that will guide their work and interactions. Then, they communicate these strategically to supervisors, subordinates, and peers. Ombudsmen may assist through the proactive facilitation of these discussions within individual teams while seeking consensus on these values and norms at the organizational level. Invite leaders to take part in these discussions, but do not wait if they choose not to participate for any reason. These facilitated dialogues can start in each team and build to cross-organizational dialogues. This common peacebuilding activity has been used successfully in divided societies worldwide (Feller & Ryan, 2012). When applied within organizations, it has tremendous potential to create unity around shared values and desired behaviors.

Have you ever seen a highly dysfunctional unit within a relatively healthy organization? Or the opposite: a highly effective, positive unit within a dysfunctional organization? Even if one’s organization is a mess, if one’s unit and coworkers treat each other well and function efficiently as a team, one’s day-to-day experiences at work will often outweigh turmoil caused by poor



leadership. By encouraging and facilitating consensus-building around shared norms and expectations in each unit, we can make our workplaces better for everyone. Even if organizational leaders are not on board, each employee positively changes the culture in their unit by aligning their behaviors, attitudes, and interactions with the cultural values they seek to encourage. Don't wait for others to make things better. Change begins with each of us. Spread the word.

#### TOOL D) EMPOWER, TRAIN, AND BECOME AN ACTIVE BYSTANDER.

Once everyone is familiar with the norms and expectations in their unit and the broader organization, then empower them to support those behaviors through the setting of healthy boundaries and active bystander actions. "An active bystander is anyone who sees an unacceptable behavior or a person in distress and takes actions to help" (Raines, 2019, p.198). Active bystanders interrupt situations involving discrimination, violence, bullying, intimidation, harassment, and unkindness using humor, redirection, or if needed by placing themselves between the aggressor and the target. For example, if one employee is flirting with another, who is clearly uncomfortable, a third employee can interrupt the undesirable behavior by inserting him or herself into the conversation, asking the target for help with a fictional task, or making an explicit statement such as, 'Hey Bob, Mary seems like she wants to keep it professional. Let's change the subject'. Teaching and encouraging active bystander skills empower employees at every level to share the responsibility of shaping and creating the 'who are we' conversation.

"Each person is, therefore, allowed to set reasonable boundaries for how he/she/they want to be treated, and these boundaries are to be respected and supported by those at every level of the organization. There must be low-risk mechanisms for those seeking to report violations of these norms as well as a willingness to discipline and re-educate those who violate them. Otherwise, the answer to the 'who are we' question becomes, 'We are an organization that claims to care about fair, appropriate treatment, but allows powerful people to prey on the less powerful with impunity.' No one wants to work at such an organization except for the predators. These organizations are prone to litigation, turnover, and high-profile scandals" (Raines, 2019, p.199).

In an earlier *JIOA* article, Keashly (2018) argues for a stronger role for Ombudsmen as active bystanders. People generally trust Ombudsmen and look to them as models of positive organizational behavior and citizenship. In her article, Keashly correctly states that Ombudsmen can model positive behaviors, educate and train others to support positive norms and behaviors, and encourage all organizational members to speak out when witnessing inappropriate behaviors as well as acknowledging and taking responsibility for their missteps at work, often during coaching sessions (2018, p.5). Similarly, Rowe (2018) and Scully & Rowe (2009) suggest specific bystander behaviors used to informally set and enforce positive social norms at work. Human resource professionals, managers, organizational leaders, and Ombudsmen must lead by example while encouraging employees to stand up for positive behaviors. Active bystander skills are key to cultivating a healthy, effective workplace culture. Training active bystanders raise the profile of the Ombudsman's role while empowering employees to create a positive, affirming culture, thereby preventing many complaints, turnover, and litigation.

#### CONCLUSIONS

When organizational ombudsmen support and facilitate systemic efforts to create a positive workplace culture, they bring change to the underlying root causes of conflict. By doing so, they reduce the frequency of counter-culture, hostile, and predatory behaviors. In turn, this reduces the number of disgruntled, victimized employees who visit the Ombudsman's office with similar tales of mistreatment. This breaks the Groundhog Day cycle while improving mission achievement and re-humanizing the workplace.



As an added benefit, the same tasks used to address the root causes of dysfunction in organizations also bolster support for the Ombudsman's office and activities by exposing a wider swath of employees, managers, and leaders to the key skills and processes brought to the organization by the Ombudsman. Meeting with and coaching individual visitors will always be a foundational service provided by Ombudsmen. Yet, by engaging in higher-level activities (see Figure I), the Ombudsman can deepen his or her impact, raise the office's profile, and build a coalition of support for needed culture change, which benefits everyone in the organization and ensures greater mission achievement.



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<sup>3</sup> The pronouns “she”, “he” and “they” will be used interchangeably throughout the paper.