



# Questions to Consider Before Implementing an Ombuds Program

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Implementing an organizational ombuds program requires institutional commitment and the support of executive leadership. To ensure real and perceived independence and neutrality, the ombuds should report to the highest level possible within an organization and avoid any reporting relationship that would compromise independence or confidentiality. The ombuds should be free of any formal decision-making or compliance functions and responsibilities.

## 1. Executive-level support

- Do the CEO, Chancellor, President and other senior officers of the organization support the concept of an organizational ombuds? Are they prepared to appoint a person of sufficient status, and known integrity and skill, to be perceived as credible in the position?
- Does the institution understand that the concept of an organizational ombuds program is based on a fundamentally different addition to institutional risk management and conflict resolution, in that it embraces a confidential, informal resource that works independently from the formal, structured review processes?
- Is the organization willing to provide appropriate resources for the ombuds, including support for an ombuds advisory group or similar working group (sometimes a faculty or staff senate committee) to help launch and embed the new program within the organization?
- Is the CEO prepared to endorse a formal ombuds program charter or terms of reference document that spells out the roles and responsibilities of the program, ensures consistent operation in conformity to recognized standards, and assures users of the legitimacy and support of the program?

## 2. Broad institutional support

- Does organizational leadership recognize that an ombuds program will complement but not replace other important functions within the organization. Although the ombuds will suggest referrals to other programs, the ombuds does not provide psychological counseling, legal advice, medical advice, benefits advice. Are the offices that provide these services supportive of the organizational ombuds concept?

## 3. Space considerations

- Does the organization have physical space that will protect confidentiality and project neutrality, independence, and safety (in terms of creating a zone where a program user will feel a sense of comfort and confidence to have open discussions with the ombuds)?
- Can the space be configured so that it offers an informal atmosphere with enough room for the visitor to feel respected and not cramped.

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- Can the space accommodate informal seating in a living-room-like atmosphere with comfortable chairs, a coffee table, and comfortable, ambient lighting?
- Does the space offer a private entrance and, ideally, a separate exit so that visitors to the office do not feel that they are easily observed coming to the office and so that visitors can avoid encountering one another coming and going to the ombuds office?
- Is the organization willing to make a modest investment in sound remediation so that confidentiality is protected and the visitor stress levels can be reduced?

#### **4. Office systems**

- Is the organization prepared to make a modest investment to support modest business systems requirements? Ombuds programs typically require only minimal office systems to enable the ombuds to have access to email and to the organizational systems necessary to access organizational policies and to communicate within the organization.
- Is the organization prepared to support a secure tracking system that enables the ombuds to provide periodic reports on office usage, outcomes and recommendations?

#### **5. Staffing and program support**

- Is the organization prepared to provide adequate staff support to enable the ombuds to protect confidentiality, schedule meetings and appointments, and to welcome visitors to the office?
- Is the organization prepared to provide adequate training and development support for ombuds-specific trainings and participation in professional meetings?

#### **6. Program awareness and outreach**

- Is the organization ready to support the ombuds in their efforts to provide outreach and program awareness for the new program and to encourage members of the organization – including leaders and managers – to utilize the program?
- Is the organization prepared to provide resources for brochures, website, and orientation materials?

#### **7. Sustained operation**

- Is the organization prepared to support the Ombuds program's compliance with the internationally recognized ombuds Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice?
- Is the organization prepared to adjust its standing business practices within reason to enable its ombuds program to operate to Best Practices and to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice? Establishing an ombuds program may require modifying policies such as those requiring blanket reporting of information that would violate the ombuds Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.

The International Ombudsman Association provides information and support to organizations considering an ombuds program and can connect interested individuals with experts in the ombuds field.

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