Prepared to be Valuable: Positioning Ombuds Programs

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ABSTRACT

The status and privileges conferred on organizational Ombuds programs — allowing Ombuds to work differently in the organization than all others — forge the additional responsibility for programs to deliver and demonstrate actual value.

Organizational Ombuds, expert in reframing communications, stand to benefit from a new conversation about Ombuds program sustainability. Organizational Ombuds and host organizations wish to account for the value Ombuds programs' presence and activities generate. This long-standing interest promulgated qualitative (usefulness) and quantitative (return on investment) efforts. Despite this debate, few have enacted the leading practice to fully measure and properly communicate their programs' contributions and value.

The authors' core thesis asserts an expanded paradigm will allow programs, host organizations, and the public to better understand how the contributions programs make can be acknowledged and recognized as value additions. Optimally, these new patterns will stimulate higher usage rates, promote existent programs' sustainability, and increase the introduction of new programs.

KEY WORDS

Ombuds program, integration, contribution, value

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Early thinking for this article emerged from a long ago exchange between John Zinsser and Mary Rowe. Many others — clients, colleagues, respected Ombuds programs that closed, students from Columbia's Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Program's Ombuds classes, as well as those organizations who have said they do not need an Ombuds program have all directly or indirectly helped cultivate, nurture and prune the concepts presented. The authors take full responsibility for any errors or omissions.

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INTRODUCTION

"For every major organization to have an Organizational Ombudsman Office" is the guiding principle of the International Ombudsman Association's newly announced (February 11, 2014) strategic plan. This vast goal, one which the authors fully endorse, becomes a reality only when the field changes how it both envisions and values itself.

Similar to the typical case brought to an Ombuds, this article is about two or three inter-related issues. And, like the typical case, what matters is that the process generates sound options and choices which, when chosen and enacted, lead to a better future.

This article's purpose is to stimulate discussion, advance new actions, and consolidate a lexicon for the broadly defined arena of organizational Ombuds program value. It outlines how a program can responsibly position[1] itself so both the program and its organization recognize the program's contributions as 'value.'

The authors propose that the Ombuds program, which is aligned, embedded and integrated, within its organization increases potential users' (including management) program awareness, understanding and therefore trust, resulting in higher usage and therefore value.

This is not a pursuit of equations aimed at quickly measuring program cost effectiveness, or return on investment (ROI). (With attention to particular design and processes, each is possible without violating or diminishing independence or confidentiality.) Value addition requires a foundational approach, to enable the responsible execution of data collection activities and equations. For this, the authors promote an expanded paradigm; one that extends from the typical and primarily Ombuds-centric, individual level perspective to a more programmatic effort, which generates a systems level perspective.[2] Next, designing activities for alignment, embedment and integration (AEI) an Ombuds program with its organization will maximize both Ombuds and program contributions. The AEI informed contributions are pre-requisites to adequately determine the full humanistic, economic and organizational[3] value created by Ombuds programs.

The authors assert that when Ombuds AND their organizations engage this new mindset and corresponding activities, they will: Cease to miss opportunities to create value; Ensure program sustainability; Increase the professionalization of Ombudsing; and Speed the growth of the field.

Two long-standing questions drive the authors' encouragement for this change. The first: Why do such a small percentage of potential program users (less than 5 percent in most reported examples and as low as 1 percent, especially in large organizations[4]) seek assistance from Ombuds programs? Given the considerable research-based evidence[5] of growth in work place dis-satisfaction, harassment, discrimination, wrong-doing and more, it seems many more employees would want

to use a program. Certainly there could be instances of low program usage as a consequence of an Ombuds not being a good fit for the organization or an Ombuds' lack of connection, rapport or trust with the members of the organization, due to some other inadequacy. For example, a program could be designed improperly with the Ombuds assigned collateral duty or the position established merely as "window dressing."

The second: What inhibits the ubiquity of organizational Ombuds programs, especially in the corporate setting? Given the ever present and costly work place challenges, why are there not more Ombuds programs coming on-line to address the dominant negative organizational climate.[6]

The intersection of these questions points to the reality — organizational Ombuds programs are still not well understood, either for what they offer individuals or organizations. This appears as true as it did 15 years ago when considered by Marsha Wagner.[7] Consequently, few leaders — people committed to advancing their organizations from point A to point B — decide to implement Ombuds programs. Since few programs have documented usage rates that exceed four percent[8] of the potential user population and even fewer programs measure and publicly declare their contributions and full value, how could leaders know, appreciate or be motivated to initiate Ombuds programs?

DEFINING PROGRAMMATIC ALIGNMENT, EMBEDMENT, AND INTEGRATION REQUIRES SHARED UNDERSTANDING[9]

This article's key concepts have not been widely used in the field. To advance meaningful discussion requires shared understanding. When an Ombuds program's activities and the outcome of these activities intentionally connect with and support the host organization's mission, goal and objectives alignment exists. Embedment by contrast is the necessary positioning of the Ombuds program in the organization's existent structures. Integration refers to the myriad network of connections the Ombuds and its program requires with the formal functions and others.

CONTRIBUTION AND VALUE: AN ADVANCING INTEREST

IOA's new strategic plan and vision, which includes, "…demonstrating the effectiveness of the Organizational Ombudsman role to organizational leaders, policy makers, other professionals and associations and the public." provides a valuable stanchion for this article's discussion.

Careful not to confuse the Association with the field, this interest in "demonstrating effectiveness" or "value" to others has not always been universally supported. While several voices (notably Rowe, Zeigenfuss, and Munzenrider[10]) prompted the field to measure activities to create meaningful declarations of "cost-effectiveness" or "usefulness" these encouragements often lead to more deliberation than activity. Harrison presented a concise statement of this debate.[11]

The focus on an Ombuds helping an individual program user dominated the beginnings of the contemporary organizational Ombuds field. Many early Ombuds practitioners became Ombuds by way of social work, teaching, or similar fields with a focus on one-to-one communications. The host organization and especially its leadership while recognized, at times, as stakeholders,[12] were also considered as potentially destabilizing influences on Ombuds' abilities to uphold the four defining characteristics.[13]

This one-to-one emphasis and the one person Ombuds office led to the field's synonymous use of Ombuds and Ombuds program. Though often used interchangeably they do not mean the same. The responsibilities of the *practitioner* and the *program* differ. To ignore the distinction limits the effectiveness and potential of each.[14]

Through the 1980s and '90s advancements in systems became more common. The practice of holding departments accountable for their costs and returns increased, extending even to Ombuds programs. As programs with well-regarded Ombuds, such as Coors and Pace University[15] closed the question of value drew greater notice. The lens, however, remained largely fixed on what an *Ombuds* was doing vis a vis his or her assistance to those contacting the office, while excluding or neglecting how the *program* aligned and contributed to the organization. Harrison described this perspective when he wrote, "With the exception of Robbins's convenience sample (1993), Ombuds research has not reported how disputants evaluate an Ombuds, choosing instead to focus from *the Ombuds perspective* (*authors' emphasis)* on how Ombuds benefit organizations."[16] Despite the synonymous usage of *Ombuds* and *program*, the essential point is that the organization's perspective (meaning the organization as an entity unto itself and not represented by any subset of stakeholders) is absent. This absence of the programmatic and organizational perspectives remains the challenge today.

The debate about the appropriateness of measuring and sharing data on Ombuds programs' contributions continued. Voices such as Buss,[17] Fowlie,[18] Miller,[19] and Zinsser[20] began calling for increased efforts on program evaluation, which could make clear claims on value addition. Yet, only a very few organizations have assessed their program's contributions to estimate value, especially with an actual monetary figure. Even fewer have made such information public. Halliburton, ICANN, Shell, and The World Bank are notable exceptions which have had external parties assay their Ombuds programs and present the findings to the field.

There appears to be continuing interest in the process and models to make legitimate claims of value addition.[21] It is the authors' hope this article will lead Ombuds and their programs as Rowe put it to, "...describe short-term and long-term tangible and intangible contributions in ways that are relevant to their own stakeholders." [22]

EVIDENCE OF PROGRAMATIC NEED FOR AEI

It appears likely that the absence of programmatic AEI contributes to low program usage rates; limited knowledge on the part of leaders and others about their Ombuds programs' contributions and value; and fewer programs.

According to the *OMV Petrom 2013 Survey of Organizaitonal Ombuds Practices* (an informal sample conducted during the annual IOA conference) it seems that individual Ombuds' practices remain focused on how to "craft an elegant — and often unique — resolution to each particular situation..."[23] while neglecting the at least equally important programmatic focus, by which an Ombuds program can contribute to its organization. The survey responses suggested some still do not recognize the value of an organizationally aligned and interconnected program. For example, when asked to rate the quality of executive leadership's support of the Ombuds office, respondents indicated that the Executive Board (15 percent); CFO or Financial officers (14 percent); and other Executives' (23 percent) support was not only not present, but actually not applicable.[24] When asked to rate different areas' attitudes about their program, respondents stated that such related functions as: Compliance (10 percent); HR (7 percent); and Legal (6 percent) were also not applicable. These responses hint that some Ombuds practitioners see themselves as not just 'independent,' but organizationally disconnected.

The Case To Expect More Cases

In her TED Talk *Dare to Disagree*, Margaret Heffernan notes that 85 percent of American and European managers are afraid of what conflict provokes; afraid to get into arguments they are unsure how to manage or believe they would lose.[25] Countless issues and concerns go unraised, costing organizations unquantifiable expense in missed deadlines, failed projects, ill-equipped personnel or faulty products (at best) and massive lawsuits, damaged reputations or bankrupt businesses (at worst). To illustrate, imagine a hypothetical 1,000-person organization, with a management tier of 250. This 85 percent equates to 212 mangers, who could be high quality potential users of an Ombuds program. If only half accessed the Ombuds program (106) the usage rate (10 percent) would more than double the widely "accepted" normal rate.

The Ethics Research Center (ERC) 2013 National Business Ethics Survey noted 41 percent of those surveyed observed misconduct in the work place.[26] In 2013, of those who observed misconduct, 37 percent answered they did not report what they saw. Of the 63 percent who did report misconduct, more than one-in-five workers said they experienced retaliation. What does this suggest for Ombuds programs? Returning to the hypothetical organization the 41 percent who observed misconduct equals 410 people. Of these 152 or 37 percent did not report the observed misconduct. A sub group of these non-reporters is especially startling: nearly 20 percent of non-reporters (30 people in the 1,000 people company) wanted to report, *but did not know where to go in the organization*.

Regardless of the reason for not reporting, the math results in 15 percent of the organization as having had reason to access the Ombuds regarding the issue of misconduct alone. Furthermore, of those 410 who observed misconduct, 63 percent reported it and, of that group, 21 percent or 54 people were retaliated against. This is another pool of high-potential Ombuds users in the organization. As these two groups are NOT exclusive, combining these groups means 206 individuals had solid motivations to access the Ombuds. That equals 20 percent of the organization!

If even half this group accessed the program, it would be another "record-setting" Ombuds usage rate of 10 percent. (Note: this percentage only includes issues of misconduct, it does not include the most typical Ombuds program case types such as: compensation or career development.) Given either example, what is the explanation for the typical, reported usage rate of only 1 - 4 percent? The difference suggests a significant number of potential users are for some reason not accessing Ombuds programs.

One additional reference of work place need for Ombuds programs — Gallup's *2013 State of the Global Work place* concludes, "…63 percent of the world's employees have essentially checked out, and an additional 24 percent are acting out their unhappiness and undermining the accomplishments of the 13 percent who are committed to innovation and organizational progress."[27]

Considering these wide ranging topics from engagement, loyalty, and wrong doing, if only 20 percent percent of all the people experiencing just these challenges found their way to the Ombuds program, one could anticipate, at the very least, double digit usage rates to be the norm. But, they are not. The authors contend that it is not because so few employees want help, but because too few are aware, understand or trust Ombuds programs.

Based on the literature, very few programs know or publish the actual percentages of people in the organization who are: 1) **aware** of the Ombuds program; 2) **understand** the program, such that they can differentiate it from the other related functions and communications channels; and therefore 3) **trust**, in advance of need, that the Ombuds is truly independent and confidential, and can actually be of meaningful assistance. The authors know of only one organization that annually queries their entire potential user population on the issues of awareness and understanding and subsequently reports the results to the entire workforce, accompanied by a message of support from the CEO. During interviews for this article and elsewhere, Ombuds have repeatedly stated they would like to do such surveys but do not have the resources or support to do so. Others have explained their organizations are not interested in such information, so they do not pursue it. This in turn expands the Ombuds program's capacity to reach and inform all potential users, as well as help all actual program users.

Whether reading a report issued by the ERC, Gallup, KPMG or any number of other polls or surveys about the work place, the common findings are today's work experience for most is disengaged, unsatisfied, and fearful. This suggests a large population with issues and concerns appropriate for Ombuds programs. Yet they do not use the programs. Why?

It is unreasonable to expect that everyone with an issue would seek help from an Ombuds program. Research shows the challenges of coming forward and seeking help are far greater than generally thought. Help-providers, in particular, can overestimate the likelihood of people seeking help.[28] However, nothing in this literature suggests the Ombuds community or host organizations should be satisfied with usage rates of 1 - 4 percent.

The Case To Expect More Programs

In 1992, the then Ombudsman Association and University and College Ombudsman Association's memberships totaled slightly more than 150. That same year, the Ethics and Compliance Officers Association (ECOA) was founded with 12 total members. This year, IOA has an approximate membership of 850; ECOA's membership equals 1,322. An additional 700 belong to another competing association for a total of approximately 2,000 "qualified" ethics officers.[29] Had the Ombuds community grown at the same rate as the ethics officer community, there would be more than 24,000 IOA members.[30]

Those original 12 members of the ECOA were all in then Fortune 500 organizations. Today, more than 66 percent (330) of the Fortune 500 are represented in ECOA membership. By contrast, IOA's total Fortune 500 representation is no more than 5 percent (25).[31]

Several factors, which this article does not have the space to address, contribute to the comparatively slow growth of organizational Ombuds programs in the Fortune 500. However, the authors believe the primary reason is that too few understand or appreciate the function's benefits. The field has been reluctant to enact the leading practice of programs fully declaring their contributions and value. Consequently, the function remains largely unknown and even less understood.

These inactions have contributed to the constrained growth of the field and the detriment of individual programs. While writing this article, the authors became aware of two corporate programs that were eliminated and one, which was "reduced." Value is not just a corporate issue. Also while writing this article, The University of Colorado Boulder presented its Ombuds program and all the other university departments and programs, with an *Administrative Program Prioritization Self-Study Form* to complete. Comprised of more than 63 questions, the form's introduction explained:

> The University of Colorado Boulder is undertaking a program prioritization initiative to help us make strategic decisions about the prioritization of core academic and administrative resources *in support of our mission*. …The prioritization of administrative programs at CU Boulder is intended to be an objective and *evidence-based* process.
> (*authors' emphasis*)

The *Administrative Program Prioritization Self-Study Form* questions included:

- How does your program align with the University's strategic plan?
- Is it essential that the University offer this service?
- What would be the impact if the University did not offer this service?
- Does your program align with the University's signature areas of research?
  Consider:
  → Is your program necessary or beneficial for the promotion of research, teaching and outreach;
  → Is your program value-added, although not required, to educate students and enhance their success and/or support other University goals; or
  → Is your program critical to teaching, learning, research and discovery to take place?

These and other questions, demonstrate this organization's interest in how all program activities, including the Ombuds program, align, and contribute to the University's mission.

Conversely, the authors became aware of two programs (one corporate and one NGO) expanded or were considering expansion, during the writing of this article, because the organizations recognized the contributions and how those contributions were value additions to the organization. The International Committee of the Red Cross's Deputy Director General Balthasar Staehelin described the plan to expand their Ombuds function as a "…logical and important step aligned with our strategic 'one global workforce' initiative."

The Case From Other Functions About Value

Ombuds are not alone in the challenge to identify their contributions. *The University Administrative Program Prioritization Self-Study Form* queried all functions. Simple searches reveal dozens of articles attempting to demonstrate the "value," "ROI," or "cost-benefits" of related formal functions such as: Human Resources, Ethics/Compliance, and Employee Assistance Programs. Measurement is an issue of the times. However, those other related, formal functions have better "foot holds" — that is they are better understood and represented in organizations. More organizational leaders are aware of and understand these other functions. Many leaders have staffed these other functions (more than 20 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs have been high level HR managers, for example; none have been Ombuds).

Considering the related field of Human Resources, it is generally accepted that an HR system effects its organization's overall outcomes. Research by Nishii and others puts forth otherwise, "…the effect of HR practices is not likely to be automatic and always as expected; instead, their effect will reside in

the meanings that employees attach to those practices."[32] Accordingly, employee perception, knowledge and belief about an Ombuds program then becomes paramount to a program's capacity and the corresponding value addition.

In 2012, KPMG reported the annual cost of Governance, Risk, and Compliance (GRC) consumes more than 6 percent of an organization's annual revenues. This vastly exceeds the cost of any Ombuds program. Almost two-thirds of respondents to the KPMG study considered GRC "convergence" (bringing GRC into a single systemic unit) a cost, rather than an investment, and only 31 percent said that they were effective at quantifying the benefits of these activities. The GRC codified List of Benefits includes:

- Smarter strategic decision-making
- Effective resource management
- Lowered risk and control costs
- Eliminated silos
- Optimized capital allocations
- Automated workflows
- Minimized duplication of effort
- Lowered vulnerability to attrition
- Reduced insurance premiums[33]

With the exception of automated workflows, Ombuds programs also claim these contributions.

These examples suggest employee attitude and what others in organizations are actively making a case about what they contribute and why they should be valued. Additionally, many of the outcomes parallel Ombuds function contributions. Given that most other functions are more common and therefore more understood, Ombuds programs appear to have more work to ensure organizations can recognize their unique contributions and value. As an Ombuds from a corporate program explained,

> We are called on to do that which is beyond the standard expectation of managing the individual problem on a case by case basis. We are here to aid leaders in thinking and complex problem solving. We are sought out for our opinion on important organizational decisions because of our connection. We are key thought partners to leaders and managers of all levels. This is where our greatest value is.[34]

Greater degrees of AEI are essential to achieve this program's degree of organizational trust and involvement.

CONTRIBUTION AND VALUE ADDITION

Contribution refers to everything the organization gains, everything that happens, intended and unintended, because the Ombuds program exists. Contribution is a way to "bundle" all the activities of the Ombuds *program* and the Ombuds *practitioner,* but also a way to think of the impacts on those organizational members who do not have direct interface with the program, yet are affected by it. Andy O'Donnell, former executive vice president in the Office of the CEO at Baker Hughes, Inc., who was involved in the development of the o3, his company's Ombuds program, described this phenomenon saying, "For employees, knowing the program exists is just as important as using it." This view point exists at the International Committee of the Red Cross as well. The Deputy Director General Balthasar Staehelin, explained, " [The Ombuds program] is an expression of interest in possible problems..." He continued, "[We] are interested in a platform and a space for dialogue for preventative action."

By contrast, value addition is a smaller set. Value addition is what the *organization recognizes and appreciates* as occurring, due to a program's presence and activities. These additions can be both intended and unintended, but the key is the organization's recognition.

AEI Ombuds programs provide greater value addition, as the program and the organization have negotiated the hoped for gains. Jointly created and enacted appropriate processes (data sharing, definition generation) executed under the heading of integration, enable both the program to account for its contributions and then consequently for the organization to acknowledge the value. For example, Eaton's Office of the Ombuds has a global mandate, which continues to expand annually. Business needs, identified through a collaborative communicative process inform the choices regarding where the Eaton program will next provide Ombuds services.[35]

Such an AEI program also connects with other functions. Thus, others can declare the value additions made by the Ombuds program. For example, if because of the Ombuds program, compliance experiences a reduction in the number of hotline calls that do not need investigation, because they did not rise to the legal threshold, compliance could be one to suggest the Ombuds program impacted the situation.

Where a program's contributions exist on the spectrum of "just knowing" value exists to the organization relying on the program as a valued thought partner, depends on the degree of AEI. A program, designed, implemented and operated with a commitment to its alignment, embedment and integration, will be a resource to the entire organization including leadership. The organization and the program will be in healthy dialogue about what is possible and needed from each to the other.

ICRC Ombudsman Reto Meister described this challenge for Ombuds saying:

> If we hide behind the Independence, Neutrality, Informality, and Confidentiality, we are under-exploiting the richness of the relationships and the position. We are not helping others to see the bigger picture; we are not being a good Ombuds if we only focus on resolving individual issues and copings. We must also empower ourselves to take a step beyond,

PREPARING TO ADD VALUE

Becoming Aligned, Embedded and Integrated

Value addition and its measurement depend upon a program's AEI. Opportunities to increase AEI are available to new and established programs alike. Those organizations just beginning to consider a program have the chance to "design-in" AEI. Established programs can enhance their AEI through changing program management activities, with the intent to improve and expand communications, relations and perceptions. For either a new or established program the organization's mission, goals and objectives are the starting point to develop a program's AEI. These elements also inform the value addition measurement criteria. "Where performance is measured, performance improves. Where performance is measured and reported the rate of improvement accelerates."[36]

Intentionality added to this prescription, as the field of visualization has repeatedly demonstrated yields even greater outcomes. Several essential actions which require careful organizational and Ombuds program interface exist, in order to create value. These points, listed in Figure 1, could be considered the antecedents of contribution and value addition. *How* these activities are enacted and achieved establishes the tone and commitment of a program's AEI.

Figure 1

Essential Elements To Position Program for Contribution and Value Addition	
Structural	**Communications & Information Management**
• Charter or Terms of Reference, which is cross-referenced and congruent with other organization policies • Program design process aligned with mission, values and culture of the organization • Program design process conducted utilizing essentials of Ombuds practice: dialogue based, open involvement including volunteers, confidentiality for critical inputs, and broad organizational representation • Protocols and materials tuned to organizational values, culture, and objectives • Program governing body established • AEI informed program database • Information Specialist position charged to connect the program's knowledge gains with the organization, as appropriate	• Orchestrated, strategic communications plan, including way to address crisis situation • Intra-net web site page, which updates with new information and engages page-viewers • External facing web page • Ombuds referenced and linked on other functions Intra-net pages, materials and policies as appropriate and possible • Other functions referenced and linked on Ombuds intra-net pages, materials and policies as appropriate and possible • Regular connection meetings at predetermined and agreed to intervals with executive and management level heads of functional areas — especially those with whom program does not otherwise regularly meet

With these essential elements in place, a foundation exists for programs to engage in the following five activities to support and enhance their contributions.

1. Talk About Value

While an organization identifies the value addition, the Ombuds needs to initiate the dialogue dialogue, which will establish what value is possible. So contributions can be fully recognized, Ombuds must communicate with users, potential users, the authorizing environment, and other stakeholders what potential value the program could create. Recognizing contribution as a value addition is more likely when the expectation that it might happen and the framework to appreciate it already exists. This communication occurs optimally as part of the program design and implementation, but can begin at any point. This dialogue should be repeated consistently, as part of a program's introduction and at regular intervals, jointly re-examined with the authorizing environment.

Providing a compilation of potential program value (see Figure 2) and engaging stakeholders in discussions of the organizational goals, as well as what would "evidence" the value addition (i.e. how would they know it was occurred) prepares an organization to both expect contributions and to recognize how the Ombuds program directly or indirectly facilitated these.

Figure 2

Framework of Potential Ombuds Program Value Additions		
Economic	**Organizational**	**Humanistic**
• Expanded productivity • Increased retention • Preserved management time • Enhanced operational efficiency • Advanced individual and team development • Reduced disputing process and outcome costs • Improved reputation/brand protection • Reduced incivility (sabotage/ theft) • Lowered or eliminated insurance costs	• Supplemented programs • Navigated systems • Heightened transparency • Enhanced accountability • Protected and maximized personal responsibility • Increased ethical and compliant behavior • Advanced pre/pro-ventative conflict-posture • Advantaged under the Federal Sentencing Guidelines if wrong doing is proven	• Increased engagement • Strengthened organizational trust • Expanded fairness • Enhanced creativity and risk taking • Augmented individualized-career development • Heightened respect • Improved and preserved working relationships • Reduced incivility (bullying/ mobbing / isolating)

2. Target Current Concerns / Communicate Selected Focus

Whether initiating or refreshing a program, understanding the organizational concerns, which the Ombuds program could impact and describing those as a focal effort for the program, helps users, potential users and the organization to understand why the program exists. A simple statement of "supporting engagement efforts" or "augmenting ethics and compliance capacity" can move the sometimes nebulous program into a more understandable shape. Most programs are designed to receive any work place issue or concern. But, with limited resources, it's advantageous for a program to concentrate its attention (e.g. resources, marketing materials, educational subjects etc.) to the areas of most need.

A program cannot fully function if it operates in a vacuum. Doing so threatens a program's long-term sustainability and limits an Ombuds' capacity to raise or support any recommended systemic change. In the majority of instances, one person's issue is a topic of concern for others. As an Ombuds program has the capacity to hear all types of concerns, proclaiming those of particular interest to the organization writ large is quintessentially an "aligning" activity. Such targets are best defined annually in concert with the organization. The organization's goal and annual objectives offer a starting point.

3. Broaden and Deepen Relationships

When understood, championed and intentionally linked to all the stakeholders, but especially the authorizing environment, a program is not only well supported, but AEI reinforces and sustains program independence and neutrality. Too few programs have been AEI designed for any conclusive research at this time. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests an AEI program generates greater

program awareness, understanding and trust, especially when supported by a governing or oversight body. The governing body serves several purposes including to:

- Support and monitor program's administrative responsibilities
- Consider and define, in conjunction with the principal Ombuds, the program's annual objectives and the degree to which objectives are obtained;
- Review the principal Ombuds' program (not case) management performance
- Augment program communications;
- Identify and enable opportunities for the program to improve integration with and the organization; and
- Ensure, where appropriate, the program and its staff practice in accordance with the IOA Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics (SOPCOE).

This cross-functional committee, comprised of seven to eleven members, includes varying organizational levels (including top-tier leadership)and other personal attributes, which are representational. Functional representation from the organization's core activities (e.g. medical staff for healthcare organizations, teaching staff for educational organizations, etc.) not only the related, formal functions (legal, human resources, etc.) is essential. This group, supported and prepared with training is fully knowledgeable about the responsibilities and limitations of organizational Ombuds programs, the SOPCOE, so it can contribute to defining intended and desired impacts.

With a governing body, a program's viability is less likely to be determined by a single person or function. A governing body ensures greater reach via interpersonal networks. This group also provides an "advocate voice" to support the principal Ombuds and the program, with respect to additional resources, e.g. different office locale, or other needs that might need to be "fought" for. Having this body pursue these discussions or needs helps preserve the perception of Ombuds and program neutrality and independence.

This group in no way replaces the essential connection to the President of the University, CEO, or an organization's pinnacle leader, as recommended by the IOA Standards of Practice.[37] However, a program built with only this dotted line to the pinnacle leader effectively limits the program's opportunity to integrate fully and to gain additional and diverse supportive voices. With a reporting structure only to one, a program can be jeopardized when this relationship falters or the individual leaves the organization.

4. Establish a Mechanism to Manage Perceived Ombuds or Program Shortcomings

Almost no Ombuds programs have been designed or operate with a mechanism to address complaints or concerns about an Ombuds or the program itself. How does this effect perceptions about a program? Could low program usage rates also be an indicator of lack of trust or confidence in a program with no complaint mechanism for its own actions? Ombuds are human and the possibility exists for misjudgment or misconduct. It is critical to establish a protocol to manage such situations. Human Resources, Legal or Compliance are ill-equipped to receive such an issue, particularly if the person coming forward requires anonymity or cannot afford for others to know they worked with an Ombuds. The governing body described above is an appropriate locus for raising and addressing such a concern.

Even if the mechanism is never used to raise an issue, which is the case to date with the program known to have this mechanism, having and communicating the existence of such a process could provide reassurance for some, thus increasing the comfort and confidence for those seeking help from a program. This mechanism also alleviates others' concerns that an Ombuds' independence and confidentiality could cover Ombuds misbehavior.

5. Leverage Learning

Ombuds' often site as a purpose "to help employees help themselves." Accordingly, serving as an educational development and information resource offers another way to build a program's AEI. Developing training, whether in concert with other functions or independently based on identified issues emerging from Ombuds cases allows an Ombuds to show they recognize the needs of users, potential users and the organization as a whole. Whether authoring the content for a web-based training, reviewing articles, and posting suggestions on their own website, Ombuds programs can provide numerous learning and development activities.

These learning vehicle examples, as listed in Figure 3, serve several purposes. Learning creates contributions, which can be recognized as value, as they enhance knowledge and skills. Secondly, these interactions afford another opportunity for employees to know and further their trust in the program and practitioners. The chance to meet and talk to an Ombuds outside the parameters of conflict or difficulty, can significantly personalize the Ombuds.
Even this limited set of five necessary activities could challenge the staffing levels of even multi-

Figure 3

Learning & Development Opportunities for Increased Integrationn
• Host webinars for knowledge and skill development on negotiation and other conflict management areas • Recommend and/or deliver training on topics which emerge from observed trends and issues • Provide library on communication skills, conflict, negotiation, problem solving, etc. • Develop and institute e-learning modules, which could flexibly cover multiple subjects • Participate in new hire, new manager orientations and development • Expand practioners' own professional development to gain competency in related areas such as: Intercultural Communications, Appreciative Inquiry, Training design, Organizational Development, etc. • Use program's website organization's publications and other venues to provide information, resources and guidance about related topics

member Ombuds programs, let alone a sole practitioner. There is no doubt that becoming and maintaining an AEI program requires additional steps and more attention than the current standard. Resource needs, including staffing present an opportunity to advance integration. Involving other parts of the organization, including the recommended governing body, can lead to more connections and understanding. In most organizations, access to greater resources is best assured by creating value.

It may be necessary for existent programs to re-examine their time allocations to various tasks and reallocate activity to tasks intended to expan AEI. A 'lead' Ombuds of a program could spend up to 50 percent of their time on AEI-related activities. This is a stark contrast to the 10 percent reported in a 1999 Simon and Rowe presentation at the IOA annual meeting.[38] More recently, over half of the *OMV Petrom 2013 Organizational Ombuds Practices* Survey respondents did not include "Feedback and Reporting" in their top three activities.[39] Additionally, the significant increased data needs of an AEI program recommend a dedicated information specialist. This individual's responsibilities include connecting with other parts of the organization to establish shared definitions and defensible data sharing protocols, while managing data basing, informatics and report production. The expertise and demands of this position mean they are not available for case-related work. This position is beginning to appear in larger Ombuds programs and could become an essential element of the fully aligned, embedded and integrated Ombuds program of the future.

THE ASCENDING SPIRAL OF VALUE RETURN FROM AN AEI PROGRAM

> A company that communicates throughout the work place in an effective manner is more likely to avoid problems with completing the daily procedures, and less likely to have a problem with improper occurrence and will generate a stronger morale and a more positive attitude towards work. When employees communicate effectively with each other, productivity will increase because effective communication means less complaints and more work getting done.[40]

Organizational Ombuds programs properly positioned and structure, foster effective communication to deliver all the benefits and the inherent value described above. As both implicit and explicit communication multipliers, Ombuds augment both the performance and humanity of organizations.

Andy O'Donnell championed the development of the o3, Baker Hughes' Ombuds program. Upon first learning about the concept, he thought the program could be a useful safety valve to relieve pressure for people when they had a problem and as another way to resolve issues without having to resort to legal procedures; two typical descriptions of what programs can provide.

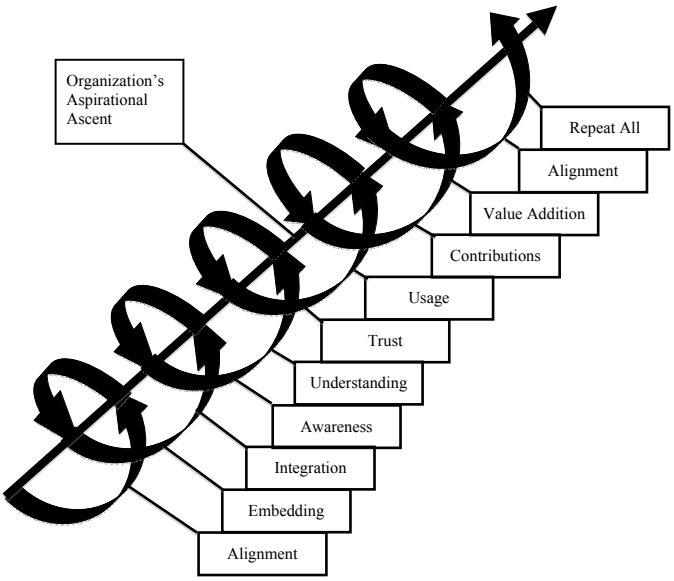
Now more than a year into operations, O'Donnell, the first Chair of the Ombuds Governance Committee, still sees pressure release as an important point for the program, but he also sees other contributions as a key value addition made by the o3: the creation of a more positive environment. "…it sets an atmosphere that the company cares and values its employees."

He added, "It's also a channel for leadership to learn things it does not know, have an expanded understanding of where people are and what they are thinking. Especially from those who feel disenfranchised. All of this helps managers be more informed so they can make better decisions."

This example shows how as a program moves toward its AEI it gains greater opportunities to add recognized value through more diverse activities, which tie into the organization's broad needs.

Alignment, embedment, and integration set a context where more people in the organization will be aware of the program, understand the program's intent and activities on a higher level, and therefore "trust" the program more. There is every indication that this will lead to higher case-loads. Higher case-loads, in-turn generate greater opportunities for more program contribution, in a high AEI setting, these became recognized as value additions. This organizational recognition will increase both the perceived value of the function and almost certainly the real value addition. Those in organizations talk about that which they value, that which they benefit from, that which aids them in advancing their mission and achieving their intended goal. They build processes to secure and ensure viability for such functions. In so doing, they guarantee greater awareness, and provide greater resources, which further strengthen the alignment and integration and continually envalue the embedding. Then, the cycle begins again and ascends. An ascending spiral that mirrors the organizations aspiration ascent is the demonstrative image for this process.

Figure 4



CONCLUSION

The last decade's increasing interest in determining organizational Ombuds program contribution and value creation is a much needed development. To be a widely recognized and well understood profession, with an increasingly common presence, practitioners and the field need a broader commitment to align, embed and integrate programs in order to first better serve program users and second to account for their contributions and fully measure their value.

Legitimate challenges clearly exist. The particular cultural context of Ombuds programs will always mean diverse operating realities and specific adjustments organization to organization. Rowe writes, "There is no single … method of measuring cost effectiveness."[41] And, there is no single method for an Ombuds program to be properly aligned, embedded and integrated. And, there is no single way to account for all Ombuds programs' contributions and value additions. Each program must undertake organization specific activities to become AEI in order to inventory their contributions as value additions and report what is discovered.

Full and proper value recognition actually protects an Ombuds program's defining characteristics. Recognizing value reinforces the importance of the defining characteristics, by generating for the stakeholders a clear understanding and correlation of the organizational benefit, as well as individual Ombuds program users' gain, through the unique value proposition of the characteristics. The defining characteristics require practitioners to behave differently than all other members of a given organization. This organizationally provided privilege — the ability to do that which no one else may — is rare and valuable. It must be "traded." The organization bold enough to allow one of its functions and a number of its members to behave "outside the norms" — to the extent that Ombuds must — deserves to expect gains from the function and to understand clearly and accurately just what contributions and value have been made.

Likewise, the Ombuds role as a voice of conscience, a monitor of organizational fairness, does not require the program to disconnect from the organization for "perspective" or hold high moral ground which determining contribution would diminish. Without legitimate and defensible processes to determine and demonstrate value additions, the Ombuds program becomes ancillary and, thus, dispensable. However, an aligned, embedded, and integrated Ombuds function, which expends the needed energy to help a broad internal constituency, and especially those shareholders identified as the authorizing environment, has a workable preconception of possible value along with intentional predetermined desired effects, and will be best able to recognize Ombuds program contributions as value additions. This program will become the type of sought out and trusted advisor, capable of returning the greatest possible value. This emergent paradigm is currently demonstrating its worth in limited applications. Additional research (such as ROI studies, leadership support surveys, and assessing potential user perceptions of awareness, understanding and trust) and especially, additional enactment of this AEI framework are needed to demonstrate that it is repeatable and universally valuable.

ENDNOTES

1. "Responsibly position" refers to the International Ombudsman Association Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics or SOPCOE. The authors in their own practice respect and uphold the SOPCOE and require the same of any client or collaborating partner. The authors do not condone or promote any action or inaction that in fact or appearance would undermine or diminish the SOPCOE.

2. This article distinguishes between an Ombuds *program* and an Ombuds *practitioner*. Though each are quite different, it is common, even within the field, to use Ombuds — i.e. the practitioner when one actually means the program. Especially when only one person staffs a program, confusing the program with the person is understandable. Throughout the authors' discussions and interviews, as well as writing this article, the authors too found they sometimes used "Ombuds" when they intended Ombuds program. It is imperative to distinguish the program from the practitioner, as each has distinct roles and responsibilities. Thinking of both as one in the same creates rate limiting factors on: What a practitioner can do for users; What a program can contribute to its organization; and How the organization recognizes the value added; as well as the general public's understanding of the field. A program should not be a person; and a person is not a program. For one, the SOPCOE manifests differently for both. For example, while a program should never be positioned or placed such that it takes "a side" (and nor should the Ombuds practitioner) a program's existence is not to be "neutral." What then, would be the point? An organization implements an organizational Ombuds program for a variety of reasons, but the underlying expectation is that it will contribute to creating a better environment for all. This article emphasizes programmatic necessities — alignment, embedding and integration — in order to expand contributions and the recognized value additions a program can make. Of course, these activities are executed by people; they do not, however, all have to be executed solely by the Ombuds. Organizational leaders, personnel from related functions, administrators, managers, an Ombuds program's governing body, and even external consultants can contribute, and may, in fact, be better positioned in some instances, to ensure some of these programmatic activities occur, and in so doing, protect the independence, neutrality, confidentiality and informality of the Ombuds practitioner.

3. Frank Fowlie and John W. Zinsser, "Evaluating Ombudsmen Offices" (presentation, 2008 International Ombudsman Association Annual Conference, Boston, MA, April 14, 2008).

4. In his 2012 University Ombuds Office Annual Report, James S. Wohl, Ombudsperson and professor at Auburn University noted, "Approximate employee usage rates of Ombuds offices at colleges and universities range from 1 percent to 5 percent of the constituency population. The employee usage rate in the current year of the Auburn University Ombuds Office was 2.47 percent."

5. The three following works combine to present a picture of the modern work environment. Each offers particular advantages and all are worth pursuing, even if not all data corresponds.

   Richard H. Girgenti, "KPMG 2013 Integrity Survey." KPMG 2013. https://www.kpmg.com/CN/en/IssuesAndInsights/ArticlesPublications/Pages/Integrity-Survey-2013-O-201307.aspx

   E. O'Boyle, Jim Harter, "Gallup's 2013 State of the Global Workplace," Gallup, 2013. http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/164735/state-global-workplace.aspx

   "National Business Ethics Survey of the U.S. Workforce." Ethics Resource Center. (2013). http://www.ethics.org/nbes/download-reports/

   For further consideration of the continuing impact of discriminatory behavior in the workplace, "A Workplace Divided" is useful in its clarity.

   K.A. Dixon, Duke Storen, and Carl E. Van Horn, "A Workplace Divided: How Americans View Discrimination and Race on the Job. Work Trends: Americans' Attitudes about Work, Employers and Government," John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ and The Center for Survey Research and Analysis, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT. January 2002. eric.ed.gov/?id+ED480971

6. While the number of Ombuds programs in higher education has continued to grow and the most recent decade has shown increases in the U.S. Federal government and health care, corporate sector Ombuds program growth is essentially flat, and dramatically lags behind other functions such as ethics and compliance.

7. M. L. Wagner, "The Organizational Ombudsman as Change Agent," *Negotiation Journal*, 16: 99–114. doi: 10.1111/j.1571-9979.2000.tb00205.x Wagner's interest in seeing Ombuds change and advance organizations through rigorous connective communications provided the authors with support for the concepts presented in this article. She encouraged all Ombuds to take action and to interface on a high level with their organizations.

8. "...with utilization at the 4 percent level probably closer to normal." Charles L. Howard, *The Organizational Ombudsman: Origins, Roles, and Operations A Legal Guide* (Chicago: American Bar Association, 2010), 177.

9. Alignment relates to the connection and commitment an Ombuds program has with the purpose or mission of the host organization. Alignment includes the recognition by the Ombuds program personnel that they have something to add to the organization, something which makes the organization better than it would be without the program, but also moves the organization ahead to achieving the organizational mission, vision and goals. Ideally, all in the organization perceive and appreciate this alignment of purpose — especially those who use the program.

To be clear, the authors are advocating for a programmatic alignment. That is, the Ombuds program needs to be aligned, while the Ombuds practitioner remains independent, neutral, informal and confidential. Especially as regards "neutrality" there must be clarity. Neutrality pertains to Ombuds' management of a case or interfaces in the public venue (such as an Ombuds not being an official voting member of a committee or taking part in a formal process). The program must be a functional addition to the organization. It must provide a contribution, which the organization sees as value. If the program is judged to be neutral, as regards its contribution and value addition, the organization will by necessity jettison it.

- Embedment is the proper structural placement of an Ombuds program throughout the organization, including mechanisms for oversight or governance, access to all types of power, means of correction and redress for Ombuds actions/inactions. Embedding is also aided by a proper description of these aspects in the terms of reference or charter.

- Integration references the many workable connections between an Ombuds program and those other functions in the organization, especially those with which there is the greatest need to interact to achieve the Ombuds program's mission and goals. Different organizations, having different needs and desires from an Ombuds program, will lead to the program integrating with different functions at various levels (e.g. an organization desiring an increase in workforce engagement might lead the Ombuds program to integrate more highly with Organizational Development and Learning to a greater extent than the organization looking to the Ombuds program for a dramatic increase in ethics and compliance reporting). Integration looks like appropriate regular communications, the establishment of appropriate shared criteria for events and data exchange, so that a coordinated understanding of what each function — Ombuds and ethics for example — receive and experience from the other.

10. James T. Ziegenfuss, "Perspectives on Costs and Cost Effectiveness of Ombudsman Programs in Four Fields. Case 4: Hospital Case (a client Ombudsman)," *Journal of Health and Human Resources Administration* 15, no. 3 (January 1993): 302-305.

11. T. R. Harrison, "What Is Success in Ombuds Processes? Evaluation of a University Ombudsman," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* (Spring 2004): 315.

    Harrison writes, "Although these descriptions tell us what skills are necessary for one to be an Ombuds, they do little to tell us why or if they are effective. Evaluation of Ombuds processes comes primarily from surveys and self-reports of practicing Ombuds and focuses primarily on the number of grievances heard and resolved (Netting, Paton, and Huber, 1992; Ziegenfuss, Rowe, and Munzenrider, 1993), cost effectiveness (Rowe and Ziegenfuss, 1993; Perneski and Rowe, 1993; Hall, 1993; Rowe, 1993a; Ziegenfuss, 1993a; Lux, 1993), and Ombuds' perceptions of disputant satisfaction (Robbins, 1993)."

    This aptly catches the Ombuds-centric nature, and the absence of an organizational alignment.

12. Mary Simon and Mary Rowe, "Benchmarking and Metrics for Ombuds Programs or Of What Use Are We Anyway?" (presentation, 1999 Annual Conference of The Ombudsman Association, Phoenix, AZ, April 1999).

    This presentation presented an extensive list of stakeholders. Mary Rowe has spent considerable time and energy employing her singular ability to build what must be considered the definitive list of organizational stakeholders who connect with the Ombuds and Ombuds programs.

13. On Thursday, May 21, 2009, at the semi-regular meeting of the East Coast Ombuds Group, a whole group discussion on the issue of alignment, value return and its potential impact on neutrality occurred. Among the many voices heard were Mary Rowe and John W. Zinsser who disagreed about the use of the word "alignment." The group struggled with the notion of who "received" the value created by an Ombuds. There is question as to whether the group considered Ombuds "programs" rather than only Ombuds practitioners. It is clear now, however, the discussion needed to extend to include the Ombuds program as well.

14. Just as the authors encourage a distinction between "practitioner" and "program," they also separate management or leadership from the organization. The authors use the term "organization" to refer to the entire entity — the collective of all that comprise it, not just the ownership or designated leaders.

15. http://Ombuds-blog.blogspot.com/2009/06/pace-university-closing-Ombuds-office.html

16. T. R. Harrison, "What is success in Ombuds processes? Evaluation of a University Ombudsman," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 316.

17. Helmut Buss, "Controlling Conflict Costs: The Business Case of Conflict Management," *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* 4, no. 1, 62.

18. Frank Fowlie, "*A Blueprint for the Evaluation of an Ombudsman's Office: A Case Study of the ICANN Office of the Ombudsman*" http://www.icann.org/Ombudsman/blueprint-for-evaluation-of-an- Ombudsman-nov08.pdf p. 1.

19. David Miller, "Editorial: Measuring Up?" *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* 3, no. 1 (2010): 6.

20. John W. Zinsser and Lawrence A. Jagneaux, Jr., "The Untold Millions; Demonstrating Organizational Ombuds Programs' Value Return." (presentation, 2010 International Ombudsman Association Annual Conference, Portland, OR, April 2010).

21. Practitioners continue to request presentations and more content specific to measurement and evaluation from IOA's Professional Development Committee. The authors receive requests for assistance and information on the subject from practitioners and organizations.

22. Mary Rowe, "Identifying and Communicating the Usefulness of Organizational Ombuds with Ideas About OO Effectiveness and Cost-effectiveness," Journal of the International Ombudsman Association 3, no. 1 (2010): 19.

23. M. L. Wagner, "The Organizational Ombudsman as Change Agent," *Negotiation Journal,* 16 (January 2000): 111. doi: 10.1111/j.1571-9979.2000.tb00205.x

24. https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B5ZmVelRFyNUYXV4UDBCTFVOTG8/edit?pli=1 p.16

25. http://www.ted.com/talks/margaret_heffernan_dare_to_disagree.html

26. National Business Ethics Survey of the U.S. Workforce. Ethics Resource Center, 14. http://www.ethics.org/nbes/download-reports/

27. http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/164735/state-global-workplace.aspx p. 108.

28. F. J. Milliken, E.W. Morrison, and P.F. Hewlin, "An Exploratory Study of Employee Silence: Issues that Employees Don't Communicate Upward and Why," *Journal of Management Studies,* 40 (September 2003): 1,453–1,476. doi: 10.1111/1467-6486.00387

As well, see, Vanessa K. Bohns, Francis J. Flynn, "'Why didn't you just ask?' Underestimating the discomfort of help-seeking," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, volume 46, issue 2 (March 2010): 402-409.

Bohns and Flynn's work examines how and why help-seekers come forward. It would be useful to examine if their findings are applicable to the potential population of users wanting help from an organizational Ombuds.

29. Tim Mazur (chief operating officer, The Ethics and Compliance Officer Association) in a teleconference interview with John W. Zinsser on February 13, 2014.

30. 2000/12=166.666. Rounding the ethics officer growth rate down to 165 and multiplying by the 1992 existent Ombuds membership population (150) provides the result of 24,750.

31. Review of the International Ombudsman Association Member Database, Ombudsassociation.org/members-only/membersgip/search-member-database, February 12, 2014.

32. L.H. Nishii, D.P. Lepak, and B. Schneider, "Employee Attributions of The 'Why' of HR Practices: Their Effects On Employee Attitudes And Behaviors, And Customer Satisfaction," *Personnel Psychology*, 61 (2008): 507.

33. Brenda Boultwood, "The GRC Value Proposition," (February 2013): 4. http://www.garp.org/risk-news-and-resources/2013/february/the-grc-value-proposition.aspx

34. Interview with a corporate Ombuds in a teleconference with John W. Zinsser, February 2014. (Some interviews were conducted in confidence and the names of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.)

35. Ilene Butensky (vice president, Office of the Ombuds, Eaton Corporation) in a teleconference interview with the authors, January 10, 2014.

36. Thomas Monson, publicquotes.com/quote/35700.

37. Ombudsassociation.org/standards/, See especially 2.3.

38. Mary Simon and Mary Rowe, "Benchmarking and Metrics for Ombuds Programs or Of What Use Are We Anyway?" (presentation, 1999 Annual Conference of The Ombudsman Association, Phoenix, AZ. April 1999).

39. "OMV Petrom 2013 Survey of Organizational Ombuds Practices," (October 2013): p. 18. https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B5ZmVelRFyNUYXV4UDBCTFVOTG8/edit?pli=1

40. Emmanuel Majekodunmi Ajala, "The Influence Of Workplace Environment On Workers' Welfare, Performance and Productivity," *The African Symposium: An online journal of the African Educational Research Network*, volume 12, no. 1 (June 2012): 142.

41. Mary Rowe, "Identifying and Communicating the Usefulness of Organizational Ombuds with Ideas about OO Effectiveness and Cost-effectiveness," *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, 3 no. 1 (2010): 19.