



## Talking to an Ombudsperson: a priceless occasion.

Contacting an Ombudsperson may not be an easy decision. Many questions may come to the staff member's mind:

- ➔ Can't I really resolve this issue by myself?
- ➔ Has it really come to this?
- ➔ What would the ombudsperson do anyway?
- ➔ Will he/she be really neutral and keep my issues confidential?
- ➔ Can the Ombudsperson help me solve my problem?
- ➔ Should I just put up with this and see if it goes away?
- ➔ Would I be at risk by contacting the Office?

In fact, no action will be taken without your approval. The Office of the Ombudsperson works in an entirely informal manner.

You can begin by simply having a discussion with the Ombudsperson: a neutral, confidential, independent person who is experienced in advising staff members of their rights and options. After carefully listening to what you have to say, the Ombudsperson will work with you to examine your options and identify possible actions, which could be undertaken.

The issue may very well be resolved without the direct involvement of the Ombudsperson; that is, you could be empowered to solve the problem independently. However, in most cases, staff members ask the Ombudsperson to be directly involved in solving the matter. In doing so, the Ombudsperson may mediate between two or several staff members through various methods including 'shuttle diplomacy'; he/she can be involved in researching the facts of a case or can be asked to provide specific information - mostly policy related - that the staff member may not have been able to acquire or understand; this can include clarification of policy where there is ambiguity or vagueness. The Ombudsperson would take all precautions necessary to protect the identity of the inquirer while working on a case; however, cases are often too complex to be resolved on an entirely anonymous basis. In any event, the Ombudsperson would never mention the name of the inquirer without his/her approval. In this regard, it is often understood during preliminary discussions, whether the visitor/caller is giving full permission for the Ombudsperson to inquire on his/her behalf.

This doesn't sound too worrying, does it?

But some of our visitors' most frequent misconception is to think that the Ombudsperson should become their advocate.

An Ombudsperson cannot become an advocate to any party in a dispute and is also not in a position to find fault but rather, ensure that due process is followed. If the Ombudsperson finds that justice has not prevailed in a given case, he/she would make a recommendation to the executive body.

However, and this is also one of the major misconceptions about the Ombudsperson's role, the Ombudsperson does not implement a decision and is not a policy maker, but rather strives to find a fair resolution to a dispute brought to his/her attention.

It would be unwise for anyone to think of retaliating against a person who has contacted an Ombudsperson. It is also not tolerated. Contacting an Ombudsperson should not be seen, after all, as a threatening act but rather, a willingness to solve issues in a fair and amicable manner without escalating them to a more formal level. Ideally, every party involved should embrace and make the most use of the Ombuds process.

So what do you have to lose by talking to an Ombudsperson? Probably nothing, and you may gain much indeed. You may gain knowledge, information or clarification of an issue that may have preoccupied you for some time. Most of all, sharing your issue with a person who is able to understand it and keep it confidential has been found by most inquirers to be a priceless occasion.