



“Sssh.....don’t go to the Ombudsman”

When should I contact the Ombudsman?

This question often arises when people face conflict in the workplace, especially since parties involved in a dispute usually have various avenues open to assist them to find a resolution. Sometimes it may be helpful to involve another impartial and respected colleague who is familiar with the context in which the conflict is happening. Another avenue may be to request the intervention of a representative from human resources or perhaps the Head of Office. On other occasions, colleagues choose to deal with the conflict themselves, perhaps outside the immediate office environment, where they can discuss their feelings, fears, reactions and possible ways to address the conflict. Unfortunately, in exploring options such as these to resolve conflict, parties are frequently informed and cautioned: ‘Don’t go to the Ombudsman!’

Here are some of the reasons that are likely to be given for preventing someone from seeking the assistance of the Ombudsman:

- ➔ We can deal with the matter ourselves
- ➔ The Ombudsman will report the incident to the Executive Heads

- ➔ Reporting to the Ombudsman is a sign of incompetence
- ➔ The Ombudsman will recommend that you be ‘black listed’
- ➔ The Ombudsman only deals with cases from Directors and Assistant Secretaries-General
- ➔ The Ombudsman is a man and will not understand the issue from a woman’s perspective
- ➔ The Ombudsman is a tool for management

We all need to be very clear about these issues. First, there is no specific time to bring a matter to the Ombudsman – although it is safe to say that the earlier, the better! Anyone who has dealt with a conflict knows that it is not a structured experience and often results in unpredictable outcomes. It would be difficult to assert that certain circumstances warrant the Ombudsman’s attention while others do not. Anyone can contact an Ombudsman at any time during a conflict. It is also possible (and even advisable) to contact an Ombudsman even if there is no conflict but rather a need to have another perspective on a matter regarding workplace relationships.

Ombudsmen are structurally independent and neutral. As noted above, optimal use of the Ombudsman's Office is often at the beginning of a dispute, when there is often unease, discomfort or lack of communication but also a lot of opportunity to generate more options for dialogue and resolution. Always remember when you decide to consult the Ombudsman: confidentiality is the foundation upon which the integrity of an Ombudsman is built. Without confidentiality the Office of the Ombudsman cannot discharge its duties effectively. We take confidentiality very seriously and take great precautions to uphold it at every stage of our practice. Therefore, if you are contemplating contacting the Ombudsman and are warned and cautioned: "don't go to the Ombudsman" remember that you and the Ombudsman are the only ones who would know.