

# Respectful workplace advisors (RWA)

## Programme description



Colleagues come to talk to the **Respectful Workplace Advisor (RWA)** for help in looking for options and to get clarification on available conflict resolution resources in the organization.

### **The idea**

Ideally, an RWA intervention would happen as follows: a staff member comes to the RWA for help in exploring options on a work-related issue that he's faced with. When the RWA confirms that the staff member has indeed come to the right person, they make an appointment for the two to meet confidentially to talk. Later on, the RWA reports the issue to the Ombuds office on the RWA log without providing names.

In reality, however, things can happen quite differently. For instance, people may not always ask for a specific meeting to discuss a matter with the RWA. Most of the time, an RWA intervention happens during casual day-to-day conversations with colleagues in corridors, gatherings, meetings, phone conversations, etc. This may even be a major area of opportunity for RWAs to make the most impact in managing workplace conflict.

An RWA in a country office once traveled to a field mission with a colleague. The RWA had noticed from previous observations that this person was always very quiet and often looked preoccupied. During the long trip by road, the person talked about how unbearable the workload had been on him since the new department supervisor had arrived. He talked about how he felt that the work was not distributed fairly and that sometimes he had to stay late on weekdays and come to work on weekends just to be able to meet deadlines while others had time to chat and socialize in the office and leave on time. He also talked about how this was starting to affect his health. From what seemed like a mere "venting" of a staff member to another trusted colleague, the RWA was able to give some pointers to the person on the possibility of contacting stress professionals and also how to raise the issue with the supervisor or talk to the Ombudsperson.

*Working together to find solutions*

The best way to ensure that concerns heard by the RWAs during such casual encounters are given serious consideration is to have them reflected on the RWA log. RWAs enter on their log cases that they have handled within a specific timeframe-without, of course, any information leading to the individuals that have raised them-to their Ombuds/Mediator offices.

In addition to concerns brought to RWAs in various circumstances, an RWA may also observe trends without individuals having raised specific issues. These observations should also be brought to the attention of the Ombudsman or Mediator. This way of reporting general concerns has proven to be very useful in detecting problems in the general work environment and helping Ombuds/Mediators to make recommendations for improvement. The organizations may subsequently be prompted to revisit various policies affecting the staff.

RWA feedback is usually included in Ombuds/Mediator annual reports, highlighting the impact of RWAs on systemic improvement. It is therefore very important that RWAs also try to identify underlying issues, which often represent the origin of most conflict, and not capture solely those that occasionally surface.

Does this mean that the RWA hat must be worn at all times? Possibly so. In fulfilment of the important responsibilities vested in them, RWAs, along with their individual functions, also stay alert to signs of discontent and observe causes of conflict in their work environment. They might provide staff members with valuable help in solving their individual complaints, they may also play an important role in identifying systemic problems that are often the true cause of everyday conflict.

## **The background**

The original RWA network was started in 1993 at the World Bank to deal with sexual harassment issues. It has since evolved to deal with all types of harassment. Under the encouragement of former World Bank president James Wolfensohn, the network went worldwide to the World Bank country offices in 1997. Over the years, the RWA network has evolved as an integral part of the World Bank Group's informal conflict resolution system.

## **Do you want to get involved?**

The initiative to deploy respectful workplace advisors at the United Nations was started with a five-day training workshop in the West African nations of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ghana in 2007 (see document "RWA Pilot, 2007").

For more information about the RWA Programme please contact us:

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