Some of the Sources of Power and Influence of an Organizational Ombuds
Teaching Note
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People often ask an organizational ombuds: “How can you help anyone if you have no power?” But, of course, there are many sources of power and influence in human affairs. Negotiation theorists discuss and teach their own lists of the sources of power in human interactions. This Teaching Note uses a list of ten sources of power that I developed in teaching Negotiation and Conflict Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management;¹ it briefly describes how each source of power and influence is useful for organizational ombuds.

1. Positional Power or the Power of Legitimate Authority. Authority to make decisions—which is derived from official status within an organization and/or from laws and policies—is the most obvious source of power. Organizational ombuds (OOs), by International Ombuds Association Standards of Practice,² do not have ordinary management decision-making authority. OOs instead practice under a Standard called “Informality.” They offer options to their constituents, and help in choosing options, rather than making binding decisions on behalf of the organization.

OOs do, however, have positional influence that derives from a several factors: their official title, the fact that they generally report to very senior leaders in the organization, their access to almost anyone in the organization, and their receiving any kind of work-related concern. Many ombuds are included as observers or non-voting resources in high-status councils and work groups within their organization.

2. Rewards. This source of power and influence includes both tangible and intangible rewards. While ombuds do not typically provide tangible rewards, their ability to provide intangible rewards is significant. Intangible rewards include delivering respect, providing a hearing, helping people with new ideas and painful problems—and equitably affirming the personhood of each person with whom the ombuds works.

An ombuds also has significant indirect reward power, for example by helping constituents to work in a way that brings them recognition for their achievements. Ombuds also frequently can highlight the good ideas and achievements of their constituents in a way that brings tangible and intangible rewards—for instance, when they discover a manager doing well with some vexing issue and have permission to speak of the accomplishment.


3. **Sanctions (and Force).** These sources of power include both tangible and intangible sanctions, as well as coercion. The Standards of Practice for ombuds stipulate that they themselves do not participate in disciplinary proceedings and cannot coerce anyone, except possibly in the rare case of imminent risk of serious harm. However, ombuds are familiar with the formal procedures in an organization that can result in sanctions and can support constituents with respect to them. Ombuds also bring issues that may result in investigations to the attention of appropriate leaders in the organization. In addition, an ombuds often can help constituents to think about their own behavior and behave in a way that helps them to avoid errors and misjudgments that might result in sanctions.

4. **Information.** Information, including both open and private knowledge, is a major source of power for ombuds. In many organizations, the ombuds office has the widest “catchment” for information of any office. Many ombuds hear from constituents throughout an organization—that is, all demographics, all geographies, and all cohorts. The ombuds hears about all types of workplace issues, often in real time. The office may receive information around the clock.

In addition, an ombuds has access to most types of information and records collected by the organization. The ombuds typically may speak with anyone in the organization. In addition, an ombuds keeps up to date with rules, regulations, and local customs in the various units of the organization—under circumstances where in modern times this is sometimes a difficult task for other managers.

5. **Expertise.** Ombuds have extensive knowledge, training, and experience in conflict management. Ombuds understand in breadth and depth how things work within their organization and can help their visitors develop and identify options for addressing concerns. In addition, an ombuds focuses full-time on conflict management—in circumstances where almost all other managers are swamped with their own job responsibilities.

6. **An Elegant Solution.** The ability to identify a solution to a problem that provides the most value and least harm to the most stakeholders—accomplished at the least cost—is a source of power that is often overlooked. An ombuds can sometimes piece together bits of information relevant to a particular issue, listen in depth, and over time, to the interests of all who are stakeholders in a situation. Because they are familiar with so many aspects of an organization, an ombuds can sometimes uncover new options for an unexpected and sustainable solution.

7. **Moral Authority or “Referent Power.”** This source of power is premised on principles, faith, status, charisma, and/or likability rather than on laws and policies. It is grounded in a personal ability to gain respect from others, and identification of others with the ombuds or their ideas. This source of power is a perception of constituents and often builds over time. It is a source of power that is sometimes dependent on context. It
may be enhanced by perceptions of an ombuds’ integrity, self-discipline, skills, generosity, fairness, caring, and courage.

8. **Relationship Power.** Relationship power offers influence among colleagues, family, friends, and/or affinity groups. This source of power usually depends on effective interactions with others. These interactions may be deep or apparently fleeting. Trust can build quickly off the subject at hand, so seemingly minor interactions often build trust. The perception of trustworthiness can build indirectly, by an ombuds who builds strong relationships with others who in turn have many of their own relationships. That is, constituents may begin to trust the ombuds indirectly—because someone that *they* deeply trust has referred them to the ombuds or expressed trust in the ombuds.³

9. **Commitment.** The power of commitment is derived from never giving up, from unyielding persistence. Ombuds often work for weeks or months or even years on problems that seem to last forever. Ombuds sometimes work toward solutions for complex problems with multiple cohorts, multiple issues, and different sets of rules, without giving up. Commitment is often important in times of high personnel turnover, where the ombuds keeps following up—thus providing dedication to finding solutions to long-standing concerns.

10. **BATNA, the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement.**⁴ In negotiation theory a BATNA is a fallback position; having a BATNA means having an alternative, a “Plan B,” a “way out.” Ombuds, by their Standards of Practice, are constantly offering options to those who need wisdom and support. One of the most important sources of power for people who feel hopeless and exhausted is to learn that they are *not* trapped—that they have alternatives in life. (In fact, often the most important source of power for a visitor who is dealing with an exceedingly difficult person is a “way out.”)

The ability to help a visitor to develop good options—or even a “least-bad option”—is a major source of power for an ombuds in dealing with both complainants and responders. This can be especially helpful when the ombuds can point out that a potential option is quite reasonable—for example that other people in similar circumstances might have chosen such an option.

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