

Using Operationally Useful Data to Communicate Ombuds Value and Effectiveness

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Why keep data? The answer may be different for every organizational ombuds professional (OO). When considering what data to collect about their work, each OO will wish to learn the interests of their constituents and then try to meet the needs of their visitors, organization, and leadership, as well as their own needs.

In 1973, when I first started working for MIT as an early type of ombuds, my bosses were interested in *operationally useful data*. MIT's President and Chancellor said they would not ask who came to see me, but they were interested in *aggregated* data about the visitors to my office. They normally expected information that would not identify individuals—but, rather, provide general facts to describe where concerns and good ideas came from, for example, by school within the university and job category.

My bosses also asked specific questions: What were “good ideas” they had not heard? Were there any “new” issues? What were the issues that needed immediate attention? How common were these concerns? They also asked for *operationally useful* information about how leadership at all levels could help—and, if necessary, deal—with problems that needed their attention.

So, from the beginning, I collected non-identifiable statistical data about concerns and visitors and about persons perceived to be a problem. And I proactively listened for “good ideas” and “new issues,” as well as for complaints. Originally, I gave only informal reports, in weekly discussions with leadership at all levels, and with various units and affinity groups. In later years my colleagues and I also made a brief annual report.

I also learned other reasons to collect data—from my work, and from OO colleagues. For example, ombuds are sometimes thought “not to have any power” because they do not have management decision-making power. However, the statistical data collected by organizational ombuds (OOs) represent a major source of *informal* power for OOs to help constituents.¹

Data also can demonstrate the OO's value *for* constituents—including the employer. Data can help every OO identify how they can be more effective. Data can also help to show OO expertise in many vital areas of management where AI faces limitations in comparison to humans.²

¹ Mary Rowe, ["Organizational Ombuds' Sources of Power and Influence,"](#) *Journal of the International Ombuds Association* Vol. 16, No. 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024).

² For five such areas, see Isabella Loaiza and Roberto Rigobon, “The EPOCH of AI: Human-Machine

The purpose of this article is to share several ideas about *how and why data matter*—for OO practice and for demonstrating value and effectiveness. What are some current data collection practices? What more might a particular OO consider and why?

Most organizational ombuds keep some non-identifiable statistical data. By International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice, OOs do not keep identifiable case records for their employer or for any other purpose. Best practice also suggests that ombuds should shred or delete their working notes and paper calendars, if any, on a regular basis according to a written office protocol. Beyond these brief points, there is a wide range of practice about OO office data, among OOs in K-12 schools, colleges and universities, corporations, faith-based and health care entities, and at all levels of national and international government agencies.

Most ombuds keep some statistical data about their visitors and about the issues brought in. For issues, some OOs use the IOA database classifications; many OOs add to or reformat those classifications and develop their own issue list for their office database. In addition, some are keeping brief “Friday Checklists” to track major types of concerns encountered each week, including types of risk faced by visitors and the organization, visitor choices of options, and ombuds services and functions. These lists focus more on ombuds work than on visitors—and are designed to protect confidentiality.

Some OOs develop or buy a large database system to keep a wide range of data and to permit useful “issue clumping” and crosstab analysis. As just one example of usefulness, having a wider range of data permits the OO to clump together all the issues based on social and cohort identities. In a large organization, these aggregate clumps can then be cross-tabulated with a) each major constituent group of initial visitors and b) each major constituent group of persons complained against. It is common to discover that *intra-group and peer* conflicts are at least as common as conflicts *across* groups or between supervisor and supervisee. Analysis of such patterns may be useful to leadership, affinity groups, and to colleagues planning training courses.

Custom databases that are online need to be constructed and managed with care to protect the confidentiality of constituents.

Most ombuds report some (non-identifiable) data privately to senior officials and unit heads. Some OOs write public or private annual reports. Some report to relevant unit heads whenever there are non-identifiable data that will help the relevant department or unit. Some report to every senior officer about that officer’s own area on a regular basis. Ombuds who are regular observer-guests in committees or affinity groups may discuss relevant non-identifiable data in meetings.

Some OOs produce significant “systemic reviews” that look into concerns and good ideas with respect to a system in the organization, and some ombuds collect data on specific topics. As discussed further below, examples include: the incidence of *bystanders* among OO visitors, and the characteristics of the OO’s *most serious cases*. Some OOs collect data which permit *analysis of ombuds service*—for example, which units are we reaching, and which units do not use the office? Do we need to do better in offering a “zero-barrier” office? Or do some units just not need the office?

Additional Data Practices Reported by Some Ombuds

1) It is usually a good practice for new OOs to request access to organizational data about what was happening before they started. Many ombuds begin their work at organizations that have collected many years of data about conflicts and conflict management. These data might include complaints about safety problems, concerns about employee and managerial turnover, costs of recruitment and legal staff and settlements, increases in health care costs, conflicts related to social identity, intellectual property fights, etc. Prior conflict management data can be important to the OO in several ways. For one thing, these earlier data will help the OO learn about their organization. And being able to compare to earlier benchmarks—if the OO office can help specific stakeholder groups, reduce injuries, improve morale, support good ideas, and reduce costs—will help OOs demonstrate their effectiveness.

2) Some OOs explicitly look for “new” issues, new aspects of old issues, insufficiently recognized lingering issues, good ideas, and good news. Just one or two data points of this kind may turn out to be of major value to the organization and its constituents.

Information about *trends* is useful for year-to-year comparisons. However, *odd patterns* and *new issues* may be immediately useful throughout the year to many of the stakeholders of an OO. For example, free speech is now a painful topic in many organizations. Concerns about vaccination and full-time returns to the workplace are causing anxiety. In such situations, an ombuds can help assess what is happening in real time. In fact, sharply divisive “new issues” are especially important in OO work, because divisiveness illuminates the importance, for every organization, of having independent, neutral, and confidential ombuds who practice informally—and who thus can help with polarizing issues.

An OO may request that leadership specifically charge them to be on the lookout for information that surprises them, and to look for “new” issues or new aspects of issues. Being asked to look out for new issues may make it easier for the ombuds to discuss new topics—or new manifestations of painful old topics—when they arise, especially if the new topics cause concern. OOs might also welcome instructions to look out for good news.

The “new” topic might be a “good thing,” as when a unit manager or employee comes up with an excellent way of dealing with a vexing issue; good news might include efforts made by a high-tech affinity group that results in successful recruiting in a particular unit.

The “new” issue also might be quite troubling. And very significant. For example, an OO might learn from a visitor in department X, and then from another visitor in faraway department Y, about what could be a new type of attack on the organization’s systems—say, a cyberattack from abroad that left evidence on two unrelated printers.

Being alert to new and insufficiently recognized issues—and good news—is one of the reasons for an OO to ask to be a guest at department meetings, cohort meetings, affinity groups, committees, etc., and to spend significant time out and about, just *listening* to constituents. Finding multiple ways to identify, assess, and communicate about “new” and insufficiently recognized issues and ideas helps an OO to demonstrate effectiveness.

3) Most OOs keep some non-identifiable, descriptive data about individuals and groups who bring concerns and good ideas. An OO may keep non-identifiable data about each visitor—and, also, about visitors who come in groups. These data may include *generic demographic, geographic and other general descriptive information*. (In this context, *geographic* data usually refer to substantial areas of the organization—such as whole divisions or whole schools—in order to protect the identities of visitors. Please see the Appendix for a list of such categories.)

Some OOs track their service to many different stakeholder groups. (See the Appendix for a list of potentially relevant stakeholder groups.) Information about the *breadth of OO services* is useful for analyzing scope of service, for planning outreach, for illuminating the independence and fairness and credibility of the OO office—and for demonstrating value. Demonstrating a wide catchment for important information and wide service to multiple stakeholders helps to differentiate the OO office from others—and thus demonstrate unique service in the conflict management system.

4) Some OOs keep generic data about *persons or groups who were the subject of concern*—in those cases where there *is* a person or group of concern. (Some cases center only on issues rather than on individuals.)

Logging general descriptors about people, if any, who are reported of concern, permits analysis of “which broad cohorts at the organization generate the most concerns.” As an example, review of all concerns about abusive behavior might show that while men are the largest group perceived to harass, they are not the only perceived harassers. Women may equally be shown to be seen as “bullies,” and male-on-male and female-on-female harassment and bullying may need attention.

In sum, being able to track *both* (or all) parties to concerns and complaints—in the aggregate—permits finding people in the organization who may need attention, in their relationships with others. As an important example, most OOs discover that *intra-group* concerns are painful and ubiquitous throughout the organization, in addition to the many conflicts that occur between groups. Peer-to-peer conflicts, especially among managers, are among the costliest conflicts in an organization. Analyses of such concerns may help to illuminate the effectiveness of OOs to various stakeholders.

Having geographic descriptors about constituents who are reported to be of concern permits the OO to track the schools, major bureaus, or divisions in the organization where specific problems are more often perceived to arise. Creating “heat maps” is within OO Standards of Practice if undertaken with great care to safeguard the identities and privacy of visitors and people of concern. As an example, intellectual property or conflict of interest or safety concerns may be common in just one school (or one bureau of an agency, or one division of a corporation)—and thus be an appropriate topic for the OO to take to just one relevant Dean or Director. Locally focused reports to relevant leaders (that scrupulously protect the confidentiality and privacy of all constituents) may help to build trust and demonstrate effectiveness.

There is a serendipitous benefit derived from keeping generic data about people of concern. If OOs keep non-identifiable data about people of concern (as well as data about initial visitors) they are likely to notice a significant number of ombuds cases where there is a concerned visitor, and issues to consider, but *no one is named as an offender*. Identifying and assessing the issues in these cases may be useful in reports back to leadership. For example, an OO might identify serious safety issues that are not specific “conflicts,” in a way that is useful to leadership for strategic planning.

5) Some OOs keep data about the *roles* of visitors and people of concern. As an example, non-identifiable data about *anonymous* visitors, and about *unknown offenders who cannot be identified* may be important in analyzing trust issues—and safety and security issues—in organizational culture.

When OOs can demonstrate that they receive *self-described perpetrators* and *accused constituents*, as initial visitors, it helps to illuminate trust in the OO office and its impartiality.

Some OOs keep non-identifiable data about *groups as visitors*, and about *complaints against groups*. Some keep track of visitors who identify themselves as *bystanders* of unacceptable behavior. Role tracking of this kind is likely to be of most interest to senior leaders with respect to cases that the OO has tagged as Most Serious Cases. (See more on this below.) Demonstrating that the OO receives serious concerns from a very wide catchment, including

anonymous callers, bystanders (and the bystanders of bystanders),³ groups, self-described perpetrators and accused constituents as well as complainants—and supervisors as well as workers—helps to demonstrate the value of the OO.

6) Most OOs track issues. Most OOs track issues, but just naming “issues” in detail may not result in much operationally useful data. As above, tagging issues with the location where they arise may be useful. Analyzing which options get chosen for which issues may also be useful.

Considering Issues and Options Together. Some OOs keep data about which *options they are offering*, for which issues, and which options are *chosen* by which visitors for which issues. Tracking issues and options together is most valuable when the OO keeps data about *all* the issues in a case, and all the options (that the OO knows about) that have been chosen by a visitor. This is because one valuable service of an OO is to be able to deal with complex cases with many issues. For example, the OO may think of different offices and managers to offer as options for different issues brought by a visitor. Tracking the choice of different options is especially important with respect to the Most Serious Cases. (See more about such cases below.)

Where the ombuds tracks multiple issues for each case, crosstab analysis may illuminate issues that appear to be “sentinel” indicators. For example, allegations of harassment or bullying frequently accompany or even trigger coming forward about other serious offenses. People may be more willing to come forward to management about other forms of unacceptable behavior when they feel harassed or bullied.

Informal options may be particularly effective when a visitor does not want anyone to learn of the visit to the OO.⁴ These include a) the option of a “*direct approach*” when the visitor chooses to deal with the issue themselves (after discussion and preparation with the OO); and b) the option when a visitor chooses *identity-free generic action* by the OO in conversations with managers.

As examples of generic action, the OO might suggest a local training program about a topic like unsafe or unacceptable behavior, plagiarism, or conflicts of interest. The ombuds might suggest generic monitoring by HR of illegal behavior like uncompensated overtime or suggest generic spot checks by the Audit Division of expenditures in a specific unit.

Direct approaches and generic options, when effective:

³ For more information, see “Bystanders and the Bystanders of Bystanders,” n.d., <https://mitgmtfaculty.mit.edu/mrowe/bystanders/>.

⁴ Mary Rowe, “[Options to Consider When Complainants and Bystanders are Fearful: A Toolkit for Complaint Handlers, Hesitant Complainants, and Hesitant Bystanders](#),” teaching note (Cambridge, MA: August 2024). (Note: This is a collection of links to several of Rowe’s articles relevant to this topic, including generic options and the direct approach.)

- a) are sometimes the most protective of people with concerns, while supporting the rights of people alleged to be a problem, and
- b) sometimes best support the interests, values, and mission of the organization, and
- c) are often the least costly, and
- d) generic options also may foster improvements in policies, procedures, and structures.

Data about the use of these options may help to demonstrate the value of the OO office.

When direct approaches by visitors and generic options are tried and found *not* to be effective (with respect to specific concerns), it may be important for an OO to include this fact, without disclosing any identities, in reports to leadership.

Much of the work of an OO consists of facilitation, shuttle diplomacy, and mediation—with individuals and sometimes with groups. It can be useful to see which issues are most commonly chosen by visitors for OO intervention.

Tracking the options chosen by visitors (and, if possible, some indication of outcomes if known) can provide aggregate data about the work and skills of an OO. That is, over time, it can be operationally useful to the organization and to the ombuds practitioner to review which functions of the OO have been most effective with which kinds of issues.

It also is useful to track issues and relevant cohorts when visitors choose the option of making a formal complaint. One goal of an OO office is to support *all* the elements of their conflict management system—offering formal options as well as informal services. OOs may wish to be able to demonstrate that they are, in fact, helping visitors to understand all the units in the conflict management system. And an OO may be able to help if they learn that a formal option does not seem to be working well.

Communicating the extent to which visitors choose to contact line management and compliance offices may be valuable for reports to management, to the compliance offices, and to committees and affinity groups who ask for “feedback from the OO.” Analysis of which formal options are chosen for specific issues is also helpful for OO self-evaluations.

7) It can be important for OOs to track their Most Serious Cases (MSCs).⁵

⁵ Mary Rowe, Timothy Hedeon, Jennifer Schneider and Hector Escalante, ["The Most Serious Cases Reported by Organizational Ombuds: Data From Surveys and Interviews"](#) working paper, December 2024.

Early identification, assessment (and sometimes help with the management) of a Most Serious Case may “pay for” the yearly costs of an OO office.

Some OOs have one or more ways to code “seriousness.” For example, they track cases involving multiple complainants and groups. Or they track cases involving multiple issues, those of very long standing, those engendering high costs to constituents, or cases that involve multiple sets of rules and regulations. Or they track cases deemed important to the entire organization. Some OOs designate cases involving illegal or criminal allegations as MSCs. To determine which cases are “most serious,” OOs may also consider potential financial liability, or the time it takes to resolve the case, or cases where there ultimately is a change in an organizational policy or procedure or structure, or cases where the reputation of the organization is at high risk.

Tracking the MSCs can be useful in various ways. The OO can keep track of *how they first heard* about each MSC. If an OO office is hearing about serious cases from a wide swath of the organization—from injured parties, from bystanders and the bystanders of bystanders, from compliance officers and supervisors, and other conflict management offices, and even occasionally by perpetrators—it illustrates the value of the OO to many stakeholders and to the whole conflict management system.

Analyzing the MSC data may help the OO to plan discussions about elements of the MSCs with managers. As an example, take a case where the OO has heard about a Most Serious Case from bystanders. The OO might mention—for example, in relevant discussions with managers about a generic issue such as safety, research integrity, or intellectual property—about “the value added by bystanders.” The OO might then take the opportunity of discussing the importance of managers being receptive to bystanders.⁶

Leadership is sometimes concerned that an OO may “just sit on” vital information. Aggregated and non-identifiable data may illuminate the range of effective options undertaken with Most Serious Cases. It may be useful for leadership to understand this range of options (consonant with IOA Standards of Practice) that the OO has found effective to get vital information to relevant line and staff managers.⁷

It is also useful to the OO office to track the most serious cases over time as part of OO self-evaluations. In addition, where these serious cases are known to administrators—which often happens with the most serious cases—then keeping

⁶ Mary P. Rowe, “Bystanders: ‘See Something, Say Something’ Is Not Enough,” *Alternatives to the High Cost of Litigation* Vol. 39, No. 10 (November 2021): 153-165. (Note: This article is an expansion of Mary Rowe, [“Supporting Bystanders: See Something, Say Something is Not Enough,”](#) MIT Sloan Working Paper 5897-20 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Sloan School of Management, January 2020); and Mary Rowe, [“Helping Hesitant Bystanders Identify Their Options: A Checklist with Examples and Ideas to Consider,”](#) *Journal of the International Ombuds Association*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024).

⁷ See the Most Serious Cases paper, op. cit., for aggregated data reported by many OOs about how they dealt with MSCs.

relevant data may be added to other evidence that the OO office is in fact serving the organization well. Aggregated data about most serious cases can help illuminate the importance to the organization of having an OO who is effective both in protecting sources *and* protecting the mission of the employer.

In sum, data may support aggregate analyses that help to communicate the value of ombuds service that is in accord with the organization's mission and values, and in accord with the IOA Standards of Practice. Data collection may illuminate the value of Ombuds service to many stakeholder groups—including the employer. And, finally, collecting data may also support OOs to talk and write about “what works.”

Appendix: Ideas about Lists for Data Collection

For your main database and your “Friday Checklist”

Who are all your constituents—in addition to the organization itself? How might you categorize your constituents as you think about collecting data about your services? Where are they? Who are they? What roles do they play? What are their jobs? Are they part of your organization’s conflict management system, either formally or informally?

Some of the following categories will be relevant to most ombuds. Ask yourself: Which of the categories below are relevant to your mission and the mission of the organization?⁸ You might collect data on:

- **Geographics of your constituents, as relevant to the “organizational chart”**

This typically involves only major units of the organization, such as regional locations, bureaus, divisions, or schools.

- **Demographics and ranks of individuals, as relevant to the organization**

- **Roles of those who bring concerns and good ideas, such as:**

Individual initial visitors/inquirers with concerns or ideas

Groups of visitors/inquirers with a concern or idea

Those complained against and respondents

Visitors/inquirers who complain symmetrically about the other party (i.e., counter complainers)

Bystanders and peers who come in with a concern or as witnesses (including bystanders of bystanders)

Anonymous visitors/inquirers, as individuals or groups,

Responders who are helping deal with a concern or good ideas

- **Cohorts as relevant to your caseload**

These could include:

Affinity Groups

Alumni/ae

Compliance officers and Human Services offices (see sublist below)

Consultants

⁸ Keep in mind the organizational mission, vision, and core values statements relevant to your reports as you design and use your database and Friday Checklist. It may help to mention major elements of these statements in your reports.

Contractors
Customers
Board members
Applicants for employment
Employees
Faculty
Families of those in the organization
Former employees
Instructors
Line managers
Leadership
Legal counsel
Neighbors of the organization
Partners of the organization
Postdocs
Retirees
Senior managers
Staff
Staff supervisors and managers
Applicants for admission as students
Students: undergraduate, graduate, part-time, full-time, returning
Student employees
Trainees
Vendors
Visitors

- **Compliance Offices and Human Services as relevant**

These may include:

Animal Care
Audit
Counsel
Disabilities
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging
Employee Assistance
Environmental Hazards/Waste Hazards
Equal Opportunity (Human Rights, Discrimination, Harassment)
Ethics
Faculty Senate
Fitness for Duty
Human Resources/Industrial Relations
Human Subjects Committees
Inspection/Inspectors
General Intellectual Property/Patents/Copyrights
Medical Departments/Nursing Stations
Mortality/Morbidity

Patient Welfare
Quality Assurance
Risk Management
Safety
Security/Campus Police/Police
Staff Association
Union Officials