Identifying and Communicating the Value of Ombuds Functions and Talents: Proposals for Consideration

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Abstract

The organizational ombuds (OO) profession is relatively new—and unusual. It is spreading steadily around the world but not well understood. The quartet of International Ombuds Association Standards of Practice (IOA SoP) for the profession is unique, which means that OO practice needs detailed explanation. Employers, conflict managers, human services practitioners, negotiation experts—and would-be ombuds—often ask for more details about how ombuds practice. However, there are unusual challenges in collecting data about ombuds practice. Many commonplace methods of evaluation do not comply with the four pillars of IOA SoP: confidentiality, independence, neutrality/impartiality, and informality. Ombuds communicate about the identities of those they serve (their "visitors") only in rare emergencies, or with explicit permission and at their own discretion. Much (although not all) of what is known about ombuds practice is self-reported because of the IOA SoP. In addition, ombuds practice is sui generis, depending on the practitioner and the context. There is no generally accepted way to keep and communicate metrics about the value and effectiveness of ombuds functions and talents. Each ombuds practitioner needs to identify, assess, and communicate how they personally add value and must do so in ways consonant with the IOA SoP. This article adds to current brainstorming among organizational ombuds (OOs) and other conflict management professionals about collecting data and communicating the value and effectiveness of ombuds functions and talents in ways consonant with the IOA SoP.

Keywords: organizational ombuds, ombuds value and effectiveness, ombuds functions and talents, International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice

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The goal of this article is to add to current brainstorming (Rowe et al., 2026a) among organizational ombuds (OOs) and other professionals in conflict management about the value and effectiveness of ombuds practice. Some ideas in this paper may be found relevant to ombuds office databases about cases, issues reviewed, and visitors; however, this article focuses on ombuds functions and talents.

Why is this brainstorming needed? The organizational ombuds (OO) profession is relatively new—and unusual. It is spreading steadily around the world but not well understood. The quartet of International Ombuds Association Standards of Practice (IOA SoP) for the profession is unique (International Ombuds Association, n.d.), which means that OO practice needs detailed explanation. There are unusual challenges in assessing the value of ombuds practice. Many commonplace methods of evaluation do not comply with the four basic components of the IOA Standards: confidentiality, independence, neutrality/impartiality, and informality. Ombuds communicate about the identities of those they serve (their "visitors") only in rare emergencies, or with explicit permission and at their own discretion. Many track and discuss such points as the number of cases, issues, and hours spent, and the number of visitors and contacts. However, it is not common to track or keep reportable metrics about the specific functions that are performed and the talents that are used—which are among the very characteristics of ombuds practice that many people would like to understand. The IOA SoP also mean that much (although not all) of what is known about ombuds practice is, and must be, self-reported. In addition, ombuds practice is sui generis, depending on the practitioner and the context. The span of informal OO functions, constituencies, employment arrangements (online

and in person), sectors, locations, and organizational missions is wide. There is no generally accepted way to keep and communicate metrics about the value and effectiveness of ombuds functions and talents. Therefore, each ombuds practitioner needs to identify, assess, and communicate how they personally add value, and to do so in ways consonant with the IOA SOP.

Many complex difficulties in identifying, collecting, and assessing data about ombuds work seem likely to have inhibited understanding the value of ombuds practice. We focus therefore on identifying, collecting, keeping, and communicating about data in ways that are consonant with IOA Standards. The standard of confidentiality is of special concern in these days of swiftly increasing challenges to cybersecurity and data security (Stanford University Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, 2026; Zax, 2025).

We now turn to ideas that each ombuds might consider for collecting and communicating data about their specific functions and talents. We then offer some examples of ombuds value where these data collection ideas may be useful.

The First Complexity: Whose Opinions Matter?

The concept of "determining OO value" is itself complex: Whose judgment matters? Among those most *directly* affected by an ombuds office are its constituents (those for whom the office is available) and its "visitors" (those who engage with the office on any side of a discussion), and the organizational leadership to whom the ombuds reports and provides upward feedback. Among those *indirectly* affected are many organizational managers with whom the ombuds corresponds, often to consult on anonymized concerns, issues, or good ideas. Each of these many stakeholders may, in turn, assess the value of an ombuds in different ways. As only a few examples, is the ombuds appropriately cognizant of the mission and norms of the organization? Is the ombuds mitigating organizational risks and the organizational costs of

conflict? Reducing the risks experienced by visitors about coming forward about concerns and ideas? Is the ombuds contributing to fair decision-making? Surfacing good ideas for organizational systems? Being perceived by visitors as insightful, kind, and effective? Methods for assessing the value of ombuds functions and talents need to consider many stakeholders, to the extent possible.

How do ombuds themselves identify the value of their functions and talents?

Ideas presented in this article were derived from the experience and judgment of four experienced ombuds and their decade of work together in conducting surveys and interviews of colleagues through the IOA. This article was adapted from several working papers (Rowe et al., 2026a), which were meant to inspire more of the brainstorming that organizational ombuds need at this point in the profession's development. We hope that readers will offer further examples of OO value to the profession and additional ways to identify, collect, and communicate data in ways consonant with IOA Standards.

If organizations are to continue establishing and maintaining organizational ombuds offices, operationally useful details about the value and effectiveness of ombuds practice are essential. Many employers and organizational members have little idea about the functions and talents of an organizational ombuds—and would welcome metrics and stories with operationally useful information. Employers, conflict managers, human services practitioners, negotiation experts—and would-be ombuds—often ask for more details about how ombuds practice.

The authors believe that an organizational ombuds office can help its constituents and organizational systems to function more happily, at lower cost. We believe that the very existence of the office can help organizations. We believe that organizational ombuds add significant value to both visitors and organizations because of the unique quartet of International

Ombuds Association Standards of Practice—confidentiality, independence, impartiality/neutrality, and informality (Rowe & MacAllister, 2025)—and because of distinctive ombuds functions and skills.

Why Is Determining Ombuds Value So Difficult?

Ombuds practice is slowly but notably expanding around the world. However, it is difficult even for ombuds to track the value of their confidential services. There are many reasons why. The concept of Key Performance Indicators is not appropriate for the ombuds profession. Ombuds have no universally accepted data collection techniques that safeguard confidentiality, ombuds independence, ombuds impartiality, and informality, in the face of frequent issues like mandatory reporting, subpoenas, cyber-insecurity and hacking (Rowe et al., 2026b). There is no agreed-upon scientific method for evaluating ombuds practice (Rowe, 2010). Because the IOA Standards require the highest possible protection for visitor anonymity and records confidentiality, there are few, if any, recordings or reviewable records of ombuds practice to study.

Most ombuds cases involve or affect at least one other person—in addition to the visitor who brings an issue or good idea to the ombuds office. The ombuds may or may not meet others involved in or affected by a case. The outcomes of many cases may not be apparent for days or months or even years. The outcomes may have several or many facets, both material and emotional. People who were not directly involved may be affected. Ombuds—on their own, by themselves—very rarely determine *any* case outcomes; rather, ombuds endeavor to offer options for the choice of their visitors. In addition, “fixing things” and/or taking advantage of “good ideas” is usually in the hands of others (including the visitors) involved in the options that have been chosen by the visitors. In sum, ombuds may or may not know what happens next when a

visitor leaves the ombuds office. And, if ombuds *do* learn "what happened next"—whether wonderful or not wonderful—they are still bound by confidentiality unless they have permission to speak.

Sometimes ombuds do know that they have made a major difference, and sometimes in a way that is publicly known—for example when they have worked on what is called a "Most Serious Case" (Rowe et al., 2024b). The authors of this article have been told of dozens of such cases. There was an ombuds who helped settle dozens of class action cases in their first year in the job. Others have helped their organizations create or improve sorely needed policies or procedures. Still others have helped scientific teams to work together, where a serious dispute has been resolved—or a breakthrough has occurred almost immediately. Some ombuds have been publicly credited by their organizations for improved morale and engagement, reduced legal costs, fewer damaging conflicts of interest, fewer patent fights, fewer team and unit conflicts, support to visitors in a time of polarization, and/or fewer external complaints. Some OOs have received major organizational awards. Occasionally an ombuds helps to save a life or prevent serious injury or another disastrous outcome. Sometimes an ombuds is known to have helped to prevent or mitigate major risks to the organization and its people. Some ombuds routinely carry high caseloads over the years, and the numbers alone are seen as an indicator of effectiveness.

Many ombuds keep an office database to gather anonymized information that is usually about the kinds of issues that are brought to the office, as well as limited information about the numbers and job categories of visitors and, sometimes, about the options that visitors have chosen. Some ombuds do brief satisfaction surveys. For outcomes, the ombuds *profession* has

only a little, aggregated, self-reported data collected in the IOA Practice Survey (Rowe et al., 2024a).

Operationally based metrics about the *functions* of ombuds are hard to find. This article therefore focuses on possible methods for each ombuds to assess their functions and talents and then offers examples of OO value and effectiveness that might be evaluated by these methods.

Keeping Ombuds Practice Consistent with IOA Standards of Practice

Cybersecurity is changing very fast and likely will continue to be an issue for everyone who keeps data. Each ombuds may need to consult repeatedly with experts on safeguarding their own practices. In some countries this may include attention to legal orders or authorities (see, e.g., Wolford, n.d.) Since it is becoming apparent (McMillan, 2026; Mims, 2026) that all digitized data online are potentially vulnerable to hacking, theft, alteration and other misuse, as well as possible subpoenas, we begin with ideas about collecting data in ways consonant with the IOA SoP:

- On a regular basis, review all the devices, systems, tools and apps, use of the cloud, and use of interpreters and translators and experts, for compliance with IOA SoP, and relevant legal requirements (for example, Wolford, n.d.). If possible, include ombuds office staff in the review (Gu, 2025; Ramos, 2025).
- In this context, design and review all data collection methods, report preparation, and communication methods for protection of ombuds confidentiality, independence, informality, and likely perceptions of impartiality and neutrality.
- De-identify, collect, and keep only operationally useful information, and only information that would not identify visitors if it were lost, stolen, hacked, or subpoenaed.

- As appropriate, shred and dispose of notes and data, on a regular basis, according to an office protocol.

Some Useful Methods to Consider

Methods for each ombuds to discuss with their local experts (Rowe et al., 2026a) include masking, or not keeping, the dates of records; using methods whenever possible that focus on OO functions and talents rather than visitors; keeping only very general descriptors of issues, the demographics and locations of visitors and cases; and using calendars, surveys, and storage and communications methods that are specifically designed and reviewed every few months for cybersecurity.

For example, one can store anonymized data on a designated computer that is never online and is unlocked only by the ombuds. One can use methods that anonymize each of the separate steps in any sequence of steps required to collect, assess, analyze, and communicate data. One should take care that data collected/used in one database cannot easily by collated together with data collected/used in a different database in a way that permits identification of visitors. (As one example, masking the dates of data acquisition, and not keeping dates in relevant databases, are ways to make it hard to collate databases together.)

With these thoughts in mind, this article focuses on collecting data, on the functions and talents that each ombuds uses, with methods that are kept separate from any other ombuds office database.

Undated, or Date-masked, Checklists and Paper Notes (aides-mémoires) to Track Functions and Talents

Some ombuds are experimenting with undated weekly checklists to gather organizationally useful data about OO functions and talents (Rowe & Hedeen, 2026; Rowe,

2026). Weekly checklists take very little time (after the time that is spent in constructing the lists). One simply reads through the list once a week and makes checks on an undated checklist. (For a small prototype of such a checklist, see "A Simple Weekly Checklist Template (with no date or a masked date)" in the Appendix.)

The OO checks off, from these detailed lists, any functions they performed that week in any case, along with generic attributes of the week's cases that are relevant to the interests of the organization and the visitor (s). Weekly checklists use masked dates of input or no dates. If stolen or subpoenaed, the checklists do not easily identify specific cases, since there is no date of entry and the data refer to weekly practice rather than to specific visitors. Aggregation of checklist data over time provides operationally useful data about the OO's functions and talents.

Some OOs keep *undated paper and pencil notes* (aides-mémoires) sequestered privately in a safe place. They provide a way for the OO to keep their thoughts and questions, and even some perceptions of a few case outcomes, without identifiers. In a large office these notes can be used, as relevant, in office discussions; for example, they could help different members of the ombuds office to track the same questions. Notes of this kind, used over time, can collect operationally useful data, and can illuminate specific functions and talents in each ombuds practice. Ombuds should shred paper and pencil notes, as appropriate, on a regular basis.

Collecting Feedback from Others

Ombuds can collect feedback, where relevant, about their functions and talents, and anonymize and de-identify the feedback when appropriate. For example, the ombuds can systematically collect comments from notes, mail and emails, commendations, evaluations, awards, reports, and articles mentioning the office functions and the ombuds' skills. Some ombuds have devised IOA SoP compliant methods of surveying "visitors" who have used their

office, and/or all organizational constituents. Some ombuds ask to be included in routine organizational surveys. Some ombuds survey their complaint system partners (like Ethics and HR), operational managers, heads of student services, major affinity groups, and others for feedback.

Communicating Data About the Value of Ombuds Functions and Talents

Ombuds can use "functions and talents" data and examples in many ways to illuminate their service. They may use information from other sources, including their office database, the International Ombuds Association Practice Surveys, the IOA Blog, the Ombudsblog, other resources published by the IOA (for example, Burton & Keashly, 2025), and from articles and books in the IOA bibliography of relevant publications (Escalante & Rowe, 2026). They may use these data, and local (anonymized) examples, in informal contacts with leadership, unit managers, managers within their organization's conflict management system, and affinity groups—and in community discussions throughout the year. Some may communicate these sources of value through the OO office website, office reports, organizational websites, newsletters, organizational lists of resources, and posters in-house. Some ombuds discuss the value of their functions and talents in podcasts, presentations, interviews, letters, and videos, on their own and with colleagues, as well as in their own research and writing and teaching about OO practice.

Including a Focus on Specialized Functions and Talents

Each ombuds may want to collect and communicate data about specific and perhaps unusual aspects of their own practice. Ombuds often have specialty skills and talents that are much in demand. Detailed data about these ombuds' specialty services can be especially important in illuminating value. Some ombuds offer an extraordinary panorama of training

programs, or of (well-attended and well-received) talking and listening circles in time of tension. Some are regularly in demand to teach managers how to listen to complainants, how to support neurodiverse populations, how to help mentors and mentees, how to help scientific colleagues plan to work together, or how to train and support coworkers who will work together across the globe entirely online. Some regularly teach elements of negotiation theory relevant to the mission of the organization. Some are specialists in conflict management system design and practice and contribute to planning organizational systems.

Ombuds who spend much of their time in mediating (AI & Rowe, 2026a, 2026b), or in shuttle diplomacy or with specific groups, can usually describe the subsets of functions and skills they use. In some ombuds offices, each of these subsets may, if they are common, deserve its own checklist to track—each week—the functions and skills that were used (e.g., dorm group mediations, intellectual property mediations, international mediations using interpreters).

Ombuds who focus closely on their service in support of fairness might wish to track this work on checklists, and to collect feedback on their work on this topic (Papica, 2011). Ombuds who regularly offer specific skills often hear back from participants who provide warm thanks (and stories about good outcomes) that may be appropriate for collection. Some ombuds may have relatively unusual visitors (e.g., bystanders, self-described offenders, resource people in other offices in the organization, donors, family members of people affiliated with the organization, former visitors who return simply to thank the ombuds, visitors who come to thank the ombuds for a systemic improvement that helped them and others) who reflect the breadth as well as the value of service from the ombuds. Communicating any feedback that illustrates the depth and breadth of an ombuds practice may help to illuminate the value of an ombuds.

Some Examples of Ombuds Value and Effectiveness and Ways to Collect Data

Voice and a "humanized" Workplace Climate

The existence of an ombuds office can be a signal that the organization supports the concept of voice for individuals and of the importance of the individuals who exist and work in a bureaucracy (Green, 2026). Ombuds exemplify this value through listening with care to concerns and good ideas from each constituent (and each group) that contacts the office. Ombuds sometimes are told that they have contributed to retention and morale just by "providing a hearing" for the voice and feelings of a visitor. That ombuds listen and exemplify listening to every visitor—with delightful people and when dealing with difficult superstars and others—can add significant value across the organization. If the concept of "speaking up" is important to the mission in the organization, some specific examples of the ombuds' contribution to voice and listening can be collected by undated paper and pencil. For example, ombuds' notes could include: "helped employee affinity groups to learn how to offer effective suggestions to management;" "asked graduate student groups for ideas to mitigate red tape in filing theses"; or "led a series of discussions with managers about listening to 'people you find difficult.'"

Fair Process

An ombuds office can be a signal, by its very existence, that the organization respects fair processes, especially if the office is promoted by leadership and other resources. Ombuds endeavor to model procedural fairness in every interaction. They sometimes hear that their emphasis on fair processes has built trust in their own office and increased trust in formal channels. An article by Gerald R. Papica discusses this idea in illustrative detail. Papica includes several practices that could be tracked by an ombuds with private pencil and paper notes. He also

provides an "Ombudsman Fairness Checklist" (Papica, 2011) that could be used as part of a weekly checklist in an organization where fairness is part of the mission.

Safety, Accessibility, Credibility, Fairness, and Choice

Ombuds that practice to the IOA SoP seek to provide a "zero-barrier" (safe, accessible, fair, and credible) ombuds office. Ombuds help to develop options and a choice of options for visitors, in alignment with research on the inherent value for many people of having both options and choice (Rowe, 1993). OOs often are told that they are "the first" contact made by a visitor—or told that the visitor "would not have brought the given concern or good idea to any other office or manager," or told that "a friend told me I could trust you." This point is especially important for organizations that have strong "zero-tolerance" policies, since one of the documented effects of such policies is that some people are afraid of bad outcomes if they speak up about concerns and good ideas (Rowe & Bendersky, 2003). This point is also particularly important with respect to bystanders as visitors, and to the bystanders of bystanders as visitors, who sometimes are crucial in getting vital information to management in a timely way (Rowe, n.d., Rowe, M. 2023–2024a.). Constituent comments and gratitude about the importance of a zero-barrier office can be collected from visitor comments, articles, and surveys. These data are sometimes especially telling if they have come from visitors who found the office in different ways—for example, coming in from referrals by other constituents or resource offices. Breadth of service by itself shows value.

Communicating Information

An ombuds office provides and receives much-needed information, to and from visitors. Ombuds who receive everyone, at every level and in every role and unit and for every type of work-related concern, have a wide catchment for information. Some ombuds have significant

breadth and depth of understanding throughout an organization and offer corresponding value in their wisdom about issues that arise.

Ombuds practice often includes wide knowledge of rules, laws, and norms, and how the organization works in different ways in different units. Over time an ombuds acquires mission-critical, safety-critical, ethics-related, productivity-related, and morale-related wisdom. Ombuds frequently realize, during an office discussion, the need to help visitors learn of rules, norms, or events that need to be understood or considered. By the same token, ombuds often learn that visitors have information that they wish could get safely (perhaps anonymously) to management. Visits with the ombuds sometimes turn out to be both effective and brief, as crucial information is shared. Ombuds can track "providing information" and "accepting information"—without identifying data—on an undated checklist. One ombuds, who was particularly attuned to the importance of just accepting, offering, and discussing crucial information, kept undated paper and pencil notes of "cases resolved at intake—by information." Over a year, the information thus collected helped to support improvement in a policy—and to illuminate the value of the OO office.

Risk Mitigation of Several Types of Risk—and Early Warnings/alerts

An ombuds can often help visitors deal safely with the multitude of risks that visitors may perceive in speaking up (Rowe, 2009). Risk mitigation for visitors is a bedrock source of OO value. Perceptions and feelings about risks often are major barriers to coming forward or speaking up. As Amy Edmondson (Edmondson, 2026) has said, "Holding back is second nature. The key is helping people navigate uncertainty." Some visitors feel shame and many have multiple fears. "Riskiness" barriers may exist even when visitors have ideas that would benefit the organization in direct and indirect ways. In fact, mitigating risks felt by visitors is often

essential in helping the organization to manage its own risks when visitors have information that would benefit the organization. Delivering respect, affirming the dignity of everyone with whom the ombuds has contact, and providing options with care for the feelings of visitors are all major sources of ombuds value. In private notes and in surveys, ombuds sometimes get appreciative feedback about their kindness or care; thanks for being treated with respect; and specific thanks for addressing a visitor's pain or fear. These comments can be de-identified and collected as data about helping visitors to deal with risks.

Organizations also face many risks, and visitors often bring information that organizations need. Ombuds can almost always find ways (Rowe et al., 2024b)—that are consonant with very strict protection of visitor identity, visitor choice of options, and the IOA SoP—to help in surfacing needed information to management. This is true with respect to a wide variety of *financial, operational, and reputational* risks to the organization. And this is true with an underestimated arena of risk mitigation in which ombuds excel, which is to help visitors to help the organization with *strategic* risk mitigation—by offering good ideas to prevent the organization from "missing out." The types of risks reported by visitor—and those perceived by the ombuds as potential risks for the organization—are easily tracked on an undated weekly checklist …and usually much appreciated by leadership.

Time to Listen and Discern (Floyd et al., 2025)

Ombuds focus on listening and are usually able to give concerns the time that is needed and some of the care that visitors need. OOs can help the organization save on costs by helping sort out concerns for which managers (or coworkers or fellow students) may not have time; ombuds are often efficient and effective at discernment. As noted above, OOs are often effective in dealing with fear, pain, grief, and rage, with kindness and respect for the dignity of everyone

involved in a case. Ombuds may offer multiple appointments, especially in complex cases, to provide time to deal with emotions, seek important facts, or review options sequentially in different parts of a case. Ombuds and visitor each may take the time to muse and ponder and consult with other resources, during or outside of a visit—all while safeguarding the confidentiality of visitors.

OOs may be able to locate resources for the visitor in both common and unusual cases. And OOs may even find unique resources, or unique time frames for action, to help with unusual cases. OOs may suggest follow-up appointments to offer time for a visitor to "check in again"—for example, if the ombuds wonders if there has been a hidden agenda that a visitor might want to explore—or to hear more about the visitor's having consulted other resources, or to hear the outcome of a visitor's choice of options. An undated weekly checklist can track each week if there was any case where an "an option was accepted," and, especially, if "an unusual resource or option was accepted."

Listening to Constituents from Every Role and Status

One reason that ombuds frequently learn information that is important to organizational risk management and organizational systems is that they hear from many different constituents in the organization. Most ombuds listen to all roles in the organization, including, for example, bystanders, bystanders of bystanders (Rowe, n.d.), groups and teams, anonymous callers, distinguished guests, donors, accused persons, and self-described wrongdoers.

With anonymous callers, an ombuds can sometimes listen at length and learn more information than a hotline. Bystanders, and the bystanders of bystanders, are often the first—and occasionally the most important—source of information about the most serious cases that ombuds handle. Group work (within and between groups) is especially effective in many

organizations that depend on teams, collaborations, and affinity group communications. Ombuds sometimes develop a highly appreciated specialty of expertise with groups and teams at every level in an organization. Ombuds can offer distinctive value to groups through shuttle diplomacy and through caucusing, especially in complex situations. Working with accused persons and self-described wrongdoers may help to illustrate an organization's commitment to fair process.

The breadth of "listening" of ombuds can be illustrated by ticking off the roles of visitors, and "work with group(s) or team(s)," on an undated weekly checklist.

Enterprise-wide Reach: for New Issues, Good Ideas, and Pattern Detection

As noted above, an ombuds may be the only office in the organization that can hear any work-related issue, from all persons, in all ranks and roles, in all units in their designated constituency. An experienced, in-house ombuds can help an organization with its transactive memory systems, helping to build dynamic capabilities. (Argote & Ren, 2012). These "capabilities allow firms to sense, seize and reconfigure their resources in response to opportunities and threats within their environments" (Mushangai, 2023, p. 1).

Working throughout the organization sometimes helps the ombuds identify new issues and patterns quickly, to the benefit of all constituents and the organization. The ombuds may hear concerns early on, and act as an early warning system for new issues, in ways that prevent further damage. The ombuds may hear half-baked but excellent ideas early on and be able to help in their development. An ombuds may also be able to react early in the game to discourage unethical and illegal actions. Ombuds can proactively get out of the office and listen widely, to help in understanding if a new issue is going to blossom into a pattern, if an old issue is becoming complex—or if a good idea might have wide utility. "New issues" and "good ideas" can be ticked off on an undated checklist—so, also, can "reporting a pattern."

Of special importance, the ombuds might also use the undated checklist to note if any case that week had relevance for a larger part of the organization than just the individuals involved. (For example, the checklist might record if any case that week had relevance, respectively, to a group, unit, division, system, or to the whole organization or even to others outside the organization.)

Outward Feedback and Upward Feedback, Escalation When Appropriate, and Efficiency in Emergencies

Many ombuds learn to be listening and casually communicating throughout the day, in ways consistent with IOA SoP, about concerns and good ideas (Conger, 2025). This happens in the halls, in meetings, before and after presentations, or with constituents getting to work. Most ombuds can provide upward feedback, in ways consistent with IOA SoP, efficiently and effectively, to every level of supervision and management (Rowe et al., 2024c). An ombuds can be very efficient in emergencies; most organizational ombuds can communicate swiftly with leadership, and if necessary, with multiple relevant managers. Functions like upward feedback can be ticked off on an undated checklist: “communication with a relevant manager,” or “communication with leadership.” Urgent actions, and emergency action, might be mentioned in an undated paper and pencil note.

Confidential, Independent, Informal, and Impartial Third-party Processes

An ombuds can provide impartial and confidential shuttle diplomacy, facilitation, coaching, and mediation. A full-time ombuds may consult weekly with visitors of every rank—and is often a catalyst in helping to resolve thorny issues. These informal processes allow parties to develop and explore options, and work to repair and build relationships, without the rigidity, visibility, or cost of formal procedures. Some OOs function as facilitators for informal

committees that do not keep records or recordings, or for ad hoc meetings where the organization or an affinity group asks them to be a neutral convenor. (Ombuds—in agreeing to facilitate when asked—may ask for an agreement that they will never be asked for information about the meeting.) Third-party functions performed each week can be ticked off on an undated checklist each week.

Each of these third-party functions has distinctive subspecialties, which in some practices might warrant separation on the ombuds' list of services. Mediation and shuttle diplomacy are rare for some ombuds, who might then treat the two functions as one item. At the other end of the spectrum are ombuds whose mediation services are very frequent and varied. (See, for example, AI & Rowe, 2026a.) As noted above, each subtype might then be a separate item on an undated weekly checklist.

Strengthening the Conflict Management System (CMS)

As noted above, ombuds offer and provide a portfolio of informal conflict-management functions. When relevant to a case, ombuds also discuss formal options with constituents, thus offering yet more possibilities to visitors, while also supporting the organization's conflict management system (CMS) (Rowe, 2009). An ombuds frequently discusses formal channels in depth with visitors and may suggest other subject-matter resources and support services. An OO can track the number of options offered on an undated checklist each week. The OO can also provide occasional, informal design input for the CMS, including gap analysis, mapping of options chosen by visitors, and informal ideas that can make the CMS better coordinated and user-friendly. Specialty services like this might be mentioned in undated paper and pencil notes.

Leadership Coaching and Decision Quality

An ombuds can strengthen leadership capability by serving as a confidential thought partner and coach for supervisors, helping them analyze conflicts, practice difficult conversations, inspire good new ideas, and improve people skills. An ombuds can help improve decision quality at senior levels by integrating qualitative, cross-cutting data patterns and "weak signals" into strategy discussions and governance deliberations. An ombuds may be able to inspire leadership to portray caring and genuine "humanization"—by helping leaders to understand the emotional effects of their communications. Specialty service like this can be captured in a generic way on an undated weekly checklist or in undated paper and pencil notes.

Building Conflict Competence Across the System

Ombuds service can enhance conflict competence across the organization—demonstrating facilitation, shuttle diplomacy, mediation, coaching, role-playing, skills-building, and modeling respectful interactions and interest-based problem solving. These functions, over time, may reduce conflict costs and increase collaboration. That is, these common services help to address specific issues and may help build conflict-management competence. Repeated exposure to ombuds-style analysis—discerning interests, clarifying issues, and helping to develop options—can improve employees' and managers' problem-solving, communication, and relationship-management skills. Data about effects on the organizational culture may sometimes be captured in articles, surveys, and feedback from visitors and others.

Generic Options (which Help Constituents and Support Organizational Systems)

An ombuds can offer generic options (Rowe, 2023–2024b) that address concerns in ways that shield the identity of a visitor, if the visitor requests anonymity. Generic options are an organizational systems approach that can powerfully strengthen the organization's CMS and

operating systems while addressing specific concerns on a confidential basis. Some generic options have wide significance and result in major benefits for the organization and visitors. (As an example, if a frightened support staff person reports not being paid for overtime, the ombuds might ask for a unit-wide review of hours and overtime that catches the issue but does not expose an individual.) Generic options are one of the highest-benefit and lowest-cost ways to deal with serious issues and good ideas, especially in the frequent cases where visitors are afraid. The simple fact of the use of generic options can be tracked on an undated weekly checklist.

Occasionally the ombuds may facilitate an improvement in policies or procedures or organizational structures—a service that might be captured in an undated note—and thank you notes on service of this kind can sometimes be collected.

Lowest-level, Self-managed Resolution

Ombuds frequently help to see concerns and good ideas addressed at the lowest possible level—for example, by visitors on their own. Sometimes this also means that a visitor will learn how to help prevent, mitigate, and manage difficulties in the future—and to discuss conflict management and good ideas with others. This may be especially important with respect to powerful bystanders—who sometimes learn from a single case to offer, thereafter, continuous strength in building community around issues like safety, mentoring, and listening (Rowe, 2025). Cases where the ombuds sees only an initial visitor—who then handles their issue on their own—are easily tracked on an undated weekly checklist. One ombuds tallied the fact that that in one year more than a third of all complainants reported having successfully handled their concerns on their own, after having consulted the ombuds.

Relationships and Organizational Intelligence

Working throughout the organization helps the ombuds build relationships with managers, group leaders, all levels of staff or students and postdocs, and affinity groups. An experienced ombuds can help leadership understand how different units, ranks, and roles will be enthusiastic—or concerned—about organization-wide proposals or changes. Tracking this kind of consulting (e.g., consultation with a supervisor or manager or affinity group chair) can be done on an undated weekly checklist.

Handling Complex "multi-multi" Issues

An ombuds can deal with multi-generational, multi-issue, multi-person, multi-unit, multiple-emotion cases that arise under multiple rules and norms. Ombuds can support multiple managerial decision-makers and affinity groups in discerning solutions for complex situations. They can offer continued support over time. Working with these "multi-multi" situations may be easier for an ombuds than for offices that (appropriately) focus only on specific issues or specific cohorts in the organization. Tracking "multi-multi cases" can be done on an undated weekly checklist. Collecting data this way over time may contribute to high-level planning in an organization. "Multi-multi" cases are sometimes of such importance that an ombuds may be able to make a major contribution just by analyzing all the parameters of a case, or series of such cases, and communicating that complexity with leadership in ways consistent with IOA SoP.

Addressing "ill-fitting" Concerns

An ombuds can deal informally with costly concerns that do not easily fit into the purview of compliance offices, such as serious misunderstandings, personal matters, or idiosyncratic interests that might cause a top performer or someone with rare talents to quit. Addressing costly, "ill-fitting" concerns can support both constituents and the organization in

significant ways. Alerting a visitor—in a timely way—to a potentially serious conflict of interest may prevent mistakes. Supporting a visitor to discuss a good idea—with all the managers who care about the issues that are involved—may help a good idea to blossom. Helping a senior manager prepare for recruiting or discussing a misunderstanding—with an eccentric or easily offended or ill-prepared superstar or donor—may make all the difference in the outcome. "Ill-fitting" concerns can be a generic item on an undated weekly checklist.

Systemic Reviews and Learning Over Time

Ombuds have wide access to data, prior studies, and reports. Many OOs do systemic reviews, including informal reviews (consistent with IOA Standards of Practice) for leadership, and can often help deal with concerns that keep popping up in different ways over time, or a systemic analysis of an important facet of a complicated set of issues. The fact of working on or submitting a review can be checked off on an undated weekly checklist.

Listening Circles, Various Trainings, and Many Ombuds-specialty Services

An ombuds may offer talking circles in times of stress, grief, and polarization. Ombuds offices often offer trainings for various cohorts and affinity groups—and on specific topics on request—including active listening, training managers how to listen to bystanders, preparation for working on a team and team communication, dealing with loss, dealing with public issues when views are highly polarized, dealing with neurodiversity, offering a sense of joy, preparation for performance reviews, and colleague-to-colleague collaboration skills. Many ombuds have specific skills and expertise with specific cohorts in the organization. These services are usually easily tracked by on an undated weekly checklist. Some ombuds have a happy reputation for building community (with specialty services) that is seen as a major source of value to an organization.

Rumor Management

An ombuds office can sometimes pick up on ill-founded rumors and find options for preventing or dealing with such rumors. By quietly checking facts, clarifying misunderstandings, and offering correct facts and relevant coaching, the ombuds can reduce harm and costs caused by misinformation. Services of this kind might be tallied on an undated paper and pencil note, if there are several or many in a particular year.

Compliance and External Scrutiny

The existence of an ombuds office may help to protect an organization under the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines or similar laws in other jurisdictions and countries, at a time of government inquiry, as an indication of commitment to following the law. The office's role in fostering lawful, ethical behavior can be part of a broader demonstration of organizational due diligence. Having an ombuds office maybe helpful in an institution's accreditation reports and the fact of inclusion can be captured in a note.

Probable (average) Cost-per-case Savings for the Organization, by Comparison with Formal Alternatives

The authors' AI search in 2026 did not show methodologically sound, cost-per-case comparisons among ombuds and HR and legal professionals, let alone benefits per case. There are multiple reasons why conducting accurate cost/benefit comparisons, even of direct costs, is difficult. (See, for example, Joint Inspection Unit, 2015.) Widespread dispute resolution literature on this topic bends to the belief that, on average, informal case resolution costs less than formal processes and is found to be more satisfactory for those involved. (As just one example, see Canadian Grain Commission, 2022.) Beyond this point, helpful comparisons are hard to make. Some ombuds have tracked cases and/or specific issues in cases that otherwise

would have gone to their legal department or other costly formal processes. Some make undated paper notes about cases that seem to have an indisputable good outcome (Rowe, 2026).

In some cases, various other costs have dropped sharply after the beginning of an ombuds office, which illuminates the importance of collecting benchmark data before an ombuds office begins. An ombuds might track referrals on an undated checklist when a compliance office refers cases to them. If there are frequent formal actions in the organization, an ombuds might make a paper-and-pencil note each time they help locally affected constituents during or in the aftermath of a formal proceeding such as an investigation (Hill & Ingham, n.d.).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is simply to illuminate and communicate lesser-known aspects of the value that organizational ombuds provide, at a time when the world does not actually know much about what ombuds do. Ombuds practitioners are currently assessing their services in old and new ways. Ombuds are determining how to collect operationally useful data, and how to collect data in ways that safeguard confidentiality, independence, impartiality, and informality (Rowe & Hedeen, 2026; Rowe et al., 2026c; Rowe, 2026). We know something about the issues that come to ombuds and something about the number of visitors and a few, SoP-compliant characteristics of visitors. We hope this article may inspire ombuds to add more functions and talents to this list, and collect more details about functions and talents that seem to be effective in their own practice—to share with other ombuds, to practice yet better, and to help their communities understand the ombuds profession.

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Appendix: A Simple Weekly Checklist Template (with no date or a masked date)

OO activities occurring *in any case* this past week. Check ALL that apply for your work this past week:

• Issues involved (in any case)

-Values, Ethics, Illegalities (incl safety)	Yes
-How people treat each other	Yes
-New Issues/Resurfaced Issues/Good Ideas	Yes
-Organizational Systems Issues	Yes

• Complexities (in any case) ("multi-multi cases")

-Highest number of issues in a single case this week: (#_____)

-No specific respondent (just situational/system issues)	Yes
-Many people, groups, roles, visitors, respond*ents* and those affected)	Yes
-Visitor and Respondent in different units	Yes
-Visitor and Respondent of different demographics	Yes
-Visitor and Respondent from different cohorts (job, rank, role)	Yes
-Many people, groups, or roles as Respond*ers*	Yes
-Many rules, or norms (may) apply	Yes

• Risks faced by Visitor(s) (in any case):

-loss of relationships (family and work)	Low	Medium	High
-retaliation/career damage/fear	Low	Medium	High
-loss of privacy, loss of face	Low	Medium	High
-loss of potential benefits from good ideas	Low	Medium	High

• Risks likely faced by the organization (in any case):

-Financial	Low	Medium	High
-Operational	Low	Medium	High
-Reputational	Low	Medium	High
-Strategic (e.g. loss of good ideas)	Low	Medium	High

OO Functions performed this week (in any case):

-Helped visitor(s) to receive or provide essential information	Yes
-Helped to develop an unusual/unique/complex option	Yes
-Discussed formal and informal options (#____of options)	Yes
-Appropriately helped organization to get needed information	Yes
-Helped the visitor(s) who chose to act directly	Yes
-Acted as a facilitator/mediator/coach/shuttle diplomat	Yes
-Undertook, with permission, generic option(s)	Yes
-Inspired/supported/instigated systemic change	Yes

• Systemic Review Yes

• Your ombuds office specialties
(e.g., talking circles, restorative justice, services
to specific populations, trainings) Yes

• "NEXT" Options chosen by Visitor(s), if no third-party action by the OO

-Visitor will "wait and see" and perhaps keep notes Yes
-On the record (formal) complaint Yes
-Direct approach about the issue in person or in writing Yes
-Discussion with another manager, office or resource Yes

• How/Why did Visitor(s) choose the OO Office

-Referred by another office or resource Yes
-Suggested by supervisor Yes
-Suggested by bystander or peer Yes
-New issue from the same Visitor earlier Yes
-Heard, met, saw the OO in training or other public discussion Yes

-Referred by someone in the same unit Yes
-Referred by other party in discussions of the same concern Yes
-Read about the office online Yes

• Visitor's Roles in the concern(s), if Visitor not the initial party

-Supervisor Yes
-Peer or bystander Yes
-Bystander of a Bystander Yes
-Respondent Yes
-Other Yes

In using/modifying/adding to this template:

-Set the application to apply no date, or a randomized date
-Consider keeping the checklist on a dedicated computer offline?
-Identify and collect data that will be operationally useful to you and your constituents
-Collect data that would not easily identify any case, constituent, or your organization
-Try to keep the checklist under 30 minutes, with adjacent lists if needed