



## SAFE SPACE !

### *The Organisational Ombud - not the Classic Ombud !*

#### **Is there important information that does not get to the right people in your organisation?**

Employees only divulge what cannot harm them and which they *perceive* cannot harm them. In the workplace, saying the 'wrong thing' may well threaten jobs, advancement, or "reputation". No matter how "open" or "accepting" an organisation's culture really is, no matter how protected employees really are from backlash, *perceptions* of possible exposure linger when dialogue is with management, extensions of

***We don't know what we don't know!***

management, or co-workers.

That causes repression and filtering of information that should get to the right people in "unrefined" form. It leaves employees with unresolved concerns that often lead to results that are bad for the employee and bad for the organisation.

#### **Festering Conflict**

For example, if a conflict cannot be raised for fear of retaliation, alienation, or ridicule, the matter remains unresolved. If that dilemma becomes unsustainable, the employee, who may be valuable, might quit, take more sick leave, or perform sub-optimally – a classic case of unresolved conflict's costs.

#### **Corporate Governance**

Another example may be knowledge of events that point to wrongdoing by a senior – like embezzlement, or unethical behaviour. That could be particularly difficult and risky to bring to the attention of the right people.

Hotlines or anonymous tip offs are notoriously flawed because they lack the dialogue needed to separate out exaggeration, mischief, or malice that could ruin reputations.

It is anonymity plus dialogue that equals best information.

So dealing with potential eruptions of bad publicity, lawsuits, or even criminal proceedings early can avoid big problems when it may be too late.

A high quality early warning system is the most valuable resource in a corporate governance toolbox.

Dealing with these two challenges properly can only happen through a "Safe Space" that is unequivocally respected and protected by top management.



## This is where the Corporate or Organisational Ombud [OO] fits in.

The Organisational Ombud is completely different from the “Classic” Ombud who plays an adjudicative role in the settlement of disputes between the public and service providers like insurers or banks.

The Organisational Ombud is the ‘open door’ for the workforce. S/he receives better quality insight to employees concerns than anyone in the chain of command can do.

Because of that, the OO has the best shot at solving issues ‘below the radar’. That becomes a valuable resource to staff who might otherwise resort to measures that are destructive. These might include grievance procedures, badmouthing, unconscious sabotage, or a lot of off-sick days.

**One of the most important functions of an ombuds is to act as an agent of change by gathering general data to present to the senior management of the organization.** Michael Eisner

The opportunities lie in the aggregated information that the OO keeps records of [without any references to people involved].

That information can be extremely important when used to inform management or HR of trends, hotspots or areas that need to be scrutinised. The superb quality of that data provides players with prospects that may never have been thought of before.

### A strategic advantage?

The four pillars on which the OO practises:

**1 Neutrality.** The OO remains unaligned and does not advocate for any one party, but for the organisation itself, in a way that is fair and objective.

**2 Independence** from all other organisational entities and parties with vested interests - including management. This means reporting directly to the Board, or at least to the CEO. S/he holds no other position that might compromise independence, or the sole discretion needed over whether, or how to act regarding an individual's concern/s. The OO does not act as an agent of the organisation nor receive notice on behalf of the organisation. S/he also does not create, modify, or enforce policy.

**3 Confidentiality** is sacrosanct and information is privileged. The only exception is when there is imminent danger of serious harm. The OO does will not testify in any formal process within the organisation and will resist doing so outside – even if permission is given to do so. No records are kept that might enable identification of an individual.

**4 Informality.** The Organisational Ombud listens, provides off-the-record suggestions for constructive resolution of issues and when appropriate, may look in to procedural irregularities or systemic obstacles. Although the OO may suggest formal routes, s/he does not get involved in any part of that, including investigations.