

The goals of the Ombuds Office is to resolve disputes, discuss and mediate concerns and help participants create options and develop action plans to implement in order to create a healthy, happy, effective, productive, efficient, and competent workplace. The Ombuds Office works to help design a place where people want to come to work, where they trust their leaders, colleagues, direct reports, and university administration; a place that is not stressful or anxiety producing. Everyone should feel valued and be paid fairly. Diversity should be respected, and inclusion encouraged. All these important workplace values are discussed and encouraged. The Ombuds Office follows four tenets:

Neutrality Informality Independence Confidentiality

These help employees resolve conflicts in a non-threatening and unbiased atmosphere and gives each participant new insights and tools to make their workplace the best it can be for the present and the future.

With the multitude of problems brought about by the COVID-19 virus, all prior meetings with all employees have been done on the phone or over Microsoft Teams. Now, employees have the choice to have mediations and facilitated discussions in person or continue online. In addition, more departments, colleges, and schools have asked and participated in a variety of trainings such as E-communication, emotional intelligence, communicating across generations, civility, etc. Training is good, but any insights and information presented in any form needs to be consistently reinforced, modeled, and practiced by everyone including leadership.

Between July 2020-July 2021 the Ombuds Office saw approximately 125 faculty, administration, and staff members. The majority of people were from the Belknap Campus with roughly 40 participants from the Health Sciences Campus (HSC). Eleven of the twelve schools and colleges were represented and over the course of the year along with several offices and departments not associated with a college or school. Over this time, eight trends emerged. They are the following and are ranked in order of most represented to least:

- I. Respect and empathy for colleagues:
 - a. **Fear of retribution**
 - b. Isolation factors in work related challenges
 - c. Poor listening behaviors in person or when on an electronic meeting
 - d. Lack of civility and courtesy when answering emails
 - e. Lack of accountability
 - f. Inability or lack of desire to change

- II. Communication Issues:
 - a. Poor skills-
 - i. Active listening (listening and checking for INTENT of message)
 - ii. Appropriate wording
 - iii. Controlling emotions while speaking
 - iv. Inability to understand differences such as cultures, barriers, personal challenges, differences in how people work (i.e., extroverts and introverts, time of day people are most productive, etc.), gender, etc.

- v. Willingness to encourage open communication even in difficult situations
 - b. Work style differences more pronounced and concerns over favoritism
- III. Budgetary Issues
- a. Temporary decrease in pay and lack of raises
 - b. Dwindling resources for teaching and/or research, hiring new staff (continue to increase workload because of lack of sufficient staff)
 - c. Lack of professional opportunities because of limited travel, online conferences, and number of opportunities. This should be changing as the academic year continues.
- IV. Hierarchical/Power Issues
- a. Power discrepancies between senior-junior faculty, faculty-staff, supervisor-staff, administration-faculty and staff, and all configurations of these groups oftentimes create inappropriate and rude behaviors
 - b. Fear of retaliation for expressing concerns and conflicts
 - c. Gender and other diversity situations
 - d. **Bullying**
- V. Policy and Procedure Issues:
- a. Lack of knowledge, communicating or enhancing policies and procedures to clarify expectations and professional behavior.
 - b. No or little orientation or explanation of policies and procedures for employees (particularly new hires) in individual departments
 - c. Lack of consistency (especially in some evaluation procedures) in implementation.
- VI. Poorly trained supervisors
- a. Training needed over a long period of time (perhaps first year in supervisory role)-many people are promoted to supervisor and go from colleague to boss. Without training on how to transition from colleague to supervisor, the department can become chaotic and may lose valuable workers. This is particularly true for annual evaluations.
 - b. Need accountability for supervisors/managers/leaders
 - c. This was particularly difficult during the pandemic since people leave and new supervisors are put in place but are isolated from their direct reports
- VII. Toxic Work Environment
- a. Civility an issue
 - b. Negative, discounting and/or aggressive interactions (which are more obvious online) are difficult to deal with especially when hierarchical positions are at play
 - c. Feeling mentally and physically unsafe
- VIII. Lack of Positive Recognition
- a. Encouragement of professional development and advancement
 - b. Recognition within department or school/college
 - c. Need to receive input to show appreciation for excellent work

All these concerns and issues, if not addressed, create more severe conflicts. Most of the above concerns are addressed in the new strategic plan. They certainly are addressed in the Cardinal Principles. Many of these issues are continuing from last year, but with a “new normal” at the university, employees are facing different challenges which require different solutions. The Ombuds Office is working to resolve all issues to help make the on and off campus work environment as positive and productive as possible. If these concerns are not addressed, the university will continue to lose dedicated employees along with a tarnished reputation locally and nationally.

Submitted by,

Diane Tobin, University Ombudsman