THE RELATIONSHIP OF OMBUDSHIP & LEADERSHIP IN COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS

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For YB, whose trust transformed me.

To ACB, whose trust sustains me.
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A good dissertation is a done dissertation. A great dissertation is one that somehow gets done amidst a life overflowing with love, friendship, joy, adventure, growth, and care. My life in general is an embarrassment of riches, but none more so than my good fortune of good relationships. Those most vital to the creation and completion of this work include:


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My family, for constant instruction in truth, trust, and relationship.

My hometown, Cook, MN, for showing me early on what really matters and how systems work.

My beloved, who is good to me always.

Thanks be to all.

We can only connect the dots that we collect. - Amanda Palmer
ABSTRACT

THE RELATIONSHIP OF OMBUDSHIP & LEADERSHIP IN COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS

Mary Bliss Conger
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This qualitative study explores the nature of positive relationships between organizational ombuds and organizational leaders. It focuses on success case examples of relationships between ombuds and leaders, utilizing interviews with ombuds (7), interviews with leaders (2), and document analysis across seven different institutions. The purpose of the study was to reality test an idealized model of the ombud-leader relationship implied by the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) Standards of Practice in order to identify and, where possible, fill in the gaps between that model and actual lived experience. Key findings of the study include: (a) the extent to which system-wide relationships of all kinds are vital to an ombud’s work; (b) the primacy of trust in positive ombud-leader relationships; (c) the importance and challenge of establishing credibility in these relationships; (d) the many sources of power ombuds utilize in their work; and (e) the use of executive presence as a framework for understanding how ombuds might position themselves to be viewed as credible agents in the shared activity of leading complex organizations. The results of this research provide insight into how some ombuds and leaders have successfully worked together in the past to the benefit of their organizations, and suggest ways in which all ombuds and leaders might conceptualize and operationalize their work together going forward.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On September 5, 2018, the official United Nations Spokesperson (@UN_Spokesperson) tweeted a photo of Secretary-General António Guterres standing next to Michelle Bachelet, former president of Chile and new High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Shireen Dodson, newly appointed UN Ombudsman. It read:

Secretary-General @antonioguterres this morning welcomed two new members to his Senior Management Team: Michelle Bachelet as High Commissioner for @UNHumanRights & Shireen L Dodson as UN Ombudsman. The Senior Management Group now comprises 24 women & 20 men. Welcome aboard!

It is easy to miss a tweet, but this one stood out. Even though there is much to suggest the two roles are complementary, leaders and ombuds are often cast as opposites, as distant counterparts. Yet the tweet’s message was clear: The UN ombud was part of this senior leadership team, working shoulder to shoulder with extraordinarily powerful people to guide a global organization.

Very little is known about relationships between organizational ombuds and organizational leaders. Leaders, for the purposes of this study, are individuals in positions of formal authority and high rank with responsibility for the health and success of an organization. Organizational ombuds are individuals serving as a designated neutral within an organization who provide conflict resolution and problem-solving services to its members (International Ombudsman Association [IOA], 2019a). Plenty, of course, has been written about leadership, and the literature on ombudship has been steadily growing (Bingham, Smith, Burton, & Elkerson, 2018; Escalante, 2018; Rowe, Hedeen, & Schneider, 2019a, 2019b). Even so, there has been little to no research on the topic of ombuds and leaders working together.

This gap is notable because the relationship between an organization’s ombud and its leadership is—at least theoretically—essential to the ombud function (IOA,
2019a). Similarly, much leadership theory implies that ombuds could significantly 
enhance aspects of leaders’ work (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Senge, 1990; 
Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015). There is much to suggest that good ombuds and good 
leaders have a lot in common: Leaders and ombuds both have special status and 
access in an organization. Both enjoy a bird’s-eye vantage point, albeit with different foci 
from their perches high in the hierarchy. Ombuds’ and leaders’ essential skill sets 
overlap: emotional intelligence, expert communication, active listening, synthesizing, 
reframing, questioning, and so forth. Also, both are positions into which people typically 
grow or are elevated over time, often later in a person’s career. Careers in ombudship 
and leadership are often not relinquished until retirement or appointment expiration. 

Arguably, ombuds and leaders have even more in complement than in common. 
According to the IOA (2009) Standards of Practice, ombuds are meant to report to the 
highest possible level of an organization (See Appendix A). A significant part of an 
ombud’s charge is to elevate any problems or concerns they have detected in the 
organization to senior leaders’ attention (Gadlin & Sturm, 2007; Rowe, 1987, 2010; 
Rowe & Gadlin, 2013; Schenck & Zinsser, 2014; Wagner, 2000). In doing so, ombuds 
act as an early warning system (Clark, 2013b; Rowe et al., 2019a; Wagner, 2000) and 
can provide valuable trend reporting for leaders (Saleh, 1995), helping leaders stay 
ahead of potential problems or threats as well as identify opportunities and creative 
solutions. Ombuds may also serve leaders as a sounding board, advisor, or even coach 
(Schenck & Zinsser, 2014), perhaps positioning them to be leaders’ “critical friends” 
(Costa & Kallick, 1993) or integrity partners (Brown, 2018). Key components of ombuds’ 
work would be seriously compromised or hindered without a functional connection to 
leaders. Leadership without a functional connection to ombuds should find itself similarly 
diminished.
A mutual incentive to have robust, engaged relationships between ombuds and leaders seemed obvious. However, frustration, anxiety, and uncertainty about working with leaders have surfaced in many of my conversations with practicing ombuds over the years. "My leader doesn’t understand or value what I do..." has been a standard refrain, and I was surprised by this when I first began talking with ombuds as part of my initial research. Not only did it contradict my perception of ombuds as an obvious organizational asset, especially to leadership, it contradicted my personal experience as well. My introduction to ombud work had come in an office that was explicitly championed by a senior leader. Dr. Nancy S. Dye, Oberlin College’s president from 1994-2007, was the driving force behind the establishment of the Office of the Ombudsperson at that institution in 2000. Its explicit purpose was to help improve the quality of discourse on campus by providing individuals with tools to resolve conflict, solve problems, and communicate more effectively with others. ... The office works to facilitate communication and assist visitors in developing strategies to address challenges with which they struggle, with emphasis on supporting fair and equitable process at the college. The ombuds office also reports general trends of issues and provides feedback throughout the organization, and advocates systems change when appropriate without disclosing confidential communications. (Oberlin College Office of the Ombudsperson, n.d., para. 1-2)

Throughout my five years working with that office as a student and professional staff member, I witnessed President Dye tirelessly promote the ombud role. She spoke of it often, made sure it was well-funded, rallied the involvement of alumni in the field of conflict resolution, and—importantly—gave its leader, Yeworkwha Belachew, both deep support and a wide berth. Dr. Dye, who died in 2015, was a scholar of feminist histories of the American labor movement. She knew a thing or two about access and power dynamics, and intentionally built a mechanism for promoting proactive conflict engagement and systemic feedback in her institution. (It is interesting to note that the
chair of the Oberlin Board of Trustees at the time of the ombud office’s founding, William Perlik, was a well-regarded mediator.)

As it turns out, stories of senior leaders proactively implementing ombuds programs are scarce. Most ombuds I met described a sort of benign neglect on the part of leaders (at best) or an actively antagonistic relationship (at worst). I came to believe my experience at Oberlin, with a leader explicitly establishing, promoting, and empowering an ombud, was the exception and not the rule. This realization was dawning at the same time I was delving into literature about the complexity of organizations, the challenges of leadership, and the importance of organizational learning. In other words, it came just as I was beginning to see how important an organizational ombud could truly be. Even though the word ombud (or its variants) never once appeared in the leadership tomes I consumed or in the high-level leadership and organizational learning classes I attended in my doctoral program, I saw ombuds everywhere—omnipresent in the negative space of leadership and learning theory.

In engineering, a bottleneck (n.d.) is “a phenomenon by which the performance or capacity of an entire system is severely limited by a single component” (para. 1). This concept was foremost in my mind as I was hearing about ombuds who felt disconnected from or disregarded by leaders. The ombud-leader relationship struck me as an exclusive conduit through which unique information could flow. If it were somehow blocked or reduced, the entire system might suffer. It seemed that relationships between ombuds and leaders were critical connection points that, if compromised for any reason, could significantly hamper leaders’ ability to lead as well as diminish the value in having an ombud. The relationship could become a bottleneck between the organization’s information and those in a position to use it most effectively.
A divide between ombuds and leaders neither jibed with the literature, which implied numerous ways their work naturally aligned, nor did it make practical sense. Whence the disconnect? As I made my way through the ombudship literature and tried to reconcile it with ombuds’ own accounts of dissatisfaction and discomfort in relating to leaders, I was struck by three observations: First, working with leadership was addressed in terms of structure more so than substance. Second, consideration of the ombud-leader relationship, much less the ombud role, from a leadership perspective was non-existent. And third, rare were the ombuds who considered themselves leaders.

Purpose Statement

Though grounded in core principles, the ombud role is highly flexible by design, which leads to widely varied practice of it. This variety, combined with the relative youth of the profession and the confidential nature of much of its work, has led to a significant gap between stated ideals of practice and empirical evidence of those ideals in practice. Howard Gadlin, retired NIH ombudsman, has said, “We don’t know what ombudsmen do. We only know what they say they do” (as cited in Bingham et al., 2018). When it comes to the ombud-leader relationship, however, we do not even know that, because no one has yet asked. The purpose of this study was to ask.

In doing so, my objective was to explore and document relationships between organizational ombuds and organizational leaders. An idealized version of the ombud-leader relationship exists in the conventional wisdom of ombud practice, but anecdotal evidence has suggested that it is rarely borne out in reality. The primary line of inquiry here was to consider lived ombud-leader relationships against the idealized model, with the hope that the ideal and the real might be better clarified, understood, and aligned. The value of this project lies in its contribution towards a fuller body of knowledge about
the ombud-leader relationship to advance both conceptual and practical understanding of it.

Orienting Notes

I would like to address a few stylistic choices at the outset so that terminology and expectations are clear. I use the word ombud to refer to the role of the organizational ombudsman in this work. While ombudsman, ombudsperson, and ombuds are all more commonly used, I prefer and will deploy ombud for the following reasons: Ombud is short. It is easy to pronounce and to pluralize (one ombud, two or more ombuds). Ombud scans as genderless, whereas ombudsman scans as male. Ombudsman is also strongly associated with the classical model of practice across the globe, so ombud may help avoid confusion as this work is focused solely on the organizational model. For all these reasons, I find ombud a more user-friendly term. The role can be tricky enough to explain without the further complication of a cumbersome name. Perhaps the awkward term will be replaced entirely with one more resonant someday.

I use ombudship to refer to the practice of ombuds. Its symmetry with leadership is pleasing, and its usage is apt, as the -ship (n.d.) suffix forms “a new noun denoting a property or state of being, time spent in a role, or a specialised union.” All of those apply here.

I use the singular they instead of gendered pronouns in this work. This choice reflects my politics and also contributes to the protection of participants’ identities. Gendered pronouns appear only in direct quotations of others’ statements or work or when referring to individuals whom participants gendered in their statements.

While the IOA Standards of Practice (2009) and Code of Ethics (2007) are two distinct documents, people in the field commonly (and confusingly) use standards of
practice to refer to the four ethical principles of independence; neutrality and impartiality; confidentiality; and informality from which the Standards of Practice are derived. I use Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics when referring to the respective documents in which these standards and ethical principles are codified. I use ethical principle(s) when referring to the principles themselves. (See Appendices A & B for copies of the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics.)

A few notes on scope: Because this study’s participant group was small, the world of organizational ombud practice is closely knit, and the principle of confidentiality is sacrosanct, I intentionally have not linked participants’ contributions to personal or site descriptions except when doing so provided clarifying context. That said, I did intentionally include many verbatim quotations from interviews to show not just what participants said, but how they said it. Much of what makes any relationship a good one can be hard to capture, and I hope that sacrificing some economy is worth it to help bring these voices forth.

Finally, this study was situated in an American context. Its backdrop was that of western cultural imperatives: A love of hierarchy and bureaucracy. A preference for the individual over the collective. A premise of competition and dominance rather than cooperation and partnership. These dynamics fundamentally shape the ideas, assumptions, and expectations about leadership and action embedded in this work. I just want to name that.

Context of the Times

For better or worse, our modern lives are enmeshed in organizations that are becoming exceedingly complex, and, unsurprisingly, more difficult to maneuver and manage (Kotter, 2014; M. J. Marquardt, 2002; Meadows, 2008; Pink, 2005; Schwab, 2015; Scott, 2003; Senge, 1990). This is especially true of most large organizations, be
they corporations, universitites, or governmental agencies. Many thinkers have described
the way the world and hence organizations are changing, and many have theorized
about how such changes might best be met. M. J. Marquardt (2002), for example,
identified eight significant forces of change: globalization; technology; radical
transformation of the work world; increased customer influence; emergence of
knowledge and learning as major assets; changing roles and expectations of workers;
workplace diversity and mobility; and rapidly escalating change and chaos (p. 2). In the
face of such circumstances, Pink (2005) predicted that the “six senses” of design, story,
symphony, empathy, play, and meaning will be essential for mastering 21st-century life.
Compared with the aptitudes required a generation ago, this new reality seems daunting
and vague. M. J. Marquardt charted elements of this shift (p. 11; See Table 1).

Table 1

*Marquardt (2002) Dimensions of Organizational Change*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Dimension</th>
<th>Old</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical tasks</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Peer-to-peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structures</td>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>Multidisciplinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>Fixed</td>
<td>Permeable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive thrust</td>
<td>Vertical</td>
<td>Outsourcing and alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management style</td>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td>Participative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Compliance</td>
<td>Commitment and results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Homogenous</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic focus</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Innovation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Organizational life used to be (or at least believed to be) far more structured, more clear-cut. Think of the division of labor in factory work, the notion of climbing the corporate ladder, the “lifer” who takes a job at 18 and retires from the same organization 40 years later; all of that is now the exception rather than the rule. More and different kinds of people are being asked to work collaboratively to accomplish increasingly ill-defined goals in interdisciplinary environments that change quickly in ways they cannot anticipate. The rise of the gig economy, where workers do a series of short-term tasks or freelance contracts for various employers rather than find full-time work with one entity, is a significant shift that is still unfolding. As of 2018, over one third (36%) of American workers were gig workers (Gallup, 2018). What is the impact on organizational culture, cooperation, and coordination when coworkers and colleagues can be here today, gone tomorrow?

Sorting that question may be a cakewalk compared to the challenges leaders face as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) dawns. World Economic Forum founder and Executive Chair Klaus Schwab (2015) wrote,

We stand on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope, and complexity, the transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before. We do not yet know just how it will unfold, but one thing is clear: the response to it must be integrated and comprehensive, involving all stakeholders of the global polity, from the public and private sectors to academia and civil society. (para. 1)

The Fourth Industrial Revolution will be characterized by the dominance of cyber-physical systems, which exist at the intersection of physical, digital, and biological realms. Schwab (2015) argued that three factors distinguish this industrial revolution from its predecessor: “velocity, scope, and systems impact” (para. 3). People will feel these effects in all aspects of life, and organizations both civic and corporate will have to change dramatically and quickly to remain relevant. Schwab believed organizations
would have to take on new, more agile forms to meet needs and serve a purpose. As organizations continue to flatten and morph, with much less emphasis on chain of command and hierarchy (M. J. Marquardt, 2002; Meadows, 2008; Pink, 2005; Rowe & Gadlin, 2013; Ziegenfuss & O’Rourke, 2010), authority, roles, and tasks have become less clearly defined and relationships more abundant, fluid, and important.

Alongside internal changes to how organizations work and shifts in the world around them, there are also new social expectations for the role organizations should play. The 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, a well-regarded annual survey of global trends in trust, found that the most trusted relationship people have with any institution is now that with their employer (80% in the US, 75% globally; Edelman, 2019). Against a backdrop of declining trust in traditional institutions such as government and media, as well as an increasing sense of pessimism about the future, Edelman (2019) attributed this shift to people trusting a relationship they feel they have some control over. Relatedly, people are looking to CEOs and other organizational leaders for visionary guidance (76%) and expecting them to lead social change (Edelman, 2019).

“This is the emergence of the new contract between employee and employer, which we call Trust at Work,” said [Richard] Edelman [President and CEO]. “This contract is predicated on companies taking four specific actions: Lead on Change, establish an audacious goal that attracts socially-minded employees and make it a core business objective; Empower Employees, keep employees directly informed on the issues of the day and give them a voice on your channels; Start Locally, make a positive impact in the communities in which you operate; and CEO Leadership, CEOs must speak up directly on issues of the day. Smart companies will heed the call to build trust from the inside out with employees as the focal point.” (Edelman, 2019, para. 9)

There is ample evidence of people beginning to expect more from their organizations and hold them accountable. The existence of an ethical culture has always been an asset: better financial outcomes, less turnover, and so forth (Ethics Resource Center, 2014). But now, the absence of an ethical culture is a true liability (Hays, 2019).
#MeToo supplies many stark examples of negative business consequences for issues that go unsurfaced and unaddressed. Examining an organization’s culture is increasingly part of “social due diligence” (Ahmed, 2018) in the investment world. The Google Walkout saw over 20,000 employees protest the company’s poor handling of sexual harassment (Segarra, 2018). “Weinstein clauses” are guarantees being added to merger agreements across Wall Street “that legally vouch for the behavior of a company’s leadership” (Ahmed, 2018, para. 1). Premiums and deductibles for Employment Practices Liability Insurance (which covers employee claims of sexual harassment, discrimination, and similar) have gone up, with some insurers black-balling entire industries (Antilla, 2019).

It has never been more important for members of an organization to have a safe place to bring their concerns, and it has never been more important for leaders to have all the puzzle pieces in trying to adapt and deal with the emerging future. It has also never been more advantageous for organizations to be healthy, ethical, trustworthy places.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the following premises: First, that organizations are complex. Second, that leading them well is difficult. Third, that ombuds can uniquely contribute to good organizational leadership. Accordingly, I drew the theoretical framework from components of organizational theory, leadership and management theory, and ombudship theory (such as it is).

Ombudship

Uttering the word ombud routinely draws blank stares, even within organizations that have ombuds. It is important to explain what an ombud is, as well as clarify what an ombud is not. In general, an organizational ombud is an informal, impartial, independent, and confidential individual on hand to help others help themselves, usually within the context of or in relation to a particular organization or institution. They are a resource to whom members of an organization can turn with concerns and questions about that organization without fear of retaliation or exposure. Ombuds listen, inform, reframe, coach, mediate, and generally assist visitors with whatever situation they raise.

History & Prevalence

Similar roles have existed in many societies over time, but ombuds as we might recognize them first appeared in Europe around the turn of the eighteenth century (Howard, 2010). The organizational ombud movement in the United States began in the 1960s. Some offices were originally established on university campuses to reduce bureaucracy and provide a more “humane” approach to serving students, largely in response to campus unrest regarding civil rights injustice and the Vietnam War (Stieber, 1982). In the 1980s, many US corporations established ombud offices to address crises
such as antitrust, insider trading, and junk bond scandals; the late ’80s and early ’90s saw ombuds’ expansion into federal government (Howard, 2010).

Modern-day ombuds are commonly employed by corporations; financial institutions; media outlets; healthcare facilities; institutions of education; and intergovernmental, nongovernmental, and nonprofit organizations. In addition to the roughly 400 US colleges and universities that employ ombuds in some capacity, many large corporations such as Chevron, Shell, and Pfizer also have ombud offices (Harrison & Morrill, 2004; Kosakowski, 2019). The World Bank, Red Cross, UN, International Monetary Fund, and even the Los Angeles Police Department each have ombud offices. Ombuds also exist in American public school districts in cities as far spread as Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, Portland, and San Diego. The federal government is estimated to have 150 ombuds as well (Houk et al., 2016).

Since the formation of the IOA in 2005, the burgeoning ombuds literature—largely based in a practitioner inquiry model—has grown to include a Code of Ethics, Standards of Practice, best practices, and, quite recently, increased empirical research on effectiveness and value-added (e.g., Bombin, 2014; Howard, 2010; Smith, 2014; Witzler, 2014). This all draws on the rich legacy of practitioners and associations such as the Corporate Ombudsman Association, the University and College Ombudsman Association, and The Ombudsman Association, and the California Caucus of College and University Ombuds that preceded the existence of the IOA.

**What an Organizational Ombud Is**

The American Bar Association (Evans, 2002) defined an ombud as “a person who is authorized to receive complaints or questions confidentially about alleged acts, omissions, improprieties, and broader, systemic problems within the ombud’s defined
jurisdiction and to address, investigate, or otherwise examine these issues independently and impartially” (The Role of the Ombudsman, para. 1). This study was concerned only with organizational ombuds, one of five different types of ombuds (the others are classical, advocate, executive, and hybrid). One distinguishing characteristic of an organizational ombud is their lack of formal investigatory powers (Howard, 2010).

The IOA shares on its website former UC-Berkeley ombud Margo Wesley’s description of the role:

A designated neutral who is appointed or employed by an organization to facilitate the informal resolution of concerns of employees, managers, students and, sometimes, external clients of the organization. (Wesley, 2004, p. 6)

Ombuds exist to help normalize and productively engage the conflict that is inherent in organizational life. Unfortunately, many people only learn about and avail themselves of ombud services when in immediate need due to an escalating conflict or untenable situation. An ombud is often approached with an issue or concern because someone has attempted to go through existing channels with unsatisfactory results; they don’t know the appropriate channels; they know the channels but feel uncomfortable with them for some reason; or they want to pursue a resolution informally before pursuing it through the system. (Santovec, 2006, p. 6)

Upon request, ombuds intervene so that, among other things, “failures in communication are clarified; errors in records, which may involve substantial sums of money, are corrected; definitive answers are secured where information is conflicting or confused” (Stieber, 1982, p. 9). While all ombuds are equipped to handle immediate and pressing concerns, many also provide preventative services such as conflict resolution training or communication coaching. Whatever the issue brought to their door, ombuds exist to be “liaisons or mediators, assisting in resolving all sorts of problems associated with the institution” (Hayden, 1997, p. 3). Ombuds frequently report that visitors use their
offices as a place to safely vent frustration with the shortcomings of the organization (Hannigan, 2011; Loggins, 2011; Newcomb, 2010). Openly expressing opinions and emotions seems to “fix” the problem in many cases, allowing visitors to carry on their organizational lives without negative consequence or losing time and energy to more formal procedures.

Levine-Finley and Carter (2010) stated, “The ombudsman function promotes safety in the workplace; empowers people through listening, providing information and explaining processes; and develops strategies so individuals can better handle their circumstances” (p. 117). Depending on those circumstances, ombuds may operate as sounding boards, shuttle diplomats, informal inquirers, interpersonal mediators, communication facilitators, conflict coaches, and more. Conrick (2000) paraphrased the University and College Ombuds Association description of the ombud position with the following list:

An objective professional with a concern for fairness, equity, and accuracy; a comprehensive campus information resource; ... a proponent for individual or institutional change if it is clear that existing practices or procedures are problematic; a collaborator with an awareness of the concerns of the individual as well as the concerns of the institution; an educator, teaching people the skills needed to solve problems for themselves; a means to help the institution function more smoothly; a listening ear; ... an authority on rules and procedures; an advocate for equity. (p. 51)

Ombuds work requires a great deal of flexibility, improvisation, expert communication, integrity, care, and good judgment—a certain je ne sais quoi worthy of trust and respect. In short, a large part of an ombud’s job is to creatively assist others in clarifying issues, generating options, and building capacity for dealing with conflict and complexity when it arises.
What an Ombud Is Not

This role may sound a lot like a therapist, or an advocate, or an ethics officer, or a human resources manager or, in some cases, a really good lawyer. Some ombuds do frequently work alongside these types of professionals (or have been them in former lives). As a practice, ombud work certainly draws from the disciplines of psychology, ethics, management, law (amongst others) and yet remains itself distinct. Ombuds do not formally diagnose. They do not explicitly counsel. They do not take sides or determine fault. They do not formally investigate. At the core, an ombud exists to pay attention, receive and offer information, and build trust. They are there to listen actively, to provide perspective and generate options, to assist people in deciding how they want to handle difficult situations, and to connect organizational dots, be it individuals to resources or information to decision-makers or problems to solutions, as required and appropriate.

The essential difference between an ombud and HR, ethics, compliance, legal, or other institutional resources is that ombuds are embedded dispute resolution and risk professionals who exist expressly as an alternative to standard bureaucratic channels and the chain of command, not as another link within it (IOA, 2014). Ombuds are independent and impartial; by design, they are “inside outsiders” who sit within the organization but operate separately from its administrative structures (Harrison & Morrill, 2004; Hayden, 1997). When someone does not know where to go with a question or problem—or cannot for some reason safely go where they normally would—the ombud is available. Similarly, when a very messy, complex situation presents—one with multiple issues, multiple parties, and cross-organizational elements—an ombud is well suited to address it (Rowe et al., 2019a). Ideally, an ombud is deeply familiar with their
organization’s culture, policies, and people, and able to thoughtfully and ethically help
visitors navigate them all.

**Standards of Practice & Code of Ethics**

A considerable source of strength for any ombud lies in their ability to align their
practice with the culture and needs of their particular organization. This naturally leads to
a wide variety of both conceptual and practical approaches to the job. Variations aside,
however, the IOA has developed a Code of Ethics (2007) and Standards of Practice
(2009) that provide a baseline for the role. According to the preamble to the one-page
Code:

> The Ombudsman shall be truthful and act with integrity, shall foster respect for all
> members of the organization he or she serves, and shall promote procedural
> fairness in the content and administration of those organizations’ practices,
> processes, and policies. (IOA, 2007)

The Code further outlined four foundational principles of ombud practice:

- Confidentiality
- Independence
- Informality
- Impartiality/neutrality

**Confidentiality**

The Ombudsman holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict
confidence, and does not disclose confidential communications unless given permission
to do so. The only exception to this privilege of confidentiality is where there appears to
be imminent risk of serious harm. (IOA, 2007)

Given the highly sensitive nature of many issues brought to an ombud—such as
disputes between supervisors, staff, clients, or some combination thereof—
confidentiality is recognized as essential to a functional ombud office. People come forth
with concerns more readily if they believe their identity and issues will remain private,
and studies have shown that people particularly concerned about confidentiality systematically did not participate in ombud processes (Conrick, 2000; Harrison & Morrill, 2004). This phenomenon is heightened within an organizational culture of fear or paranoia and exacerbated by the nature of interconnected relationships within organizations. It is important to note that ombuds’ confidentiality is not legally privileged and that some ombud offices are considered to be Agents of Notice for their organizations. Also, confidentiality should not translate into invisibility (Blair, 2017; Wagner, 2000), as it is important for the community to know the ombud exists and understand what they do if the office is to be useful and effective.

**Independence**

The Ombudsman is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the organization. (IOA, 2007)

Ideally, an ombud operates within yet entirely independently of the institution. They should be “consulting within the institution, but apart from the normal hierarchical chain of command” (Hayden, 1997, p. 7). Even though ombuds often have a high rank, “they typically operate outside traditional management or administrative lines to avoid competing loyalties within the organization” (Harrison & Morrill, 2004, p. 319). Ombuds exercise great care to preserve this status; they tend to avoid any roles, such as committee participation or administrative recourse, which may or may seem to compromise their independence (Hayden, 1997; Wagner, 2000). In addition, independence allows ombuds to “exercise sole discretion over whether or how to act regarding an individual’s concern, a trend or concerns of multiple individuals over time. The Ombudsman may also initiate action on a concern identified through the Ombudsman’s direct observation” (IOA, 2009, Section 1.3).
The nature of some organizations often makes absolute independence impossible, especially if the ombud has a dual role (i.e., campus ombuds are sometimes current or emeriti faculty). Additionally, visitors to ombud offices often and rightly express incredulity at full independence, as an ombud’s paycheck, budget, infrastructure, and so on do indeed come from their organization. Ombuds are generally sensitive to this reality and work earnestly to meet their obligation to the ethical principles of the profession (Conrick, 2000).

**Informality**

The Ombudsman, as an informal resource, does not participate in any formal adjudicative or administrative procedure related to concerns brought to his/her attention. (IOA, 2007)

Organizational ombuds are not allowed to conduct formal investigations into complaints or to set or modify policies. Because they are located outside the formal hierarchy of the institution, they are not and cannot be affiliated with any compulsory disciplinary structures. Ombuds do often inform visitors about formal procedures available to them (such as grievance filing), but they do not participate in such processes themselves. Ombuds are also careful not to keep notes or records, including email, which could be subpoenaed in the case of litigation. If adhering to IOA standards, ombuds do not constitute an Agent of Notice for their organization, though it is important to note that ombuds can put their organizations on notice (IOA, 2014).

**Impartiality/Neutrality**

The Ombudsman, as a designated neutral, remains unaligned and impartial. The Ombudsman does not engage in any situation which could create a conflict of interest. (IOA, 2007)

Neutrality (Conrick, 2000; Harrison & Morrill, 2004; Hayden, 1997; Wagner, 2000), impartiality (Conrick, 2000), multipartiality (Gadlin & Sturm, 2007; Wing & Rifkin,
2001) or nonpartisanship (Wagner, 2000) is a widely accepted principle of organizational ombud practice. The concept, in one of its many forms, is regularly referenced when describing ombuds’ key functions. Conrick (2000) wrote, “The ombudsperson acts neutrally, that is to say impartially, not as an advocate for either side, but as someone who hears and assesses both sides of the issue” (p. 52). This sounds reasonable, but achieving such a stance is not always easy, even if one accepts the dubious premise that our histories, biases, preferences, affiliations, and so on can be somehow suspended.

Further elaborated upon in the Standards of Practice, these core ethical principles uniquely situate the ombud as a function from which various constituents can seek information or bring concerns without fear of redress or the burden of formal reporting. They combine to make the ombuds a safe, fair, credible, and accessible resource (Rowe & Gadlin, 2013; Rowe et al., 2019a). They allow ombuds to act as a “buffer or problem corrector within the system” (Mankin, 1996, p. 49), a “mechanism of review and appeal” that is available should routine policies and procedures for conflict resolution be found undesirable or unsatisfactory (Rosovsky, 1991, p. 287). Yet the very nature that attracts visitors to the ombud office (confidential, informal) can simultaneously limit the office’s ability to address their concerns directly. Given this reality, it is important to examine more closely how the ombud helps not just visitors but also the organization overall attend to concerns or problems uncovered or confronted in their practice.

**A Dual Mandate**

Ombuds’ most visible function is that of working with individual visitors or issues, what Ziegenfuss and O’Rourke (2010) referred to as *complaint processing*. However,
ombuds exist to assist both individuals and organizations, what Wagner (2000) referred to as an ombud’s *dual mandate*. Rowe and Gadlin (2013) contended that “[organizational ombuds] are meant to illuminate aspects of the organization’s policies, procedures, structure, and culture that regularly elicit grievances and complaints, exacerbate tensions and conflicts, and undermine the organization’s efforts to fulfill its mission and accomplish its goals” (p. 2). Ombuds’ role as *trend reporters* (Saleh, 1995) or as scanning agents picking up weak signals and the systems learning that ideally results are arguably equally or even more valuable than their work with visitors (Curran, 1991; Rowe, 2010). It is in this half of their mandate, this work of assisting the organization via detecting problems, recognizing opportunities, and amplifying exemplary practice, where ombuds arguably can best affect positive change. It is also where the work of ombuds and leaders most powerfully coincide.

**Key Concepts**

Three key concepts are important for understanding the role of the ombud in their work to assist the organization and their work with leaders.

**Access**

As a *zero barrier* office (Rowe & Bendersky, 2002), the ombud office is meant to be a safe and accessible resource for any member of its constituency. Ombuds "occupy structural holes in the social networks of their organizations" as it is part of their duty “to help knowledge seekers reach someone who can provide the necessary information” (Moreland, 2013, p. 341). Ombuds can cut through red tape and sensitively convey information to those who need it, connecting them with appropriate resources quickly. Gadlin (2010) stated,

> It is in the nature of large, bureaucratic organizations that their internal dynamics create impediments against people bringing forward issues and concerns that
point to individual and structural problems within the organization. It is in the nature of large bureaucratic organizations that important information that could matter enormously for the better management and functioning of the organization is kept from the very people who could use it. (p. 25)

Ombuds are able to “hear” across the entire organization, across virtually all boundaries: “Successful [organizational ombuds] offices are one of the few places where people from anywhere in the organization feel relatively free to come to speak, at any time, about any issue” (Rowe & Gadlin, 2013, p. 4). Because they enjoy and offer such unfettered access, ombuds are a channel through which senior leaders could be made aware of sensitive and/or complex issues that might not otherwise be brought to their attention.

**Upward Feedback**

Ombuds are strategically placed to scan the entire organization, a vantage point virtually no other organizational agents occupy. In sizeable organizations there are very few offices that are aware of the full range and depth of concerns that arise within—and also across—the different units and silos of the organization. ... It is often a struggle for line and staff managers to communicate effectively even about their achievements, let alone about problems and conflict. (Rowe & Gadlin, 2013, p. 4)

Ombuds receive vital information from across the organization and also observe patterns and collect data that inform their intuition and inquiry. Ombuds are empowered to (appropriately) elevate issues of concern and systemic observations up the chain of command to the organization’s decision-makers, a phenomenon referred to as upward feedback (Kolb, 1987; Rowe, 1987, 1990; Rowe & Baker, 1984; Ziegenfuss, Rowe, & Munzenrider, 1993). Some have objected to the phrase upward feedback, finding it too limited, transactional, unidirectional, and passive; alternatives such as systemic feedback or outward feedback have been suggested (Blair, 2017). Another way to think of it may be as guided attention, in that ombuds help bring to light that which is often
kept in the dark or otherwise obscured by or overlooked in routine organizational operation.

**Relationships**

Ombuds are in the business of relationships—developing them, guiding them, repairing them. Interpersonal relationships serve many functions in organizations, some obvious and others less so. This reality is reason enough to desire appropriate organizational responses for when relationships become complicated or compromised. When considered alongside the ongoing organizational paradigm shift towards greater reliance on peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, participative management, and multidisciplinary teams, however, it should be obvious that the value of good relationships is not to be underestimated. Building “enough of a relationship with each constituent and constituent group to be generally perceived as far, safe, accessible, and credible” is an ombud’s “first task” (Rowe et al., 2019b, p. 1). Robust relationships with others facilitate ombuds’ organizational access and the ability to be knowledgeable connectors and trusted neutrals (Griffin, 2010; Schenck & Zinsser, 2014). All ombud relationship building, however, should be done intentionally and with great care, as

> It is ultimately the perceptions of the people within the organization that determine whether and how the office is utilized, enable the ombudsperson to perform his or her duties, and ascertain the degree to which the office is a valued element of the organization. These perceptions are formed and sustained not by words written in obscure documents, but through the relationships developed between the ombudsperson and other people within the organization. (Griffin, 2010, p. 66)

As always, adherence to the principles of confidentiality, neutrality, independence, and informality is paramount. Ombuds have a line to walk in working effectively with leaders without compromising these core ethics.
Why Ombuds Matter

Business Case

There are two primary arguments for the value of an ombud function. The first can be summed up as the business case, which boils down to the assertion that psychological safety matters for information flow, and information flow is good for business because it (a) mitigates risk by surfacing problems for early—and presumably less costly—intervention and (b) increases affective commitment among constituents which increases productivity and innovation and decreases turnover, absenteeism, and retaliatory behavior (Edmondson, 2004; Furtado, 1996; Harrison & Morrill, 2004; Rowe, 2009, 2010; Rowe et al., 2019a; Schenck & Zinsser, 2014). Unattended organizational conflict is a money-waster, morale-killer, and major reputational risk (CPP, Inc., 2008; Lawler, 2010; Menon & Thompson, 2016). Two important components of the business case include the ombud’s role in supporting organizational learning and in heightening the efficiency of existing formal channels (some of which, like HR, compliance, and legal, are often major cost centers).

Organizational Learning

Rowe and Gadlin (2013) identified “support to organizational learning” as part of the rationale for having an ombud (p. 3). Opportunities for growth and innovation are missed when information remains siloed or suppressed. Ombuds are ideally situated to detect and reduce such blockages at the individual, group, and organizational levels. The ombud office is an important site of interpretation and sensemaking (Daft & Weick, 1984; Weick, 1995) for people as they process their organizational lives and consider courses of action. As conflict resolution professionals, ombuds leverage what Mary Parker Follett (1924) called the plus values of conflict. People tend to avoid or ignore
conflict, believing that it hinders efficiency (Rahim, 2010; Rowe & Bendersky, 2002; Rowe & Gadlin, 2013). Brown and Duguid (1996) sagely point out that innovation almost by definition requires instances of “noncanonical” practice, which can often bring people into conflict. Ombuds help individuals and teams productively engage conflict, which increases learning as well as efficiency by reducing conflict-avoidant behaviors such as indirect communication or absenteeism, for example.

Learning is especially valuable when “effectively used in order to ameliorate problems in institutional performance” (Kezar, 2005, p. 3). Due to their unique position in the organization, ombuds often detect patterns of problems, misunderstandings, or disjoint values and see linkages that remain hidden to more formal, less flexible mechanisms. They can identify gaps between espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris, 1985; Argyris & Schön, 1974; Furtado, 1996; Kezar, 2005; Parker Follett, 1924) and root causes of systemic problems, which enhances both organizational learning and organizational trust (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Hurley, 2012; Senge, 1990). And if de Geus’s (1988) belief that “the only relevant learning in a company is the learning done by those people who have the power to act” (p. 71) has merit, an ombud’s ability to aid leaders’ learning through upward feedback and other means is critical.

Conflict Management System Coherence

Most organizations have a conflict management system (CMS), be it “de facto” or intentionally designed (Costantino & Merchant, 1996; Gadlin, 2014; Rowe, 1990, 1991, 2009, 2010; Rowe & Gadlin, 2013). The CMS may include formal and informal grievance, disciplinary, and compliance procedures and involve subagencies as varied as human resources, unions, employee assistance programs, compliance, counseling, and more. Rowe and Gadlin (2013) asserted that ombuds play the part of default CMS coordinator given their “eclectic orientation towards referrals, support, and service to all
the entities” of a CMS, and in virtue of the fact that they interact with members from across the organization (p. 10).

Formal channels for addressing conflict and/or misconduct are necessary, but they are insufficient for a truly comprehensive approach. People do not report problems through formal channels for many reasons (Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2018; “Ombuds officer’ named,” 1991; Rahim, 2010; Rowe, 1990, 1991; Rowe & Baker, 1984; Rowe & Bendersky, 2002; Rowe, Wilcox, & Gadlin, 2009). Common ones include:

- Fear of retaliation
- Fear of loss of relationship
- Distrust of confidentiality assurances
- Fear of losing control / disempowerment
- Lack of knowledge about how formal procedures will play out / affect them
- Not knowing where to bring a complaint

When the ombud is available as a safe, credible, fair, accessible, and confidential office (Rowe et al., 2019a, 2019b; Rowe & Gadlin, 2013), individuals have an alternative option that empowers them to address issues in a highly individualized way. This increases the likelihood that they will bring their concerns forward. Ombuds sit at a critical juncture between individuals’ unique (and often messy) situations and the organization’s formal (and often formulaic) processes (Furtado, 1996; Rowe, 1990, 1991, 2009). Ombuds can meet needs as they arise and change, receiving things that may not “fit” in the rest of the CMS, keeping them from slipping through the cracks. Ombuds also perform CMS triage, providing referrals and guiding issues into formal channels appropriately. They may also avert issues best resolved outside formal channels from using those (expensive) resources unnecessarily. Hence, ombuds are an important nexus of a CMS, helping direct people through its varied channels efficiently.
In doing so, the ombud supports the CMS as a fail-safe, a backup, and a redundancy measure. This is beneficial to individuals and the organization (Furtado, 1996; Rowe & Gadlin, 2013).

**Ethical Case**

The second argument for why an organization should have an ombud function is simply that it is the right thing to do. In her 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article, “We Shouldn’t Always Need a ‘Business Case’ to Do the Right Thing,” ethics and compliance expert Alison Taylor argued that making a business case for functions that ensure core values is reductive and weak.

The problem is that our obsession with making the business case for ethics makes us sound apologetic and hollow. After all, there is also a business case for tax avoidance, deregulation, and even higher death rates. We do ourselves—and the world—no favors by locking ourselves into this instrumentalist argument. …

Let’s be clear. While there is a business case for integrity, an organization that embraces it must make a conscious decision to prioritize the long term, the intangible, and the existential over the specific and measurable. A growing body of evidence shows that ethical companies outperform financially over time, but trying to translate such a broad finding into the short-term planning metrics used by most businesses is perilous. (Taylor, 2017, para. 3-4)

Rowe and Gadlin (2013) wisely observed, “In every organization, there are—for both individuals and groups—many issues and conflicts for which there cannot, realistically, be rules, regulations, or policies. These issues and conflicts nevertheless need to be addressed” (p. 5). Ombuds are a flexible function that can address such organic issues, providing a resource that helps people safely deal with matters that matter to them, not just matters that matter to the organization. Paradoxically, this also benefits the organization. People who engage the services of a competent ombud to assist with their conflicts experience an increase in morale and affective commitment to the organization (Grant, Dutton, & Rosso, 2008; Rahim, 2010). By surfacing the problems they witness or encounter rather than burying or ignoring them, people feel
they are contributing to the organization’s potential for success. An increase in affective commitment has been shown to have many positive effects including “high job performance, attendance, and organizational citizenship behavior, as well as low turnover, stress, and work-family conflict” (Grant et al., 2008, p. 899).

Ombuds also help create ethical cultures. They normalize productive conflict engagement and allow people to bring concerns and questions forward safely. They provide skill-based conflict competence training, including that for bystanders/upstanders, which builds collective capacity for respectful confrontation and clear communication. Critically, they help maintain standards of behavior that may not otherwise be enforceable. For example, in the university setting, the ombud may address instances of faculty behavior that do not qualify as gross misconduct but are nevertheless problematic, such as not holding office hours or returning student work (Rosovsky, 1991). This helps address the first steps onto ethical slippery slopes, which is where many more serious problems originate (Garrett, Lazzaro, Ariely, & Sharot, 2016; Gottschalk, 2017; Welsh, Ordoñez, Snyder, & Christian, 2015). True whistleblowing is when someone reports something illegal (Tugend, 2013), and while ombuds can receive that information (and may choose or be compelled to act on it), they add considerable value when engaged before an issue is so clearly cut. Formal channels are very well suited to address stark cases of wrongdoing or rule-breaking. Ombuds, as informal resources, can engage issues that feel hazy, where there is a sense that norms and mores are subtly eroding even though no policy violation has occurred. Ombuds can help people in the grey area when they are struggling to determine how to act in the face of uncertainty, confusion, or threat. Any organization that values its members, their voices, their choices, and an ethical culture should have an ombud.
The impact a skilled ombud can have at an institutional level is significant yet subtle. Because it is less visceral and direct than ombuds’ casework, this contribution is often overlooked, even by ombuds themselves. There is the cumulative effect of individual cases; an organization is improved in the aggregate when fewer conflicts fester and more people have increased conflict competence. Yet the value of an organizational ombud is far greater than the sum of its individual cases.

Organizations as Complex Systems.

Bolman and Deal (1997) described organizations as complex, surprising, deceptive, ambiguous. That might sound menacing, but complexity is a useful framework for understanding organizations (Cilliers, 1998; Meadows, 2008, Morgan, 1997; Oshry, 2007; Perrow, 2014). Complexity describes a state of being that is highly collective, nonlinear, and multifaceted. It emphasizes that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and prohibits reductionist approaches—one must look well beyond the lines drawn on the org chart and the words in the employee handbook to begin to make sense of why and how the organization works. It is ideal for seeing the ombud role, which exists precisely because the tidy, rational organization represented by policy and procedure is, in fact, deeply imperfect and always in flux.

Qualities of complex systems include that the system is open, with boundaries that are difficult to discern; that it has a growing history that informs its actions and adaptations; that it has rich, dynamic interactions between a large number of heterogeneous elements; and that those interactions often have a non-linear ripple effect out to other elements as well as back onto themselves (Cilliers, 1998; Meadows, 2008; Senge, 1990). Complex organizations are emergent, self-organizing, ever-evolving, and therefore hard to define, divine, and control. The complex frame requires an engaged, observant, open-minded stance in the emerging present and also provides new tools for
anticipating ambiguous futures. It allows us to see and begin to make sense of the fluid, dynamic work of ombuds and leaders.

Leadership in Complex Systems

Seeing organizations through a complexity frame opens up exciting new paths for leadership. If organizations are emergent and self-organizing, then what is the role of a leader? On the one hand, it may seem that this model relegates leaders to a figurehead at worst or a sort of custodian at best, especially in contrast to more charismatic or autocratic leaders of days gone by. On the other hand, many of these new paths mirror important elements of ombud work, especially regarding the capacity to help organizations change and grow.

Transformational leadership holds that a leader’s work ultimately lies in inspiring and stimulating an organization’s members in a way that aligns their motivations with the organization’s needs (Bass, 1985, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass & Riggio, 2006). The transformational style is premised on the assumption that personal satisfaction results in improved organizational outcomes. It focuses very much on the leader-follower relationship, role-modeling, and personal development and as such has invited emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006), self-awareness and preventive care (Drucker, 2006), and a disassociation of leadership with formal authority (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) into our collective leadership consciousness.

Unfortunately, transformational leadership ignores the larger forces at play within any given organizational system and over-emphasizes personal agency and charisma. One cannot inspire or empathize their way out of every pickle. Enter systems leadership, which shifts a leader’s role from inspiring individuals to facilitating conditions in which individuals can thrive (Senge et al., 2015). Systems leaders do not do the transforming so much as they empower and enable others to transform. They see the larger system,
foster reflection and generative conversation, shift the collective focus from reactionary problem solving to co-creating the future, and catalyze collective leadership, in the words of Senge et al. (2015). This builds on the idea of the adaptive leader (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Heifetz, Linksy, & Grashow, 2009; Scharmer & Käufer, 2013), who deals with systemic conditions, confronts the status quo, engages “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) and differentiates between detail and dynamic complexity (Senge, 1990).

The trends and concerns (past, present, and future) that ombuds are meant to raise with leaders often point to adaptive challenges, situations that “aren’t amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 13). These are distinct from technical challenges, problems that people already have the knowledge and ability to fix, even if doing so is difficult. Such problems rarely require participation from top leadership, and wise leaders should know the difference. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) claim that the most common cause of leadership failure is treating adaptive challenges like technical ones. An ombud is well positioned to surface tough or unexpected adaptive challenges for leaders, as well as broaden their thinking, perspective, and ability to dialogue productively about it.

To be successful in the work of engaging adaptive challenges, organizational leaders must adopt a systems approach suitable for complexity. By definition, a systems approach requires input from a variety of sources, some obvious but many more ambiguous. One must be able to see the forest for the trees, scan their environment, identify patterns, and use feedback wisely. Each of the “reflection and inquiry skills” Senge (1990, p. 14) suggested organizational leaders require are abilities ombuds possess of a matter of course: seeing leaps of abstraction; balancing inquiry and advocacy; distinguishing espoused theory from theory in use; and recognizing and
defusing defensive routines. Heifetz and Linksy’s (2002) charge to leaders also mirrored work ombuds do regularly: get on the balcony; think politically; orchestrate the conflict; give the work back; hold steady.

In 1983, Gareth Morgan argued that “strategic action should embody and reflect a systemic wisdom where the primary concern is to facilitate the evolution of contexts” (p. 350). Leaders in complex organizations have to “understand that very little can be managed directly, but they can do much to sponsor a new self-understanding” by encouraging uncertainty, communication about it, and new understandings of it, claimed Barnett (2000, p. 138). Drucker (2006) argued that it is a CEO’s responsibility to regularly question assumptions, to be routinely re-thinking about their organization. He emphasized “preventive care” and early diagnosis of problems and issues, an obvious overlap with the ombud’s mandate. Govindarajan (2016) called this “planned opportunism”:

The idea starts with recognizing that the future is unpredictable, shaped by nonlinear changes and chance events—the “opportunism” part. How you as a leader respond is the “planned” part. Planned opportunism requires sensitivity to weak signals—early evidence of emerging trends from which it is possible to deduce important changes… Attention to weak signals gives rise to fresh perspectives and nonlinear thinking, which help an organization imagine and plan for various plausible futures. (para. 3)

When leaders are facing a difficult decision or a growing problem, when they are trying to understand an organization’s culture or affect change, the organizational ombud should be one of their most powerful assets. Decision-makers should strive to operate with complete-as-possible system knowledge. Ombuds are a node in the organizational system that is likely to have different knowledge than others as well as a sense of the system as a whole. The ombud receives information from a variety of perspectives, many of which a leader simply could not access themselves directly (Gregersen, 2017; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linksy, 2002). As Hamilton (2014) wrote, “The first step toward
becoming a systems leader is to develop the capacity to see the system through the 
eyes of others” (Creating System Leaders, para. 1). Ombuds spend their days hearing 
about the organizational system from a wide array of others and helping them learn to 
navigate it. Because of this, ombuds also have access to a multitude of relationships. 
For Morgan (1983), in cybernetics, relationships define context: “An understanding of the 
relationships and their intensities allows one to discern the general pattern of change, 
and stable and unstable relationships within the system” (p. 351). Understanding the 
relationships in a system—both human and non-human—is key to being able to lead 
well amidst complexity.

Core Concepts

**Systems Thinking**

One of the concepts that undergirds much of complexity theory and systems 
leadership theory is that of systems thinking (Ackoff, 1994; Armson, 2011; Bennis, 1989; 
Heifetz & Linksy, 2002; Oshry, 2007; Senge, 1990; Tichy, 1983). Systems thinking, 
broadly speaking, is “a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for 
seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots’” (Senge, 1990, p. 68). Anyone 
can adopt and practice this way of thinking, but ombuds and leaders should be 
especially drawn to it. There are personal as well as professional benefits: It “continually 
reminds us that the whole can exceed the sum of its parts” (Senge, 1990, p. 11) and 
allows for distance, creativity, sensemaking, and optimism when confronting seemingly 
intractable issues. Systems thinking is a move away from basic cause-and-effect, black-
and-white, reductionist types of processing patterns and toward a more holistic view, 
with appreciation for and acceptance of the reality that everything is interconnected and 
simultaneous.
This approach requires a flexibility of mind, which is freeing both intellectually and emotionally. A good example is that of boundary setting. From a systems perspective, boundaries are arbitrary and should be used as analytic tools rather than barriers. Meadows (2008) wrote,

It’s a great art to remember that boundaries are of our own making, and that they can and should be reconsidered for each new discussion, problem, or purpose. It’s a challenge to stay creative enough to drop the boundaries that worked for the last problem and to find the most appropriate set of boundaries for the next question. It’s also a necessity, if problems are to be solved well. (p. 99)

As institutional problem-solvers (Ziegenfuss & O’Rourke, 2010), ombuds are well advised to heed Meadows’s challenge. And as conflict specialists, much less plain old human beings, ombuds benefit from the required shift “from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something ‘out there’ to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience” (Senge, 1990, p. 12). A remarkably common refrain in ombudship is “the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem”—systems thinking can help all members of an organization (leaders included) reframe, generate creative solutions, and take a more open and experimental approach to their organizational lives. Systems thinking requires the ability to step back and observe patterns, relationships, influence, and flow within the whole organization, which in turn expands the possibility that one can better understand and help channel its development. It also helps us avoid the mistake of trying to solve a problem as we idealize it rather than the problem as it is actually experienced (Armson, 2011).

**Feedback**

Meadows (2008) insisted that “systems thinkers see the world as a collection of ‘feedback processes’” (p. 24). Systems thinking is indeed essential to seeing feedback,
which in complexity terms can be defined as “any reciprocal flow of influence” (Senge, 1990, p. 74). To be clear, feedback in the complexity model is not a supervisor’s pat on the back or a colleague’s suggestion for improvement—what might be more accurately deemed performance feedback. It does not have the ping-pong quality of a linear action-reaction response either. Feedback is rather described in terms of loops: influence \( x \) affects \( y \) which in turn affects \( x \), again affecting \( y \) and so on, though usually with far more variables in the mix. The feedback loop is, according to Meadows (2008), the “basic operating unit of a system” (p. 6).

Scharmer and Käufer (2013) described closing feedback loops as essential for moving from traditional modes of leadership toward the emerging future of the whole (co-sensing, co-inspiring, co-creating). Feedback is important because it is often, though not always, a detectable aspect of a complex system’s true dynamics. Distinct from the elements of the system, which are much easier to identify, feedback is a vital part of “the interconnections, the information part of the system” (Meadows, 2008, p. 31). It is what constitutes that system as that system, not just another of its type; it belies the system’s spirit, one might say. Feedback also tends to reveal patterns and archetypes, which, with practice, are noticeable and “workable.” The ability to identify and interpret feedback is critical for anyone trying to understand and improve how a complex organization grows and changes. The notions of upward feedback or systemic feedback vis-à-vis ombuds and leaders should be understood through this conception of feedback more so than that of performance feedback.

As systems thinkers, ombuds can become proficient in identifying kinds of feedback or influence (Armson, 2011) and recognizing their archetypal patterns, which facilitates their grasp of and influence on the behavior of a complex system. The ability to read systems feedback and eventually experiment in adjusting feedback loops is
essential for using complexity as an asset. Meadows (2008) reminded us, “Being less surprised by complex systems is mainly a matter of learning to expect, appreciate, and use the world’s complexity” (p. 111). This is true on macro and micro levels. For example, ombuds can use knowledge of a system’s feedback loops to help “structure the [organization’s] rules to turn the self-organizing capabilities of the system in a positive direction” (Meadows, 2008, p. 137). On a smaller level, ancillary benefits of reading feedback loops may include the ability to be expansive in generating ways out of conflict, looking for opportunities to use small squabbles as points of high leverage, and generally assisting others in shifting toward a complexity mindset.

**Organizational Learning**

Organizations acquire information, produce knowledge, interpret, store and transmit that knowledge, and (ideally) change their actions accordingly in a continuous cycle (Daft & Weick, 1984; Perez Lopez, Montes Peon, & Vazquez Ordas, 2005). That is to say, they learn (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Cook & Yanow, 1996; Garvin, 2000; Hedberg, 1981; Huber, 1991; Vera & Crossnan, 2003). Vera and Crossan (2003) defined organizational learning as “the process of change in individual and shared thought and action, which is affected by and embedded in the institutions of the organization” (p. 123). There are also at least two types of learning, single-looped and double-looped (Argyris, 1976). The former describes learning that tends to lead to incremental change; the latter “entails challenging existing assumptions and beliefs to align the institution to the environment and therefore requires transformational change” (Kezar, 2005, p. 10). In their role as sensing and sensemaking agents, ombuds have a significant part to play in furthering an organization’s learning, and therefore its change. This description of the
cybernetic characteristics of learning organizations is practically a job description for the ombud role:

Having the capacity to perceive, monitor, and scan relevant aspects of their environment; the ability to relate received information back to those guiding the system; the ability to detect significant ruptures or problems; and the ability to initiate actions when necessary for system stability. (Anderson, 2005, p. 37)

**Trust**

Trust is a common theme in leadership literature (Caldwell, Hayes, & Long, 2010; Covey & Conant, 2016; Covey & Gulledge, 1994; Covey & Merrill, 2018; Galford & Drapeau, 2003; Hurley, 2012; Hurley, Gillespie, Ferrin, & Dietz, 2013), and it is essential to ombudship as well. If one does not thoroughly trust that the ombud is indeed a confidential, neutral, informal, and independent professional as well as a caring, compassionate, and credible individual, the chances that any person—leader or not—will seek out and respect the ombud are understandably low. It is clear that “personal trust of the ombudsperson is a necessary pre-condition for many people to fully utilize the services of the office” (Griffin, 2010, p. 67). Again, the first role of an ombud is to “build enough of a relationship with each stakeholder and stakeholder group to be perceived as fair, safe, accessible, and credible” (Rowe & Gadlin, 2013, p. 8)—the success of the rest of their work relies on it. Indeed, one of the benefits of having an ombud is creating “a culture of trust rather than compliance” for the entire organization (Bogoslaw, 2015).

An ombud’s ability to increase trust between other members of the organization or in the organization itself is extremely important. There is abundant writing about the importance of trust in modern organizations (Brown, 2018; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Covey & Conant, 2016; Covey & Merrill, 2018; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Edelman, 2019; Fukuyama, 1995; Joni, 2004; Kramer, 2007; Kramer & Cook, 2004; Kramer & Tyler,
1996; Lyman, 2012; Pandya & Shell, 2005; Whitney, 1994; Zak & Knack, 2001). High-
trust organizations consistently outperform lower-trust organizations by economic and
interpersonal indicators (see Hurley, 2014 for a comprehensive overview) Trust
increases the speed and decreases the cost at which things get done (Covey & Merrill,
2018). In a four-year longitudinal study of Chicago schools, Bryk and Schneider (2003)
identified “relational trust” as essential to successfully advancing a school’s mission (p.
45). Though the research was conducted in schools, its findings seem widely applicable
to any organization dependent on “cooperative endeavors” (p. 45). In essence, Bryk and
Schneider asserted that trust is social glue, and the stronger it is, the better for personal
and organizational outcomes. Increased relational trust leads to increased buy-in,
reduced fear of risk, increased honesty and knowledge sharing, a sense of commitment
to a greater good, and willingness to engage conflict (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). All of
these factors combined to enhance productivity, collaboration, innovation, and collective
capacity for organizational change.

Critical Friends

The IOA (2019a) suggested ombuds can “create an opportunity for the executive
to talk about things they might not be able to talk to others about” (Why Should Leaders
Listen, para. 2). Ombuds are well positioned to be this sort of resource for leaders, who
often have insular executive teams who serve at the pleasure and are incentivized to tell
a leader what they want to hear (Gregersen, 2017). This can lead to what one executive
referred to as “a good-news cocoon” (Nilekani, as cited in Gregersen, 2017, para. 3).
One of the models for an important relationship between ombud and leader could be that
of the critical friend:

A critical friend provides such feedback to an individual—a student, a teacher, or
an administrator—or to a group. A critical friend, as the name suggests, is a
trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 49-50)

Many ombuds would likely take issue with the notion of being a “friend,” however critical, to leaders. Yet there is a closeness and respect—an element of care—that can and, arguably, should exist between ombuds and leaders, or at least a mutual care for the organization. As an anonymous corporate ombuds shares,

We are called on to do that which is beyond the standard expectation of managing the individual problem on a case by case basis. We are here to aid leaders in thinking and complex problem solving. We are sought out for our opinion on important organizational decisions because of our connection. We are key thought partners to leaders and managers of all levels. This is where our greatest value is. (Schenck & Zinsser, 2014, p. 30)

Leaders do tend to underutilize the ombud as a resource in their decision making (Rowe & Gadlin, 2013), but the role of a critical friend goes further than thought partner, however, and explicitly includes critique, which is important to note. In her book Dare to Lead, researcher Brené Brown (2018) described what she calls “integrity partners” as important supports for leaders. Integrity partners are “someone at work who we can check in with to make sure we’re acting in our integrity. This should be someone we can talk to when we’re questioning how we showed up in a recent exchange or if we want to role-play a hard conversation” (p. 227). These types of roles/players can help leaders “get up on the balcony” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) and see themselves and their organizations more clearly and strategically.

**Power**

Power is an illustrative area of inquiry to better understand the ombuds role, the leader role, and the connection between the two. Their most prominent difference arguably is power, loosely defined as the ability to get someone to do something they
would not have otherwise done (Dahl, as cited in Morgan, 1997). Leaders are inherently viewed as powerful, as authority figures, in virtue of their role if not their more personal characteristics. Ombuds are often perceived (even by themselves) as having no power other than that tied to their reputation (Barkat, 2015; Blair, 2017; Harrison & Morrill, 2004). Stieber (1982) held that an ombuds' power “is intangible, tied to credibility and heavily dependent on prestige, persuasion, as well as thorough knowledge of the [organization] and its rules” (p. 10). Reputational power is, however, a form of power. Abundant research has supported the view that formal authority is neither the only nor always the most important source of power (French & Raven, 1959; Lauby, 2017; Morgan, 1997; Nye, 2004; Rowe, personal communication, Sept 6, 2018). Lauby (2017) described seven types of power in the workplace: connecting; coercive; rewarding; expert; informational; legitimate; referent. Morgan’s (1997) framework identified 14 power sources. Those compelling for ombuds include control of scarce resources; control of knowledge and information; control of boundaries; ability to cope with uncertainty; interpersonal alliances, networks, and control of the “informal organization”; symbolism and the management of meaning; and the power one already has (Morgan, 1997, p. 171). Rowe (personal communication, Sept 6, 2018) added to this list the power of expertise; charisma; commitment; moral authority; an elegant solution; and relationship. All of these serve to close the perceived power gap that is so often used to put distance between leaders and ombuds—the fallacy that the former have it all, and the latter have none.

An inherent paradox of power for the ombud role is that it has no formal power yet exists in part to be a check on formal power. Ombuds provide space within an organization where people can confront or at least safely reflect on the organization’s dominant power dynamics—that itself is hugely powerful. Precisely because ombuds do
not have formal power, they are perhaps a perfect place to see the non-obvious yet still very real power imbued in a complex system. There is a paradox for leaders as well, in that the more powerful they are, the less likely it is that people will feel comfortable bringing forward exactly the kinds of information a leader needs to have (Gregersen, 2017; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). The ombud role, by its informality, neutrality, and independence, provides an important complement.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Theoretical Framework - The Idealized Model

The primary framework in this study is what I call the Idealized Model of the Ombud-Leader Relationship (the “idealized model”). It is the guiding schema for how ombuds and leaders are meant to relate, derived from the IOA Standards of Practice and reified by conventional wisdom amongst ombud practitioners. The Standards of Practice are based on the IOA’s four Core Ethical Principles (which were themselves codified by the Corporate Ombudsman Association in the 1980s). The Standards were promulgated by the IOA and last revised in October of 2009. They are the operational guidelines by which most organizational ombuds abide or aspire to abide. All ombud participants in this study considered these principles and standards the dominant frame of reference for their practice.

Of course, the leader to whom an ombud reports is not the only leader with whom they interact. For this study, I used that particular relationship as a focal point, however, because it represents the Idealized Model of the Ombud-Leader Relationship:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition: Idealized Model of the Ombud-Leader Relationship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An ombud reports only to their organization’s senior-most leadership, providing information about and recommendations for addressing problems (real, perceived, or potential) that exist within the organization.</td>
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This idealized model, which can be summed up as “reporting and recommending straight to the top,” is drawn directly from the IOA Standards of Practice (2009), specifically:

Preamble

Each Ombudsman office should have an organizational Charter or Terms of Reference, approved by senior management, articulating the principles of the Ombudsman function in that organization and their consistency with the IOA Standards of Practice (IOA, 2009, emphasis added)
Line 2.3 (Neutrality/Impartiality)

- The Ombudsman is a designated neutral reporting to the highest possible level of the organization and operating independent of ordinary line and staff structures (IOA, 2009, emphasis added)

Line 4.6 (Informality)

The Ombudsman identifies trends, issues and concerns about policies and procedures, including potential future issues and concerns, without breaching confidentiality or anonymity, and provides recommendations for responsibly addressing them (IOA, 2009, emphasis added)

See Appendix A for complete IOA Standards of Practice document.

In plain speak, these elements describe a documented and approved arrangement wherein an ombud reports only to senior-most leadership and in doing so may flag up potential concerns as well as provide recommendations for addressing them.

This idealized model lurks in the ombudship literature (Gadlin & Sturm, 2007; Howard, 2010; IOA 2009; Rowe, 1987, 2010; Rowe & Gadlin, 2013; Schenck & Zinsser, 2014; Wagner, 2000), in the IOA’s training materials for its Foundations course (IOA, 2014) and has been, in my experience, the dominant mental model in the ombud profession. It is commonly understood that ombuds are meant to report directly and only to their organization’s highest official. Two justifications routinely offered for this arrangement are that (a) it protects ombuds’ independence and impartiality by removing potential conflicts of interest or undue influence—real or perceived—on ombuds by management (Levine-Finley & Carter, 2010; Santovec, 2006) and (b) it provides access to leaders, thereby facilitating the upward feedback and recommending functions of the position (IOA, 2009; Wagner, 2000) and imbuing the ombud role with a certain status and power (Conrick, 2000).

Direct conversation with top-most leaders is not the only mechanism ombuds have to convey systemic feedback, however. Rowe and Gadlin (2013) outline three
ways such feedback is often delivered: through statistical overview reports (some of which might be referred to as annual reports) that are either public or disseminated to key stakeholders; working directly with certain people, groups, or departments in order to highlight problematic issues; and face-to-face meetings with leaders. Yet it stands to reason that direct connection to a top-most leader could be a remarkably powerful and efficient mechanism for ombuds to use when needed.

An ombud’s ability to “recommend” and provide important, sensitive information directly to top decision-makers in an organization is extremely dependent on the terms outlined in the office charter (direct and dotted reporting lines) and the quality of those relationships. Such quality depends on a variety of factors, including personal trust and regard, professional respect, role clarity, and accessibility. An unreceptive leader might effectively silence the entire upward feedback function of the ombud role by disregarding or discrediting their recommendations. A skeptical leader might set a tone that discourages others in the organization from using or trusting the ombud, deeply compromising its utility (Jessar, 2005). A particularly spiteful or insecure leader might even just shutter an ombud office completely.

My strong sense is that most leaders are not worst-case scenarios. They do not intend to silence or isolate ombuds, but that does not mean they understand how to utilize them fully. And when this is the case, leaders may miss important opportunities to improve their own work and thereby the organizations for which they are responsible.

A Phenomenological Approach

Both ombudship and leadership are highly situated practices and therefore well suited to qualitative inquiry (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 19). The primary purpose of this study was to better understand how organizational ombuds and organizational leaders conceptualize and operationalize their work together. As previously noted, little to no
research on the nature of these relationships exists at present. Hence, the study had a very simple and pragmatic objective: Gather firsthand accounts of how ombuds and leaders experienced and thought about their working relationships. Phenomenological methods were appropriate in this pursuit, as they are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions. Adding an interpretive dimension to phenomenological research, enabling it to be used as the basis for practical theory, allows it to inform, support or challenge policy and action. (Lester, 1999, p. 1)

As a hermeneutic phenomenological study, this research positions ombuds and leaders as experts of their own experience (Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991; Lester, 1999; McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; van Manen, 1990). The goal was to capture how ombuds and leaders “perceive [their respective roles and shared relationship], describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104) and comprehensively describe the mental models in use. Ideally, a better understanding of leaders’ and ombuds’ perceptions and experiences of their work together can shape how the ombud profession envisions and engages this component of ombuds’ work.

To that end, this study’s central research questions were:

- What do “good” ombud-leader relationships look like?
- How do ombuds and leaders think about and do their work together?
- How does the lived experience of ombud-leader relationships compare to the idealized model?
- What opportunities exist for ombuds and leaders to work together to the benefit of their organizations?
Grounded Theory

This study was informed by the conceptual framework described above and shaped in particular as a reality test of the idealized model. It was conducted, however, as a grounded theory exercise. In grounded theory, the goal is to generate theories from the data inductively (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2015). Even though the idealized model provided a theoretical framework of sorts, it was known to be basic from the outset. Grounded theory allowed for its gaps to be identified and, in some cases, filled in. Through constant analysis and interpretation of data, theme, and categories emerged. These were mapped onto existing literature about ombudship, leadership, and relationship to see what fit and what did not. Hence, the direct findings of this small study are presented in one chapter below and then viewed and discussed through a prism of other relevant research contexts in another.

Methods

The primary data for this study were derived from individual interviews conducted between January and September 2018 with organizational ombuds and the leaders to whom they directly reported. While the original concept for the study aimed for two interviews (one with the ombud, one with the leader) at four separate sites (for a total of eight interviews), difficulty securing interviews with leaders required modification of the research plan. I ultimately conducted interviews with practicing ombuds at six separate sites; interviews with leaders at two of those six ombud sites; and one interview with a retired ombud from a seventh site. The total number of interviews was nine: seven ombuds and two leaders.

Ombud interviews lasted between 60 to 120 minutes; leader interviews were each approximately 30 minutes. One interview was conducted in person; all others were
conducted via an online video conferencing service. Interviews were conducted according to a semi-structured protocol, which had been fine-tuned based on two pilot interviews (one with a leader, one with an ombud). The protocols for ombuds and leaders were separate yet mirrored; they were designed to elicit each participant’s thoughts on the same topic from the perspective of their distinct role. As experience warranted, questions were slightly modified or reordered throughout the study but did not change significantly in form or content.

Each interview was audio recorded, and in most cases, I also took short notes throughout the conversation, which were later typed up in a brief memo. The audio file of each recording was transcribed by Rev.com, with whom I have a signed Non-Disclosure Agreement. The resulting transcripts were carefully redacted to remove any identifying information and then saved to a password-protected laptop and cloud storage account. I also gathered data about the context of each site, including information about its charter, job descriptions, any press or media coverage, materials on its website, and other relevant artifacts.

**Selection Process & Criteria**

While the participants were drawn from across seven distinct organizations, it is important to locate this study within the wider organizational ombuds community, primarily as embodied by the IOA. The IOA is a natural locus for this research for the following reasons. First, the IOA is the professional association that issues the Standards of Practice from which the Idealized Model is inferred. Second, the IOA is the largest convener of organizational ombuds in the world. Third, my membership in and volunteerism with the IOA since 2013 has allowed me to build relationships with ombuds that led to acquiring access to participants for this study.
All ombuds approached for participation were individuals I have come to know through involvement with the IOA over the past 5 or so years. While most interviews took place via an audio or video interface, I had met each ombud participant in person at least twice before. Each ombud participant is also someone with whom I have had other points of contact for various reasons, and so I had an existing degree of familiarity and rapport with all ombud participants before our interviews.

In identifying potential participants, I utilized a combination of theoretical sampling (Patton, 2002), group characteristics sampling, and success case or “critical case” sampling to try and find participants who would “yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge” (Patton, 2002, p. 236). I sought out ombuds who shared apparent characteristics of having positive ombud-leader relationships: they had expressed a degree of positivity about working with leaders; or seemed comfortable taking a leadership stance in their ombud work, what might be seen as an “activist” (Blair, 2017; Gadlin, 2014) or “proactive” (Barkat, 2015) ombuds; or had revealed a thoughtful interest in the topic of the ombud-leader relationship; or some combination of the above. These qualities were observed through interactions at IOA trainings, conferences, and regional ombud events.

In total, I approached nine ombuds for participation in this study. All were members of the IOA who practiced only as ombuds within their organizations (no collateral duties) in offices that adhered to the Standards of Practice. One declined to participate based on an inability to include their leader in the study. Another was interested in participating and had some initial conversations with me, but ultimately did not sit for a formal interview due to scheduling difficulties. They did give me permission to pursue an interview with their leader, which was deftly sidestepped by that leader’s chief of staff.
Six practicing ombuds agreed to participate, and all but one agreed to help me connect with their leaders. That one simply stated it “wasn’t gonna happen” given their leader’s high profile and busy schedule. I also interviewed one retired ombud, who did not have a leader (current or former) it would have made sense to interview. Of those five practicing ombuds who consented to my approaching their leaders for interviews, three connected me directly to their leader’s executive assistant, one offered to put me in touch with their leader directly, and the other gave me permission to reach out to their former leader. Two of those leader interviews ultimately took place. One was scheduled, rescheduled, and then sidestepped. One I did not pursue because of information revealed in the course of the ombud interview. Another I did pursue, but unsuccessfully.

Of the nine ombuds I approached, three were male-identifying, six were female-identifying. Three were black; six were white. Ages spanned from 35 to 85. Both leaders who participated were white, male-identifying, and over 40 years old. All sites were located in the United States, six along the Eastern Seaboard and one in the Midwest.

**Difficulty with Leader Access**

Difficulty in securing interviews with leaders was anticipated from the outset. The people to whom ombuds report are typically highly placed in an organization, busy, and potentially guarded about what they might discuss with an unknown researcher in a recorded conversation. While it is disappointing to have had low leader participation, there is insight to be gained from my attempts to connect with them.

In all cases, ombuds decided whether their leaders were approached for participation in the study. I followed their lead about if, when, and how to proceed with extending an invitation, remaining mindful of the sensitive and unique nature of ombud-leader relationship dynamics. All ombuds were thoughtful about the pros and cons of
making the “ask” of leaders, though criteria varied from ombud to ombud. For example, in one case where the ombud was nearing retirement, they hoped aloud that an interview with me would stimulate the leader to think more proactively about the hiring and onboarding of their replacement. In another case where the ombud and the leader were both very new in their roles, the ombud gingerly weighed the merits of increased visibility against putting the ombud office front and center during a tenuous time. This served to underscore how delicate leadership transitions can be for ombuds.

Only two ombuds I approached immediately declined the idea of inviting their leader; I honestly had expected more outright rejections. One made it clear that they did not feel comfortable asking their leader to spare the time for this project, and another said they were not going to ask because their leader had recently “been hit with scandal after scandal” and was keeping a low profile. Even though these responses did not result in interviews, both were extremely helpful as clear examples of ombuds scanning a situation and making a calculation to protect their leaders’ time and energy, and thereby their credibility. (Both of these ombuds are people I believe to be committed to the subject of this research as well as more vocal than average, so I felt reasonably confident that they were declining based for tactical reasons. One individual ultimately participated in the research; the other did not.)

In two cases, a leader’s representative pointed me in the direction of someone other than the leader I had approached. In one, the leader’s executive assistant conveyed that the leader “would like for you to talk with” another ombud at the institution, giving the impression that they misinterpreted (perhaps intentionally) the goal of the study. In the other, the leader’s chief of staff pointed me to a dean “who works very closely” with the ombud. Given what I had gleaned from my conversations with their respective ombuds, I speculated that both leaders were not terribly knowledgeable about
nor interested in the ombud role; hence, I was unsurprised by their deflection. No one wants to give an interview on a topic they neither care nor know much about, especially someone highly ranked and very busy.

Given the ultimate ratio of seven ombud participants to two leader participants, the results of this study are primarily informed from the ombud perspective. It is very important to bear this in mind.

**Site Descriptions**

Seven sites were included in this study. To protect participant identity, I do not describe them individually. As a group, they include two academic institutions, one public and one private; two public sector entities, one federal and one regional; one national not-for-profit organization; and two corporations, one publicly held and one private. The smallest constituency served was approximately 1,500; the largest was nearly 100,000. Their cultures were described, respectively, as “one where the hierarchy matters,” “innovative and learning-driven,” “reactive,” “chaotic and political,” “very people-oriented,” “data-driven, evidence-based,” and “data-focused, very research-driven.”

The precipitating events for the formation of these ombud offices included regulatory orders, constituent demands, legal proceedings, and, in three cases, the desire of senior leaders to start an office. Each ombud office was structured a bit differently (see Figure 1), and ombuds had varying degrees of “say” over how their reporting relationships were set. In some cases, the reporting lines changed over time, either due to a shift in the organization’s structure or a change in personnel or both. But in most cases, the ombud-leader reporting relationships had remained static.
Data Overview

Interviews, Correspondence, & Memos

In the end, I conducted roughly 12 hours of interviews resulting in 216 transcript pages for analysis. I wrote brief memos after each interview, and also kept a running research journal throughout analysis. Correspondence with participants and/or their staff was also reviewed as data. I was also very fortunate to have opportunities to check my findings with others in the field (member checks), as well as ask follow up questions of participants as required.

Site Data

I compiled profiles of each site to effectively compare their type, size, location, culture, leadership structure, age of ombud office, genesis of ombud office, and ombud reporting routines. Previous experience of the ombud in each organization, if any, was also noted (i.e., had they held another position there before becoming ombud, if so what and for how long; See Appendix D, Site Profile Template). Additional data collected relevant to each site included, where possible, the ombud office charters, job descriptions, annual reports, websites, and press mentions.

Interview data and site data are, of course, situated in a larger context of ombud practice and my experience with it, which began nearly 20 years ago. I have been an active member volunteer with the IOA since 2013, an ombud consultant at various organizations since 2015, and a regular attendee of the New York Area Ombuds Group. This study is also informed by observations from the IOA conferences I have attended (five) and presented at (two); observations from over 75 hours of IOA trainings I have attended; countless personal interactions with ombud practitioners; and numerous journal articles, ombud websites and job announcements, blog posts, online video
interviews, podcasts, news reports, and other miscellaneous sources of ombud information. (See Appendix E, Data Catalogue.)

Coding & Analysis

My first step in organizing data was simply to read each interview transcript as soon as it was available, just to familiarize myself with it and correct any potential transcription errors. I then began a process of iterative coding, reading and re-reading each transcript, highlighting notable sections. I open-coded for content that pertained to theoretical categories related to the idealized model (issues of hierarchy, access, reporting and recommending, etc.). I also identified portions of the text that seemed significant, either because the participant had indicated significance; because they contributed to (or disrupted) a pattern I was noticing across participants; or because they were distinct in some other way. I used both a top-down and bottom-up approach to coding (Maxwell, 2005), looking for data that supported my etic concepts and identifying emic concepts as they emerged. As much as possible, I tried to rely on in vivo coding to capture emic concepts. For example, “executive presence,” “ringing the bell,” and “staying in one’s lane” are phrases originating from participants themselves. Analysis began as soon as the first datum was collected and continued throughout the writing of this final manuscript. In addition to continually revisiting the transcripts, I was fortunate to be able to ask follow-up questions of participants as needed and also to collaboratively discuss what I was seeing in the data with ombud colleagues as I moved through this project. Doing so certainly deepened my understanding and helped correct unintended errors.

In addition to coding interviews, I also built a profile for each site so I could compare structural elements of the locations. In these profiles, I charted historical data
about the organization and ombud office, demographic data about the ombud and leader, data about reporting routines, and so forth (See Appendix D, Site Profile Template). This side-by-side comparison was extremely helpful in top-level analysis of similarities and differences across the seven sites.

**Document Review**

In the course of the study, I collected relevant contextual documents for review. In addition to participant correspondence mentioned above, I also reviewed, wherever possible, ombud websites, charters, annual reports, newsletter contributions, published works, job descriptions, videos, podcasts, and social media posts pertinent to participants. These were then arranged into the categorizes of personal documents, official documents, and/or popular culture documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

**Data Validity**

Various strategies to ensure the validity of study data were employed. Consistent researcher memos were kept and reviewed to ensure reflexive engagement with data collection and analysis. Methods were strategically sequenced so that each phase of research would articulate sensibly with the next. Dialogic engagement with non-participant ombuds and other qualitative researchers throughout the evolution of my data interpretation was critical. Also, two participants ended up providing useful boundary cases. Their experiences differed in key ways to the “success cases” I thought I was seeking out, but I am so glad to have had them. Not only does their inclusion result in a wider representation of lived experiences, it also provided useful “other side of the coin” data that could support some of the findings, e.g., more positive relationships had quality X, less positive relationships lacked quality X, and help me think more critically about the findings as a whole.
Before transitioning into the findings, I underscore once more that this study was extremely compact and exploratory. It does not purport to capture all or even most of what there is to know about ombud-leader relationships. Rather, it merely describes what nine individuals shared about their experiences, reflects on how that relates to the received wisdom of the idealized model, and ponders what it all may indicate for how ombuds and leaders do and might relate in service to their organizations.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This study modestly attempted to map the experiences of lived ombud-leader relationships onto the idealized model of ombud-leader relationships. In doing so, alignments and gaps between the real and ideal were found. It was understood from the outset that there would likely be considerable daylight between what the idealized model suggested and what real ombuds and leaders experienced. This is obvious, given that the idealized model purports only to be minimally prescriptive (the what) and not at all descriptive (the how). In this section, I will provide an overview of some significant findings as both synopsis of and road map for the more detailed findings that follow later in this chapter.

The Idealized Model

The study confirmed that the idealized model was indeed an influential mental model. All participants, both ombuds and leaders, seemed very aware of the idealized model and how their relationships compared to it. The most significant alignment was in the idealized model’s emphasis on ombuds being connected to the “highest possible” level of leadership. Participants overall agreed that there is merit in being perceived as tied to a chief executive and/or governing board—a halo effect of status, essentially. Yet this was neither a precondition for effective ombud-leader relationships nor was it sufficient, in participants’ views. Each of the relationships investigated had interesting deviations from or additions to the idealized model.

My original interpretation of the idealized model was naïve and old fashioned, premised on a very individualistic idea of “leadership” (which reflects how leadership theory itself has developed). Ombuds’ work with leadership fans out far wider than just interacting with the person to whom they directly report. As such, the terminology needs to be better defined to capture and not confuse meanings.
Terms

In the original proposal for this study, “leaders” were defined as the persons to whom an ombud directly reports. In the course of the study, it was clear that more and broader concepts of “leader” were required. Accordingly, these are the leader identifications used throughout the study:

**Direct leader** - The person(s) to whom an ombud directly reports. This relationship is often inscribed in the ombud office charter.

**Dotted-line leader** - The person(s) to whom an ombud reports via a “dotted line.” A dotted line connotes a less formalized connection than a direct line but still is recognized as an established relationship that provides access, rights, and responsibilities (e.g., expectations of periodic reports).

**Senior leader** - Persons of sufficient rank and stature that they are considered important and influential across the entire organization. All direct leaders and dotted-line leaders are senior leaders, but not all senior leaders are direct or dotted-line leaders.

It also became useful to distinguish between types of ombuds:

**Originating ombud** - A person who was the first to hold the role of ombud within their organization. These individuals were closely involved in the initial establishment of the ombuds function in their organization.

**Non-originating ombuds** - A person who was in an ombuds role that had been held by someone else before.

**Insider ombud** - A person who had prior experience in an organization before becoming its ombud.

Finally, I have employed a uniform terminology of bureaucratic hierarchy throughout the findings and discussion for both clarity of concept and obscurity of identification. While some sites were more bureaucratic in practice and feel than others,
all of the organizations had a traditional hierarchical model of senior-most management. Hence, governing board refers to boards of trustees, directors, regents, and so on. Chief executive refers to a president, chancellor, CEO, or other chief executive type. Cabinet-level refers to leaders in the c-suite or top-most strategic management group. Senior operational refers to those leading a business unit or major division of the organization (geographic or functional). It is an admittedly imperfect system, glazing over the nuance of each site. For this study, however, I believe it sufficiently captures the upper echelons of senior-most leadership with which I am concerned.

![Diagram of Senior Leadership Hierarchy]

Figure 1. Generic senior leadership hierarchy.

Quality of Ombud-Leader Relationship

I purposefully sought examples of positive ombud-leader relationships for this study. At the time, I defined “positive” in the most generic way: not bad, better than average. Now, I define positivity as the degree to which an ombud’s relationship with their direct leader(s) was characterized by a high degree of mutual understanding and personal respect, experiences of mutual benefit, and a sense of serving their organization well. A neutral relationship would be one that is not causing harm or
distress but is not meaningful or beneficial either; a negative relationship would be one that is actively antagonistic and/or causing harm.

The most positive ombud-leader relationships in this study shared these characteristics:

- At least one of the key people in the relationship had been intimately involved with the ombud office since its inception (in two cases only the ombud; in another both the ombud and the leader(s); in another just the leader(s)).

- The ombud had experience being and/or working closely with senior leadership themselves. They also had “executive presence” and spoke explicitly about the importance of being able to empathize with leadership, understand their mental models, and deliver information accordingly.

- The ombud was an “insider” who had come up through the organization, often holding a variety of positions along the path to ombud.

Adjectives used by ombud participants to describe their relationships with direct leaders included: cordial, warm, supportive, trusting, positive, respectful, rooted, important, caring, collaborative, influential, insightful, based on integrity, and incredible.

Some participants had, naturally, worked with more than one direct leader throughout their career. The interviews focused primarily on the relationships that were concurrent with or most recent to the time of the study. However, ombuds’ past experiences were sometimes discussed, too, as a point of comparison or insight. Six of the seven ombud participants had had experiences of very positive ombud-leader relationships at some point in their career. Two had moderately positive ombud-leader relationships at the time of the study, and one was in what might be best characterized as a non-existent ombud-leader relationship. One ombud had experienced a negative relationship in their career.
Even though one participant had a non-existent relationship with a direct leader, their experiences working with organizational leadership more broadly were very illuminating. This perspective became especially useful as other interviews continued to widen the aperture of “leadership” well beyond direct leaders, even in cases of very positive relationships. It was also useful to see how the idealized model shaped this participant’s view of the deficit of their own structure.

**Types of Relationships**

While the study originally sought information about ombuds’ reporting relationships, participants regularly spoke about three primary categories of relationships between ombuds and leaders:

*Reporting relationships*

Those between an ombud and the direct leader, that is, persons to whom they had an official reporting relationship. This ombud-leader relationship was the original focus of the study.

*Peer-leader relationships*

Those between an ombud and cabinet-level leaders to whom they do not officially report (e.g., the C-suite, senior management team, provosts) but with whom they may often interact via briefings, systemic issue resolutions, or ex officio committee or task force roles. Leaders to whom they felt they had access and with whom they were placed at a peer level.

*Collateral relationships*

Those between an ombud and operational leaders within their organizations (e.g., department chairs, heads of business units, regional leaders) with whom they may often interact via case issues, trainings, or “policy checks.”
Overview of Reporting Relationships

From a structural point of view, six of the seven ombud participants indeed officially were tied to a very senior leader in their organization (or had been at some point in their career). Of those six, two also had “dotted-line” access to the senior-most group of leaders (a board of directors in one case, a chief executive and a board of directors in the other case) and one felt they always had access to the senior-most leader of the organization if needed, even though it was not specified in a charter. The ombuds provided information to leadership in some form and also supplied recommendations to various extents.

Two of the seven ombuds did not report to their organization’s chief executive or governing board at all (either directly or with dotted line access). One, in an academic setting, felt that reporting into the provost was entirely appropriate due to the peculiarities of their institutional structure. Operational control there was divided from administrative clout, and the president was “very externally-focused, and he’s the fundraiser, and he is not the right person. So, by default, yes, we’re right where we should be.” Even so, the ombud also expressed a feeling that their role would be enhanced if the person to whom they reported “really had operational control over the entire institution.”

The other ombud whose office did not report straight to the top felt that the lack of this structural support severely compromised the ombud function. Serving in a large public sector bureaucracy, this ombud stated very clearly that their office was not perceived as powerful or well-respected in no small part due to its position in the hierarchy. They put it bluntly: “People return your calls and listen to what you say when you report to the [chief executive]. It would need to report to the [chief executive], I think, to ever really be effective.” Changing the structure of the office was so important to this
ombud that they said it would be a precondition of ever taking a promotion to direct the office.

Another ombud, also in the public sector, had experienced a few different reporting structures in the course of their tenure, largely due to leadership turnover. The chief executive who originally established the ombud function in that organization not only set it up so that the ombud reported directly to them, but also put the ombud on their senior leadership team. When a new chief executive came in, the ombud (along with many others) was moved off the senior leadership team and told to report directly into the communications function. This process was repeated with each new leader, and now that ombud has collateral duties and does not report into anyone as ombud.

A different ombud also had their reporting structure shift, though not nearly as drastically and due to an unpredictable personnel change. The structure ultimately moved up a level, with the ombud reporting into one of the leaders who helped design the program to begin with. While it may not make the most sense on paper, both the leader and the ombud felt it was workable and productive and the best arrangement for the organization at the time. Interestingly, the leader (and not the ombud) expressed slight dissatisfaction “from a governance perspective” that the ombud did not have an explicit connection to the board yet felt quite good about the original decision not to have the ombud report to the chief executive.

A corporate ombud who had dotted line access to the board enshrined in their charter reported directly into a c-level office dealing with oversight and risk management, a location they felt a bit of heartburn about. Even though the arrangement was working well and by the ombud’s own admission was the right place for the role “given the realities of my organization,” there was a sense that “in a perfect world, magic wand kind
of thing, I think I would just like to be 100% true to the IOA Standards [aka, the idealized model] and report directly into the chairman."

The other corporate ombud reported into the general counsel (GC) but with dotted-line access into the chief executive and board. An ombud tied to the GC is a somewhat unusual arrangement, but this practitioner felt it was perfect. It certainly helped that the GC was one of the originators of the role, knew and respected the ombud function, had helped hire the ombud, and was committed to maintaining the important professional boundaries required.

Of the seven ombuds I spoke with, it is notable that five were originating ombuds in their sites. The other two ombuds were practicing in offices that had been established prior. One of them felt that their office could not have been better put together and expressed such gratitude for the practitioners who had preceded them in the role. The leader to whom the ombud function reported was also an originator. The other non-originator ombud believed the office had been very poorly structured (almost to the point of incapacitation) and felt entirely powerless to change it.

Three Myths

Ombuds described three major misconceptions leaders tended to have about their role. All are distinct yet interrelated. I include them in this overview section because they arose repeatedly and felt like the backdrop to many of the anecdotes shared. These help convey how many leaders (direct, peer, and collateral) had, at some point, thought about the ombud role and how their thinking changed over time.

*The Redundancy Myth*

“We’ve already got this covered” was a common belief held by senior leaders, according to the ombud participants. Leaders new to the ombud concept often assumed
that programs or offerings already in place served the purpose of an ombud. Examples
given include departments of human resources (HR), compliance, legal, and ethics;
employee assistance programs; wellness/counseling services; conduct, grievance, or
disciplinary procedures; an “open door” policy; an “800 number” anonymous telephone
hotline; 360-degree performance reviews; and so on.

Ombuds addressed this misconception by emphasizing the uniqueness of their role and how it supplements existing components of an organization’s conflict
management system (CMS) and also operates as an important failsafe to the formal channels. Ombuds described taking great pains to clarify the core ethical principles, and how they positioned ombuds to receive information and address issues that did not fit in other parts of the CMS. Ombuds would also counter the redundancy myth with examples of their proactive training and capacity building; systemic perspective; and independence from line management. In the participants’ collective experience, all of this helped leaders see that ombuds were not just “more of the same.”

The Competition Myth

A first cousin of the redundancy myth is the competition myth. Because ombuds operate so differently, they can encounter a lot of skepticism and hostility from those unfamiliar with the role. Three ombuds and one leader described experiences with senior people who reacted quite poorly to the ombud function at some point. The most common sore spot was an ombud’s unwillingness to “name names.” Ombuds observed a palpable sense of frustration on the part of senior executives who felt “I need to know what [the ombud] knows.” One of the leader participants mentioned that this was often the case with board members from outside the organization, who needed to be told that such an expectation “really was inconsistent with the whole idea of an ombuds. And they got that.”
Perhaps they “get it” more easily when a senior leader with clout delivers that message. Ombuds themselves described a somewhat more confrontational experience. In one organization, a department head bluntly accused the new ombud of “coming in to take them out” in their very first encounter. Another ombud had a colleague say, “I hate your role.” A department head in one organization was incensed to learn the ombud had a standing meeting with the senior-most leader, exclaiming, "You have a what? I don't even meet with the [leader] and you do?!" That ombud also had to manage a relationship with the head of labor relations carefully:

The agreement that I made was that I would not publish anything about supporting employees on the website. But if employees made their way to me, she would just have to trust that I would do the right thing, and if it needed to be escalated, I would encourage the employee to do that in a [formal] way. But at the end of the day, I was not going to tell an employee, "You must contact labor relations." And so she was fine with that, and over time she realized that I wasn't there to take anything away from her, that that was an additional resource.

A belief that the ombud somehow competes with existing functions can be dangerous for ombuds. It can make leaders even more skeptical and heads of ombud-adjacent functions territorial. One ombud used the word “paranoia” to describe the tensions that can arise. Addressing the competition myth involved a lot of trust building over time. Participants said that emphasizing ombuds as an informal triage system for the CMS and being savvy about negotiating “turf” were important for moving colleagues past a sense of competition. One ombud mentioned that sharing that roughly 75% of their cases eventually entered a formal channel of some sort helped leaders understand the ombud role as complementary and not competitive.

*The Risk Creation Myth*

The sentiment of “I need to know what the ombud knows” also undergirds the myth that ombuds, as a confidential resource, create rather than mitigate risk for the organization. That fear was often couched in terms of a legal worry that issues raised
with the ombud could be construed as notice to the organization given that ombuds’ confidentiality is not as yet a legal privilege. There was also an odd “see no evil” angle to this myth, conflating the detection of problems with the creation of problems. Rather, the existence of an ombud provides space for issues that might otherwise stay submerged to surface safely, giving the organization an early and organic opportunity to address and learn from them.

One ombud used data from the Ethics Resource Center (2014) biannual workplace survey to make this point to leaders. In brief, that survey consistently finds that nearly 50% of people say that they have observed or heard of something unlawful or unethical in their workplace. Of that 50%, a third do not report what they have seen or heard. This ombud, who works in a very large organization, maps those percentages onto their own population. They take that first number (50% of their workforce) and cut it in half, then cut it in half again, and show leaders that even if their workplace is far better than average, there are still a lot of people potentially observing but not reporting problematic behavior. The ombud said,

That should scare the crap out of us. We don’t know what they know, or what they think they know, which is the bigger problem, because a lot of times people think they saw something unlawful or unethical, when in fact they didn’t, but in their mind they are perceiving it that way, and you don’t want [thousands of] people walking around thinking that, right?

They would then say to leaders, "Look, those people are not gonna come forward, and this survey shows it year after year. ... So we can do nothing, or we can do this, and this gets at those folks who are otherwise not gonna come forward." Doing nothing means issues go unaddressed, potentially festering and increasing exposure for individuals and the organization. Leaders in positive relationships with ombuds understood that the ombud was important for identifying such exposure and providing a proactive, cost-effective, and sustainable approach to address it.
It is interesting to note that these three myths correspond closely to the challenges to independence outlined in the IOA Foundations of Organizational Ombudsman Practice curriculum: “Unclear parameters; tensions with HR, Legal or Security; connections with colleagues; legal pressures; overlapping functions; push for expediency among colleagues who think the Ombudsman might have valuable information” (IOA, 2014, slide 24).

**Primary Dimensions of Relationship**

Four potential dimensions of the ombud-leader relationship were clear from the literature and from my conversations with ombud practitioners over the years: organizational, logistical, interpersonal, and (intra)personal. Overall, the findings of this research affirmed those dimensions, as well as pointed to how they were interrelated and interdependent. In the end, three rather than four dimensions seemed to best capture how participants themselves conceived of the relationships: structural, relational, and personal. The detailed findings of this study are organized accordingly. Taken together, these three dimensions help us better see and understand ombud-leader relationships.

*Structural Elements*

Structural factors shaped each ombud-leader relationship. These included the established reporting line(s); the respective placement of the ombud and the leader roles in the organizational chart, that is, their position in the hierarchy; the types of reporting ombuds were expected to do; the frequency of those reports; and the content of those reports. Structural factors informed how the offices were set up and functioned (or at least were intended to).
Office Charters

The Preamble of the IOA Standards of Practice (IOA, 2009) specified that each Ombudsman office should have an organizational Charter or Terms of Reference, approved by senior management, articulating the principles of the Ombudsman function in that organization and their consistency with the IOA Standards of Practice. (Preamble, para. 1, emphasis added)

The charter of an ombud office is the documented agreement between that office and its organization. Charters “codify roles and responsibilities, and as [sic] establish a shared understanding of how the office will function within the organization” (IOA, 2018, p. 1). A charter defines the ombud role, its mission or mandate, and the scope of its duties, and often includes details about the Standards of Practice and how the office adheres to them, (e.g., emphasizes confidentiality and clearly states that the ombud is not an Agent of Notice for the organization).

At least two key structural elements of an ombud-leader relationship may be enshrined in an office charter. One is the reporting line(s) for the ombud, for example: “The office reports to the chief executive in a manner that is independent of ordinary management lines.” The other is the expectations for the ombud’s reporting routines: about what, to whom, and when an ombud is expected to make reports (IOA, 2018).

That an ombud office has a charter is assumed in the idealized model. Some ombud offices in this study had charters stipulating their reporting lines and/or reporting routines, but not all did. How participants related to their charters varied quite a bit. One academic ombud’s office did not have a charter at all, for example, but they did not find that detrimental to their work. On the other end of the spectrum, one corporate ombud cited the value of their office’s charter repeatedly. Most participants mentioned their charter very little or not at all, however.
Reporting Lines

The idealized model states clearly that ombuds should “report to the highest possible level of the organization” in order to preserve the standards of independence and impartiality (IOA, 2009, Standard 2.3). Awareness of this ideal arrangement was pervasive in conversations with ombud participants, but rarely reflected the reality of how their reporting lines were actually structured. Two ombuds had a direct reporting line into the chief executive level; four had direct reporting lines in a role below that (cabinet level); and one was at a level equivalent to a senior operational leader (See Figure 2).

![Diagram](image)

Figure 2. Participant direct and dotted reporting lines.

Two of the most leader-positive ombuds did not report into the chief executive level, but one of them did have a “dotted line” into that level, and they both had “dotted lines” into a subcommittee of the board of directors. This arrangement seemed most efficacious, as it allowed the ombuds access to leaders with both operational and oversight responsibilities.

Having the support of leadership has been said to bolster perceptions of the ombud’s clout (Hayden, 1997). Reporting directly to senior-most leaders presumes a high degree of support for the ombuds from those leaders. All ombud participants said
that clear structural proximity to senior-most leadership resulted in useful status. They believed that a reporting line into the board or chief executive levels led would-be visitors and others across the organization to perceive that the ombud had value and influence. Ombuds described it as having the power to “unlock doors,” “get folks to return your phone calls,” and instill in people a sense that it is “in their vested interest” to work with the ombud. One ombud participant felt it led to a belief that “whatever is going on with the ombuds, the [leader] is going to be aware of it, not specifically but generally” which resulted in others being attentive and focused when the ombud was involved. Another described being given “the visibility cloak of legitimate authority by where they put me,” which was both in a direct reporting relationship to the chief executive and in a physical office near that executive’s suite. “They were giving me status,” that ombud reflected.

In addition to a generalized sense of status, some ombuds also found it helpful to have access to a powerful leader to motivate action on a specific issue. An academic ombud described the pointed effect of bringing the leader to bear on a situation:

What it does is it just brings a light to a matter at a completely different level where you've got people of real power...we tend to be a bit of a top-down, command-and-control organization, so sometimes you need somebody at that top level to say, "This is unacceptable. Or this is broke, and we have to fix it." And I've had that a couple of times. Not that it was a magic wand, but what it did was it ignited the other powerful resources [in this organization] to be at the table to make sure that things got fixed, and the can didn't get kicked down the road forever.

Having access to that senior leader via a direct reporting line was vital to being able to leverage their power for both status and action when required.

While ombuds appreciated the halo effect of status from a direct line to senior-most leaders (or coveted it if they did not have it), they also described the importance of being perceived as relevant. “Highest possible level” can be interpreted as “the highest level that exists” or as “the highest level it is possible to reach given the circumstances.”
Some ombuds felt the former interpretation would not have resulted in the best outcome for their role, given the reality of their organization’s structure or culture. An originating ombud spoke about the decision to have their role reporting into a cabinet-level rather than executive-level position:

In a perfect world, I would like it so that I didn't have to report even on paper into the [cabinet-level] function, because that would really keep me separate, but I know the realities of my organization and that was not…. Like, even in the very beginning, I remember [name] said to me, he said, "Look, if it has to be that way [reporting to the CEO], we'll make it that way, but," he said, "I don't know that you'd want it that way, because it just wouldn't...you would almost then be lost altogether, because our CEO would have no idea how to...what to do with that." And I certainly wouldn't get the time with him.

It was clear across the board that the status ombuds received from a reporting line to a senior leader was beneficial for getting people to value and work with the office. When it came to doing the work, however, ombuds highlighted the value of their role being connected to an operational leader of some sort.

**Operational Control**

The idealized model does not specify whether “reporting to the highest possible level” is a necessary or a sufficient condition. Data from this study point to it being the former. When it came to utility for their work, all ombuds mentioned the importance of being connected to operational leaders—the people in charge of any given business unit, department, or area of the organization. Senior-most leaders were often described as too busy (inaccessible) or too remote (externally-facing) to be of much use to ombuds in terms of “getting things done.” One ombud said that it would be “inappropriate, really” to directly report into their chief executive as that role was so preoccupied.

The notion of an “XO” or “go-to guy” arose repeatedly, as ombuds described how they valued their reporting lines into less-senior roles. Access was one component—they felt they could get a meeting with ease, and stay in regular touch with that person.
comfortably. Another important component was the exchange of useful information.

Executive-level leaders tended to have a 36,000-foot view of the organization, whereas the more operational leaders had a better sense of day-to-day or near-future issues more germane to ombuds’ work. One ombud described having monthly check-ins with their direct line reporting leader, who was a step below cabinet-level:

We would have the two-way conversation where she would let me know things that were about to be happening, which would be so invaluable. For most things I actually had the insider heads-up about organizational changes that were coming down the pike, because then I was better prepared. And I would be letting her know at that high level, “Here are the things that I’m hearing as they are happening,” only when it felt relevant for her to know. ... I had that open line of communication.

The two leaders interviewed, who were both cabinet-level, concurred that their relationships with ombuds were useful in this way. One leader said about their ombud,

We have regular, certainly quarterly but usually monthly meetings where they'll just come to my office and give me an idea of what’s going on. And I'll tell them what's going on with the firm, that I wouldn't be surprised would result in issues that are brought to [the ombud]...[say,] a change that is going to result in a lot of disruption and turmoil. So when I'm with [the ombud] I will talk about that, give them some ideas as to what our thinking is so they can be prepared or be better prepared to deal with people when they come to see them so they don't have to say, “Oh, that's the first I've heard of that.” Now they can say, “Yes, I know, and I understand these issues, here's what I've heard.”

Interestingly, one leader also highlighted another potential problem with the idealized notion that an ombud must report directly into the chief executive:

I know all the time, the functional domains always say—whether it's diversity or HR or IT or finance or whatever it is, right—they all say best practice is to report to the CEO, right? And so you have to think through, is that really, though, what we need in this context? Because we're not trying to have our CEO have 17 direct reports.

All-in-all, from both the ombud and the leader perspective, direct access to the senior-most level of leadership came across as “nice-to-have” whereas access to and a good relationship with more operational leaders was “must-have.”
Placement in the Hierarchy

A more subtle yet still important structural element to note was where the ombud role itself was situated in the organizational hierarchy. Part of it was about the sense of belonging it afforded the ombud—feeling they had a rightful seat at the table amongst other senior leaders. Part of it was about telegraphing status—knowing that other people knew their role was a senior one, even though it was different from all other senior roles. One ombud explained it like this:

This position was created at a VP level in our organization, which holds clout, to be blunt, and so I have title and hierarchical privilege that carries weight. I think that that matters to the other organizational leaders, and I think it matters to the other staff members, just because I think it’s a signal that this is a senior role, even though I don’t manage anybody.

Not all ombuds were as clear about where their role was technically located in the organizational chart, but there were other important indicators of seniority. An academic executive allegedly legitimized their ombud office with senior leadership by using money from the budgets of all cabinet-level roles to fund it, saying to those leaders, “Now you’ve all got skin in the game.” One public sector ombud was considered a member of the chief executive’s cabinet, for example, and a corporate ombud sat on the leadership team of a cabinet-level member. These sorts of arrangements can cut both ways, however, as they do convey status and give ombuds access yet can also be perceived to compromise an ombud’s independence (a theme discussed in later sections). One ombud who sat on a senior leadership team described their approach to this dilemma:

I have to work really hard at this, that balance between independence but remaining connected to the organization. So if I were not on [the cabinet-level] leadership team, the value of my function would diminish pretty significantly, because that’s the way things are looked at within my organization. So if I was not on his team, people would view my function as not as important. I know that might not make sense to people, but I know that that is the reality in my
organization. So I made the conscious decision to be on [the cabinet-level] leadership team. Obviously he wanted me on his leadership team..., but I didn't turn it down, because I knew that if I did, it would not bode well for my function.

These three positional factors: reporting line(s), connections to operational leaders, and placement in the hierarchy were universal themes across the ombud interviews. They addressed the where and to whom aspects of ombud-leader relationships’ structural elements. What, when, and to some degree, how, were addressed in reporting routines.

**Reporting Routines**

Each ombud interviewed provided information to their leadership in multiple different ways. These routines of reporting had elements of form and frequency. Ombuds seemed to categorize reporting to leadership as either adhering to the “typical update cycle” (TUC) or not (ad hoc). Typical update cycle items included standing meetings and regular verbal or written reports. Ad hoc reporting items included those where an issue arises and needs to be communicated or consulted on; such items were further categorized as non-acute and acute.

Recall that providing “upward feedback” to leaders to help ameliorate organizational problems is considered essential to the organizational ombud’s dual mandate (Wagner, 2000). Again, Rowe and Gadlin (2013) outlined three ways that such feedback is often conveyed: through statistical overview reports (often referred to as annual reports) that are either public or disseminated to key stakeholders; in face-to-face meetings with leaders; and in working directly with certain people, groups, or departments in order to highlight problematic issues. These three modes do not constitute an exhaustive list nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive, however. For
example, traditional annual reports may belong exclusively to the typical update cycle, yet face-to-face meetings with senior leaders could be either TUC or ad hoc.

Typical Update Cycle (TUC) Reporting

Annual Report

Annual reports are traditionally compiled by the ombud and submitted to the governing body of the organization every year (Harrison & Morrill, 2004; Wagner, 2000). Such annual reports may be public, for internal dissemination only, or distributed only to select individuals. While most are indeed annual, some ombuds issued them at lengthier intervals. The frequency of such a report may be stipulated in a charter, left to an ombud’s discretion, or dictated by leaders’ requests. They are, however, intended to be periodic.

Based on anonymous aggregate data to maintain confidentiality, an annual report tends to be many pages long and contain information about trends in visitor issues and office use; identify systemic issues and opportunities for improvement; assess the overall climate of the organization; and make recommendations for improvements (IOA, 2014). Largely quantitative in nature, annual reports often include data collected according to the IOA’s Uniform Data Reporting Categories, a taxonomy in wide use by ombuds across sectors “to classify the types of issues brought to their offices, identify trends in requests for services, and note opportunities for professional development and proactive conflict competency programming” (IOA, 2019b, Ombuds Office Administration, para. 1).

Four of the ombuds in this study issued an annual report of this type. Just one of those was a public-facing report; the other three were for internal distribution only. Of the three who did not issue a traditional annual report, only one was in an office that did not issue any sort of periodic report to leadership at all (which they described as “insane”).
Semi-Annual Report

Some ombuds made a report to leaders on a more frequent basis, though these were typically distributed only to key individuals (e.g., a board sub-committee or senior leadership team). These types of reports seemed to be considered “for senior leaders only” (FSLO) and included quantitative trend data (similar to annual reports) yet also more qualitative observations and recommendations. These reports were often just one to five pages in length.

Report-Based Meetings with Senior Leaders

Written reports (be they annual or semi-annual) were often accompanied by a “talk it through” meeting with the ombud and a senior leader or leadership group. These FSLO meetings seemed to involve considerable question-asking about the report and/or direct requests for an ombud’s recommendations.

Standing Meetings with Direct Report Leaders

These were more regularly scheduled meetings between an ombud and their direct leader. Presumed to be updates or briefings where the ombud would provide upward feedback to the leader, these were quite often more like two-way conversations that saw a mutual exchange of information. Almost always verbal with no written report submitted, these interactions may or may not include the ombud making recommendations.

Leadership Team Reports

Four ombuds sat on leadership teams of some sort and often gave mini reports during the meetings of those teams, as did all other team members. These verbal reports usually included a brief status update and/or periodic trend report.
Ad Hoc Reporting

Courtesy Call

Ombuds described the “courtesy call” as a very informal report they made to leaders who were directly involved with or may need to know about an issue about which the ombud was aware. It was a discreet “heads up” that a matter might need that leader’s attention or somehow affect them. This type of interaction was distinct from ombuds working directly with leaders to address or resolve an individual case issue.

Requested Briefing

There were a few examples of senior leaders requesting that ombuds share components of their FSLO reports with other individuals in the organization. Most often, it was with the next rung of leaders (e.g., executive vice presidents or management teams). These briefings could be simply passing along portions of the written document or attending a meeting of that team to discuss it with them directly.

Ringing the Bell

These interactions took place when ombuds alerted senior-most leadership to matters of acute risk or immediate importance. They were almost always verbally communicated and may have sparked or even required action by the leader(s) receiving the report. They may or may not have included recommendations.

At the end of the day, whether any of an ombud’s reports, recommendations, or other works are ultimately translated into action or learning for the institution depends largely on the receptiveness of the leaders to whom they are addressed. The following section describes how these factors played out in lived ombud-leader relationships.
Interactions with Leadership

Participant interviews revealed three primary categories of interactions between ombuds and leaders: typical update cycle (TUC) reporting interactions; ad hoc reporting interactions; and non-reporting interactions. This section describes participants’ characterization of the types of interactions in each category. The idealized model gives the impression of ombud-leader interactions being confined to providing an important written annual report; meeting with a leader annually or semi-annually to “report in” and perhaps discuss the annual report; and having access to meet with the leader whenever needed due to acute need. In this section, participants show how the reality is not quite so tidy, and how the categories of interactions and reporting routines are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes an administrative interaction would be tacked onto a standing meeting, for example, or the delivery of an annual report would be parlayed into a requested briefing.

Typical Update Cycle (TUC) Reporting Interactions

Periodic Reporting to Senior Leadership

Most participants in this study described routine reporting interactions with leaders that included some combination of written reports and face-to-face meetings. The most common situation was one where a written report was prepared for senior leaders only, delivered, and then discussed privately with them on an annual or semi-annual basis. For example, one ombud reported to leadership roughly once a year via a four- or five-page written report. The report had both quantitative and qualitative components, and it went only to the members of the senior-most management team (cabinet-level). The ombud then joined a meeting of this team for about 45 minutes or so to “talk it through.”
This is very similar to the type of reporting both academic ombuds said they do, though it was typically with just one or two leaders, as described here:

The meetings take place in [the leader’s] office. I usually provide him a paper copy of a report. It’s a two- or three-page report, pretty high level, no specific logistical data, but trends, and themes, and some recommendations. I provide that ahead of time so that we can have some dialogue about that. Usually, much like with his predecessor, there’s nothing in there that’s a big surprise to him. It’s an additional data point that he’s aware of many of these things. And then, depending on the content of the report and other dynamics in the office, we may talk about themes and trends….I try to provide a kind of a year-end report that he can use in dealing with the executive leadership and management of the institution.

The two corporate ombuds reported to senior leadership more frequently. This is due in part to how their roles were structured; each had an operational leader to whom they directly reported as well as dotted line access into the chief executive and board of directors. (More people to whom you report, more reporting to do.) One corporate ombud meets with a subset of the organization’s board twice a year. They do a midyear update and an end-of-year update, unless at one of those meetings the ombud is asked for follow-up information, in which case they arrange to meet again. This ombud observed that meetings with the board were more frequent at the beginning of their tenure, but now find themselves in a steady rhythm of twice-yearly meetings (the minimum stipulated in their charter).

The other corporate ombud reports to two different subcommittees of the board on an annual basis but also meets with their company’s president three or four times per year. When the newest president came aboard, the ombud had an initial introductory conversation with him but then “gave it a little space because he was new.” Around the time of our interview, that ombud had recently had a second meeting with that president, which they felt had gone quite well. The president had had his assistant calendar a
standing quarterly meeting with the ombud with the understanding that, "No matter what, we’re going to meet."

One of the leader participants expressed a desire for more frequent periodic reports from the ombud, saying an increase in both written and in-person reports would be valuable. Given the dynamic pace of change and emphasis on agile planning and project management, a formal report only once a year was "less relevant and helpful than [knowing] there's, like, this predictable information and trend analysis that I know I'm going to get every quarter." That leader advised that any ombud should strive to "really understand the rhythm and habits of the organization" and accordingly devise a reporting schedule that is "as frequent as possible that also feels responsible in terms of maintaining confidentiality."

**Reporting Data + Insight**

Annual reports are often thought of as statistical overview or trend reports and are one of the primary ways upward feedback is commonly provided by ombuds (Howard, 2010; Rowe & Gadlin, 2013). As mentioned, only four ombud participants in this study said they issued an annual report; in three of those cases, the annual report was for internal distribution only. All but one ombud participant provided semi-annual reports to their direct leader.

These brief written reports were often then discussed in person with senior leaders, which allowed the group to delve deeper into the information and recommendations the ombud provided. The quantitative portion of these types of reports was derived from the data an ombud tracks about cases, such as number of visitors, categories of visitors, categories of cases, types of primary issues and sub-issues, and so on. In addition to the quantitative data, many ombuds also included in these for-senior-leaders-only (FSLO) reports their qualitative assessment of what was underlying
the notable quantitative data. One ombud explained it as, “Here are the types of things that keep coming up related to this so you have a little bit of a window into what's behind that number.” Each of the ombuds in this study who provides a written report to senior-most leaders mentioned going beyond just a statistical overview, and perhaps this anecdote from a corporate ombud captures why:

I think when I first got here I was relying more on reporting data, until about two years in. I was talking to our chief operating officer, and he looked at me and he said, “You know, you've been here a while now. I want your insights as well as the data.” And I thought I was providing them but he challenged me. And I said, “You know what? You're right. I need to think differently about what I bring to you.”

A theme of leaders sincerely valuing—almost craving—such qualitative insight from ombuds emerged across the interviews. Even though an ombud’s insight is, by definition, nonscientific and unverifiable, participants shared many examples of senior leaders soliciting it. A corporate ombud said they always preface any report with a reminder that its contents are only what they have heard. The ombud does their best to clarify and confirm, but they cannot say for sure that what they have been told is the full truth. Yet, the ombud said, “Even with that caveat, [senior leaders] almost to the person say to me, ‘This is still valuable. We need to hear what you have to say.’ So it's that other…, it's a new lens into their world. And they get that.”

When the cabinet-level management team of one organization decided to share pieces of the ombud’s report with the next level down (executive directors, vice presidents, etc.), it was the qualitative reflections they wanted to pass along. According to the ombud, the “management team felt like the quantitative pieces were actually not going to do good at this point in time, and so let's focus on the qualitative spirit of this, because we think that's actually going to prompt the best reflection and action coming out of it.” They thought the meaning, the story behind the data—what another ombud
called “nitty-gritty themes”—was what would be actionable. This echoed a comment by a public sector ombud who lacked meaningful opportunities to report to senior-most leaders. They said that while their administration was probably aware of any given issue the ombud might be reporting on, “they didn’t know enough detail to know what to do about it.” The ombud felt that the nuance they could uniquely provide would help point leaders toward effective action.

This one ombud’s feeling was confirmed by others’ experiences. A corporate ombud mentioned an occasion where, upon receiving the ombud’s first report, a new president immediately wanted the ombud to join a meeting of all his direct reports. He said, “I want you to talk to them at once, and here are the three things I’d like you to hit on” (a requested briefing). Again, the senior leader did not want to pass the ombud’s report along wholesale but did want other important stakeholders to have the ombud’s insight on key issues. An ombud reflected on why leaders found their insight so valuable:

It is beyond just the numbers. It's animated. It's about people's feelings. It's about all that stuff that is so important that you're not getting from a survey. You're not getting it from any other measure that you're doing. Because you can answer a question yes or no, or you can rate it one to five or whatever, and that's a very, sort of, generic way of getting that information. But when you tell the story of how somebody is speaking about something, there's so much more in that.

An ombud’s ability to communicate how people are talking about the issues they bring forward (not just what those issues are) adds contour and a depth of understanding powerfully distinct from all other sources of information leaders typically access. One corporate ombud vividly illustrated senior leaders’ craving for such novel insight with an anecdote about the first time they reported to the board of directors. It was in executive session, so all the employees of the organization had left the room—including the ombud’s direct leader—and only board members remained. The ombud
was on the agenda for 10 minutes but ended up staying much longer, causing their
direct leader to panic.

Forty-five minutes later I come walking out of that room. [Direct leader] is literally
in a sweat, you know? Because this is not...I didn't run like just five minutes over.
I was 35 minutes beyond what I was supposed to be, and nobody gets 45
minutes with these folks. Nobody gets that chunk of time. So [direct leader] is
thinking, "Oh my God. The world is falling apart in there. What have I done?" And
I come walking out with this big smile on my face, because I'd just had the best
45 minutes with these folks, and they loved, loved, loved everything that I was
talking to them about. They just kept asking more questions, and it was great
dialogue, and it could not have been better.

The ombud speculated that the board was so eager to engage because what
they offered was truly unique and useful. Board members typically get information that is
"very prepackaged, and wrapped up in a nice little bow and presented in a certain way,
and 30 people review it, and they practice it, and it's all done with high production value."
But the ombud's report was starkly different:

With this, it was just me, in a room, sharing information. Sharing, you know,
about the stuff I'm hearing, the stuff I'm seeing when I'm sitting in the [ombud's]
chair. ...I think for the first time they had this sense of getting very unfiltered,
direct information. ...I tried to do this like they were hearing directly from the
people in our organization. They weren't hearing from me, they were hearing
from the employees of [the organization]. And as a board, what better information
do you want than to hear directly from the organization that you have
responsibility for? They just found it very intriguing, really interesting.

Now, even after years in the role at this corporation, the ombud still feels the
board's hunger for the type of nuance they can provide. The statistical overview remains
important, but it serves more as amuse-bouche than main course. Board members are
eager to sink their teeth into the how and why more than the what of issues the ombud
presents. The ombud said,

I go in there with my statistics and my tables, and say, "Oh, you know, this
percentage of people are talking about these issues, and this percentage of
people are...." That gives them a nice overview, but then it's like, "All right. What
are they saying? When they're talking to you about 'leadership issues,' what does
that sound like?" That's where you get into the richness of, and the deeper sense
of what that issue is really about. When you tell somebody how someone is
talking to you, that gives them another whole layer of understanding.

While it no longer requires 45 minutes on a board agenda, a substantial part of
the time this ombud spends with them remains dedicated to relaying what lies behind the
statistics. Conversations like, “Despite all of our training on issue X, and all of the other
stuff that we do, our managers are still saying such-and-such, and that's not okay. It’s
still not sinking in.” The ombud certainly feels that their insight, nuance, and de-identified
yet undiluted feedback is valuable to the board, even after many years of hearing it: “I
think they actually enjoy it, you know? It's kind of different from everything else that
they're hearing.”

Standing Meetings

Most ombuds had standing monthly or quarterly one-on-one meetings with their
direct leader. The primary substance of these meetings was upward feedback in the
form of updates from the ombud about their ongoing work—number of cases, patterns or
trends noticed, outreach activities, etc. One ombud described a typical standing meeting
with their direct leader:

I just come to him prepared with, I'll make sure that I look at what the last month
or two has looked like in terms of issues that are coming to me. And if it's just
same as usual, that's what I'll say. I'll say, “Listen, no alarms, no burning fires.
We're still getting a lot of people coming to me about XYZ.” I'll let him know I've
talked to different people from time to time. And I'll say I talked to human
resources or I talked to head of this [unit], just as an FYI. I might just let him know
I'm going to [another location] to do presentations. But I don't even have to let
him know any of that.

In reality, many of these meetings were often quite brief or occurred on more of
an as-needed basis, especially between ombud-leader pairs who had worked together
for years. One such ombud said, “Sometimes these meetings are 5 minutes, because he
knows that if I have anything [urgent] I'm going to come to him. And if I don't, I'm not

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going to waste his time.” One leader in a similarly established pair eventually dropped the standing meeting, telling the ombud, "Listen, come to me when you need something." (Important context is that this ombud also sat on that leader’s management team and provided regular updates in that group forum.) Even though many of these “standing” meetings were not strictly calendared, an expectation of periodic update meetings was certainly normalized in all but one ombud-leader relationship.

The words “reporting” and “updating” give a sense of unidirectional information flow from the ombud to the leader, but standing meetings were an important site of mutual information exchange. In some relationships, the exchange was explicit, and the ombud felt they could directly ask, “Is there anything you think I should know?” In other relationships, this exchange was more tacit—an ombud would never ask, but a leader would occasionally offer. When leaders did give ombuds a “heads up,” it was usually about relevant organizational issues, decisions, or changes on the horizon that could affect the ombud’s constituents. In one example, a leader briefed the ombud about an imminent reorganization effort, which would involve a significant number of layoffs. The leader provided information that was useful in positioning the ombud to be an effective resource to those affected. The ombud explained,

I was able to get, not a level of detail that I was uncomfortable with, but like, *Here are the big picture numbers in terms of how many people are going to be affected. How are the [termination] conversations supposed to go? What are the resources staff members who are being affected are supposed to get?* Here’s what severance packages, at a very high level, are going to include, so that as I had people coming to me, I had some base of knowledge. I could help steer them to asking better questions of the people that they were actually interfacing with. I felt like I never had more information than I should have had about the really detailed decisions, but I felt like it actually allowed me to be a much better resource to the staff members who were coming to me. I think otherwise I would've felt like, "I'm just as clueless as you are," you know? That would not have felt helpful, I don't think.
A leader participant shared a similar take from their perspective on this type of exchange in standing meetings with their ombud:

We have regular, certainly quarterly but usually monthly meetings where they'll just come to my office and give me an idea of what's going on. And I'll tell them what's going on with the firm, [things] that I wouldn't be surprised would result in issues that are brought to them. We are in the process of [making a significant decision]...that is going to result in a lot of disruption and turmoil. So when I'm with [the ombud] I will talk to them about that, give them some ideas as to what our thinking is so they can be prepared or be better prepared to deal with people so they don't have to say, "Oh, that's the first I've heard of that." Now [the ombud] can say, "Yes, I know, and I understand these issues, here's what I've heard." So open communication's really important.

Such exchanges can also be an opportunity for ombuds to “be on top of the questions that the organization or organizational leadership is considering,” according to the other leader participant. They ruminated, “If [the ombud] has a clear sense of what are some of the things in the coming six months...in terms of the events or strategic questions, etc., that the leadership is engaging in,” it can lead to the ombud’s recommendations being “more relevant.”

The mutually beneficial flow of information in ombud-leader relationships was described as “a two-way street” verbatim by three separate participants. But even though there was a warm sense of reciprocity and appreciation in how participants described these interactions, they also expressed a careful tension about how to approach them. Extending the driving metaphor, ombud and leader participants both spoke about the importance of “staying in your lane” and obeying the rules of the road, by which they meant the ethical principles of ombud work. As one leader said, “I've read and digested [the ethical principles], I understand them. I understand the rules of the road. I respect them. I don't press to get information unless and until it's volunteered by the ombuds.”
Leaders were careful not to ask, and ombuds were careful not to learn too much. Even though ombuds should theoretically have access to any information available within an organization, two ombuds expressly spoke about the value of remaining on a need-to-know basis about major initiatives and executive decision-making. One ombud’s remarks were in the context of staying impartial and independent, which is easier to do with less behind-the-scenes information. The other was about protecting the ombud’s reputation: They believed information about a big upcoming organizational change was going to be leaked and didn’t want anyone accusing the ombud office of being the source. As they said, “I can’t leak what I don’t know. And I didn’t have a need to know.”

In sum, the rules of the road for the careful exchange of information between ombuds and leaders seemed to be:

- Don’t ask for too much information
- Don’t offer too much information
- Don’t pass judgment about the information you receive

These rules helped both ombuds and leaders stay in their lanes, getting everyone where they needed to be and avoiding collisions along the way.

**Ad Hoc Reporting Interactions**

Ad hoc reporting interactions took place between ombuds and leaders in the organization (not just direct leaders) as issues arose. These interactions were distinct from periodic reporting interactions yet sometimes occurred simultaneously with them. Defined by one ombuds as “the real-time work I would do with leaders as things were coming up that were specific to them,” ad hoc interactions were all highly circumstantial and with varying degrees of urgency. Participants only mentioned interactions that were
initiated by ombuds, but that does not mean similar interactions initiated by leaders did not or could not also exist.

**General Responsiveness**

It is important to frame these findings with the observation that all ombud participants felt they enjoyed a generally high level of responsiveness from leaders in their organization when engaging in ad hoc interactions. Ombuds often mirthfully described—or perhaps explained—this phenomenon as fundamentally rooted in curiosity. As one put it,

> I have never felt like people do not respond to me. And in fact, they're very quick, and I think it's because there's the curiosity. They want to know what is going on. ...They always have the funny joke like, "I'm so excited to hear from you, and I know that something is...not as it should be."

This person said, across the entire leadership of their organization, “I have never, like truly never, struggled with a lack of response.” Another ombud claimed that, over decades of service, “No one ever did not return my call.” One ombud shared this anecdote about a very senior leader’s instruction to his executive assistant:

> “If [the ombud] calls, I have to take that call.” Literally said that to his admin. He recognizes that if I am coming to him, it's important, and I'm not to wait. It can't wait until next week. You can well imagine his calendar. It is impossible to get time on his calendar, but his admin has been instructed that if I call, I get time no question about it. I get time immediately on his calendar, and he holds true to that.

Affirmations of this sort seemed incredibly meaningful to ombuds and helped them when weighing whether or not to initiate an ad hoc interaction. Just knowing the door would be open, so to speak, seemed to bring peace of mind. They could focus on what to say rather than how to get someone to listen.

**Courtesy Call**

The “courtesy call,” again, was an informal report ombuds made to leaders who were directly involved with or might need to know about an issue that had presented
itself to the ombud. The purpose of these interactions was information sharing and often served to simply put something on a leader’s radar screen more so than invite or require any action on the leader’s behalf. One senior leader described getting this type of helpful notification from the ombud as “a one-off email of like, ‘Hey, I’m noticing this trend right now in this part of the organization. And it just seemed notable, that you should be aware of it.’” Most often, however, courtesy calls were exchanges that took place over the phone or in-person encounters.

Much of this outreach was about sharing information for tactical purposes. In such cases, the call was specific to the leader responsible for an area of the organization where an issue was presenting. For example, one ombud spoke about contacting the leader of a large business unit from which the ombud was receiving a disproportionate number of cases.

I was getting in touch with that VP, not about individual things, but just to say, "Here’s a couple patterns that I’m hearing," and I think it was good, because it actually affirmed for him some things that he was already feeling, but then there were other things that were actually not as known to him. I think that, for me, was a very helpful example of how working with a VP, or SVP, whatever, in the moment was actually really productive.

In another case, a different ombud went straight to their chief operating officer about a pattern of conflict observed in a business unit, believing that “a meaningful conversation” (and leverage for change) was most likely at that level. The leader listened and asked a lot of good clarifying questions of the ombud, like “How do you know? Is it coming from here, is it coming from there, what do you think it's rooted in?” That leader then asked for the ombud’s recommendations about what to do, which was not uncommon in these types of interactions.

Some of the outreach, however, seemed about sharing information in the service of relationships. Those types of courtesy calls involved reaching out to a trusted,
knowledgeable person in the organization to get their input on or raise awareness of a potential problem brewing. This was “looping them in,” according to one ombud. This helped get out ahead of certain cross-functional issues, but also position the ombud as an ally rather than a competitor (recall the Competition Myth). Another relationship-centered example came from an ombud who said they might also give their direct leader a heads-up, to the extent that they could, if they were going to be meeting with another senior leader, “one of his peers,” about something.

Requested Briefing

Senior leaders sometimes requested that ombuds share components of their FSLO reports with other individuals in the organization, often other highly-placed leaders. These briefings could be simply passing along portions of the written report or joining a meeting of that team to discuss it with them directly. For example, the president of one organization asked the ombud to present to a committee of all his direct reports, not a group the ombud typically reported to. The president apparently said, “I want you to talk to them at once. .... You gave [me] a more expansive report, I just want you to give a brief, but these are the three things I'd like you to hit on.” Two other similar examples came up with other participants.

Ringing the Bell

This type of ad hoc reporting occurred when an issue of acute and urgent importance arose and an ombud felt the need to verbally alert leaders to it. This is discussed at length in the following section.
Non-Reporting Interactions

Four other common types of interactions ombuds had with leaders that are outside what might be considered “reporting” are administrative interactions, onboarding interactions, policy consultations, and casework interactions.

Administrative Interactions

The fact that an ombud technically reported to a given leader was interpreted by some as merely a way to place the ombud somewhere in the organizational chart so they had “an administrative go-to.” This arrangement led to interactions between leaders and ombuds that were not about reporting (in the sense of upward feedback) at all. Rather, they were thoroughly administrative in nature, such as approving a funding request or requisitioning a resource like a new desk chair. The direct leader was typically the role through whom they made such requests, which were often granted pro forma: “Whenever I've asked for a resource—and I don't ask for a lot, I recognize that that's not appropriate, I don't need a lot—but whatever I've asked for, he's given. He's never questioned it,” said one ombud. Another described the way this administrative dimension of the reporting relationship was interwoven with other aspects of their ombud-leader relationship:

She's the person who would approve my budget, approve my hours, and because she was also the [role title], she's who I would talk to about the big staff-related decisions that were happening, but it never precluded me from going to anybody else, which was great. I felt like she was my closest resource.

The administrative aspects of the role were necessary—ombuds need desk chairs—but certainly not the meat and potatoes of the ombud-leader relationship. As a seasoned leader participant wryly put it, “To the extent that it was appropriate to have an ombuds ‘reporting to’ somebody, they've all reported to me. But that's really not very substantive. It has more to do with approving expenses.”
**Onboarding Interactions**

Another interaction some ombuds had with organizational leaders was an introductory meeting during the leader’s onboarding process. These ranged from a very brief meet-and-greet to a sustained one-on-one conversation. One ombud in particular used the chance to connect with leaders during this orientation period as a clever way to begin relationships with new leaders in the absence of support from the existing senior leadership. They got on the agenda for onboarding simply by calling up the people who coordinated the process and asking for time: “Can I have an hour [with new leaders]?” And they were like, ‘You can have 30 minutes.’ Okay!”

In those meetings, the ombud was able to initiate relationships and frame the ombud office as a friendly, knowledgeable, and useful resource for leadership. Most often, they fielded a lot of questions from new leaders. People typically asked about common issues at the organization in general or about the types of issues in their particular area or unit. The ombud tended to get their job title and a copy of their résumé ahead of time so they could prepare to (appropriately) address those more targeted inquiries. Leaders who were completely new to the organization would often have very general questions, and so the ombud used that time to “talk about how things in the organization work, just like the culture and things like that”—a remarkable opportunity to set a tone for future ombud-leader interactions.

**Consultations and Ex Officio Committees**

Some ombuds interacted with leaders in the course of participating in policy review or other committees. These roles were consultative only; ombuds tend to sit ex officio on any formal group. Interactions with these groups may be rather consistent or entirely ad hoc. One ombud belonged to an informal “problem-solving group” of various operational leaders that met monthly. Another attended two different standing meetings
with senior operational leaders (the directors of policy, hiring and recruiting, HR, etc.).

They were also involved with these groups as-needed:

They have a group that's in charge of procedures and implementing the policies. You know, Policy writes the policy and that means other people implement it. A lot of times, perhaps the practice is a little different than the policy. I meet with them quarterly, but I probably call them, …I really end up meeting with them once a month about things that come up. But they have a process when a new policy comes out. We should be reviewing them and giving our comments, whether or not they choose to take them, but we should definitely be involved in that process.

Appropriate, proactive participation in such consultations and committees appeared to be fertile ground for ombuds to build relationships with current and future leaders (not to mention improve information flow and learning throughout the organization).

Standard Outreach and Casework

The final category of ad hoc ombud-leader interactions covers those that occasionally brought ombuds and leaders together during standard ombud casework or outreach activities, such as conflict competence trainings or coaching sessions. Five ombud participants mentioned having had to engage directly with a very senior leader about a case that involved concern about one of that leader’s direct reports, for example.
Table 2

*Ombud-Leader Interactions by Relationship Type*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Interactions</th>
<th>Types of Relationships</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Reporting Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Typical Update Cycle Reporting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annual Report</td>
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<td>Semi-Annual Report</td>
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<td>Report-based Meetings</td>
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<td>Standing Meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ad hoc Reporting</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Courtesy Call”</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Requested Briefing</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Ringing the Bell”</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Reporting Interactions</td>
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<td>Administrative</td>
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<td>*Direct Report Issue</td>
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<td>Outreach</td>
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**Ringing the Bell**

In addition to regularly providing trend data and insights about general patterns or problems, ombuds are also understood to be empowered to alert senior-most leadership to matters of acute risk or importance (Bogoslaw, 2015; Conrick, 2000; Furtado, 1996; Rowe & Gadlin, 2013). Each ombud I spoke with discussed the delicacy
of determining when and how to approach these acute types of ad hoc interactions—what one participant called “ringing the bell.” This phrase has an apt double meaning that nicely captures how ombuds spoke about this type of reporting: as both an important warning signal to leaders and as an action that can’t be undone.

**Deciding When to Ring the Bell**

All participants said they think very, very carefully about what, how, and when they bring something acute to a leader’s attention outside of the typical update cycle. They know leaders are busy, and that “crying wolf” will erode credibility. Criteria ombuds mentioned included:

- a sense of a critical mass of complaints about a given issue
- an issue presenting a “critical level of exposed risk” for the organization
- an instance of “particularly egregious” misconduct
- a situation that “harms safety” (including but not limited to cases involving imminent risk of serious harm that leads to breaking visitor confidentiality)
- a scenario involving a very senior person
- circumstances with an “implication for the organization as a whole.”

There wasn’t a magic number of cases about a given problem that triggered bell-ringing, though one ombud did say that having heard from "a lot of people about a particular issue” will sometime cause them to raise it. Most ombuds expressed being driven toward ringing the bell by a sense of extreme exposure for the organization or egregiously bad behavior by very senior people. One ombud described thinking about these situations as,

> We've got a red-hot chili pepper, and something really bad could happen here. Our organization has exposed risk that is either illegal, or just at a pretty critical level. It may not be at the point where the imminent risk is serious harm and I'm violating confidences, but it is at a level where I feel a need to push that up, and
make sure that gets on the radar screen, so that at least we're in a position of trying to address it, rather than just react to it. That's probably the biggest matter.

Many also said that their criteria for ringing the bell have changed over time. A relatively new ombud (practicing in the 3-to-5-year range) reflected,

I think that I probably am much more confident now in going directly to the team leader, and having that conversation, but I think I'm probably also a little bit more, "cautious" is not the right word, but I think I now have a sense that one really significant issue is not representative of a trend. For me to take the step of intervening, or doing something with leadership outside of the "adheres to the update cycle," I think I probably have a higher bar for that potentially, I think, than when I first started.

An ombud on the verge of retirement had a similar comment when asked how their sense of what warrants escalation has taken shape over a decade-plus of practice:

Oh, I think it's developed. A lot of it probably has to do with my knowledge of the institution. I was new to this institution when I came in, so I kind of had to learn how it was organized, and especially how it functions, and who the players were. And as you get a better sense of that, even though that changes over time, I think it really does factor into how you approach matters.

Ombud participants repeatedly said that they decide to raise an issue with senior leadership only after thorough consideration. Several factors were present in their descriptions of how they evaluate whether a matter is worthy of ringing the bell:

Risk Assessment

The first factor many ombuds weighed was an issue’s severity, which included its potential harm and potential risk. One corporate ombud shared their thinking in that moment of evaluation:

It's always, "What is the risk?" It's a risk-based [assessment], what is the risk, is it about a person? Is it about the company? Is it about a client? Is it a public relations risk? And how immediate is it? What are the options? Is this person [visitor] willing to take them? Do I have time to negotiate this, or do I need to act immediately?
Other Places / Other Times

Similarly, one ombud said they always try to ascertain whether the issue could go to a lower level in the organization so that, “when I choose to go to [senior-most leaders], there's a reason that I'm going to them.” The sense across participants was that if an issue was going to make its way to a senior leader’s desk, it should require that leader’s involvement or knowledge for effective resolution. There was also an important temporal factor: “Is it something that's happening now and it has to be addressed now? Or is it something that can wait [a few days]?” one ombud pondered when determining whether to raise a matter. If it can wait, they would give it a bit more time to see if the person presenting the issue might take it into formal channels themselves.

Considering Confidentiality

Four ombuds discussed the importance of exploring whether an acute issue might be raised in a formal channel, thus putting the organization “on notice” about the matter and sparing the ombud from any real or perceived breach of confidentiality. The standards of practice specify that confidentiality must be kept unless there is “imminent risk of serious harm,” (IOA, 2009, Standard 3.1) a case-by-case determination that rests with the ombud practitioner or may be spelled out in a charter (IOA, 2009, p. 6). At one organization, the leader told the ombud to protect confidentiality up until the point a life might be in danger. At others, the ombuds interpreted “harm” more broadly. In public sector organizations, especially those serving vulnerable populations (e.g., minors, prisoners, patients), there may be additional reporting requirements by law that can complicate the equation for ombuds.

If there was a way to ethically facilitate an issue into formal channels, ombuds seemed invested in exploring the option (a challenge to the Competition Myth). In doing so, the ombud might help the visitor understand what formal reporting options they had,
how each of those options might progress, and how they could best prepare to move forward. As one ombud said of acute issues raised by individuals,

My number one priority in those cases is to get them to speak up. So I help them develop options for that and I offer to help them prepare to do that. And not just prepare to have the conversation, but I also will do sort of the benefits and concerns analysis around what’s going to happen after [they report]. So I feel like when they leave me, they’re really well prepared. Or at least when they’re considering it. … I let them think about it if they’re not ready to act, and then I follow up and make sure that we’re really taking some action. For the most part, when that has come up, I have been able to get them to agree to go into some formal channel. Sometimes I think the right place is HR and they say no and go into line [management]. I don't care, as long as they get into a formal channel.

When a visitor with an acute issue did decide to bring it into a formal channel, ombuds tended to follow up to ensure the critical information was received while still maintaining confidentiality. This could take place in any number of subtle ways. One ombud would try to direct visitors toward a specific person in the formal channel, with whom they would then casually visit a few days later:

Find a reason to talk to them because once you talk to them, they start to tell you, "Oh, by the way, I had this case come in. . . ." So I've been fortunate to be able to handle it in a way that leaves the visitor still feeling in control and getting them the service that they need, because that's what was really important, and there were a number of things in the way.

Another ombud would suggest to their direct leader that they inquire with a formal channel to see if any issues of a certain sort had arisen of late (without divulging details, of course). But sometimes, a visitor simply was not willing to go to a formal channel, or an acute issue was revealed to the ombud piecemeal rather than “brought” wholesale by one individual.

Motivation

Some ombuds expressed a need to be self-aware as to their motivation to raise any given issue to that level. Three of the ombuds said that they always check their own self-interest before bringing an issue forward to leadership. One’s internal dialogue was,
“What’s my purpose in raising this? Do I have an ax [to grind] on something?” Another said their calculus often boils down to putting the shoe on the other foot: “If I’m that leader, do I want to know about this? Yes? Ok, the phone call’s getting made.”

**Considering the Leader’s Point of View**

That ombud thought of their direct leader as one of the few who “owns the entire institution, no matter what” and “feels the full weight of the institution on their shoulders.” Two other ombuds explicitly spoke about considering a leader’s perspective when deciding whether to raise a matter. Specifically, one talked about the “…and then what?”

What was going to happen and what was that leader going to need to act upon the information the ombud was going to share. In their words, “How can I give people stuff that they can actually do something with so that it feels more actionable to the organizational leader?”

**Preparing Recommendations**

*Bring solutions, not problems* is a common aphorism about working with leaders. While the ombud participants did make an effort to have something to offer leaders, they were careful not to specify a particular fix. Often, it seemed the alert was the recommendation: I have heard this is happening, you should look into it. Here is a great example of an ombud raising a systemic concern that represented an opportunity to improve a process that was meaningful across the organization:

I did go to [a very senior leader] a couple of years ago, because we were seeing trends around [a particular] process, and we were seeing these spikes in activity each year, and it was around certain issues. So what I was able to do was go to him, because this was something that was felt across the organization. It wasn’t just one business, or one location. This was everybody. ... I was able to go to him with that information, and I chose to go to him, because obviously I felt that there was a need for an organization fix to this. It wasn't a business unit, or particular function, or something like that. So I presented him with the information. He was immediately responsive. He actually put a team together to look at the issue. As a result of doing that, we made a major change in the process.
A year later, I had a 41% decrease in the amount of issues that I got around it. So it was this immediate impact. It was such an effective way of dealing with it… You know, I tell people, because I know [my organization], I'm like, "We bring in consultants for everything." You know? We bring in consultants to tell us what the weather is. So I knew that in a different circumstance this would've been something where we brought in a group of consultants. They would've worked on this for a year and a half. We would've spent a ton of money, et cetera, et cetera. Instead we did this all within a very short window of time, and then could immediately measure the results of what we did.

It was incredibly effective, and really, really satisfying in just seeing that sort of direct impact on the organization. And again, I wasn't involved in the fix. That's not my role, nor should it be my role, but I was confident that it was being looked at effectively, and something was being done… And in fact, I remember when they publicized what the fix was going to be, even I was kind of surprised. I was like, "Wow. Even I wasn't gonna recommend that level of fix!"

This example and a few others challenged my assumption that bell-ringing situations were always what we might think of as urgent enterprise-wide issues or extremely severe cases of malpractice (those “red-hot chili peppers”). Sometimes they were just huge opportunities for improvement that the ombud could uniquely identify and efficiently communicate because of their special position and relationships in the organization.

**What Happens After It's Rung?**

All but the ombud who had difficulty accessing their senior-most leader in general shared examples of leadership responding very quickly when contacted outside of the typical update cycle. In one case, a leader was traveling when the ombud raised an alert about an environmental safety hazard. The leader was “incredibly responsive,” making time to call and text with the ombud from the road. Another described the reception they experience when they reach out to an especially high-ranking leader in their organization:

Whenever I call him, he goes, ‘Come up right now,’ and he will see me that instant, because he knows, and again, it's that level of trust. I don't go to my senior folks that, ‘The sky is falling,’ because somebody came in and told me something that was uncomfortable or whatever. When I go to them, there's an issue. ...They trust that I'm coming to them, and fortunately it doesn't happen a
lot, but when it does happen, they take that very, very seriously, and they are very, very responsive.

Responsiveness from leaders not only engenders an important dynamic of trust (which is further discussed in later sections) but may also make the difference in how a time-sensitive issue is resolved. One ombud relayed a story about a visitor who was on the brink of making an inflammatory accusation of malfeasance to a federal regulatory body before resigning. With some quick thinking in very unusual and extreme circumstances, this ombud said to the would-be whistleblower,

“If I can get [the Senior VP] on the phone right now, will you talk to him?” And he said, “[The Senior VP] would never talk to me.” And I said, “Of course he would.” And I got lucky, I picked up the phone, [the Senior VP] was there, I said, “I need you to talk to somebody right now, will you do it?” He said, “Of course.”

And you know, he conveyed everything to [the Senior VP] and they hung up and he was a different person. And he said, “I can't believe this, he did take me seriously and he is going to do something about it.” And then I said to him, “Don't you feel better, now you can leave the firm and you can feel like you've done all the right things and go on to your new job.” And come to find out, he was going to work for the [regulatory body]! I couldn't have known that in the beginning.

Leaders also take action. Even though leaders are not obligated to act on what an ombud tells them, most did. It is important to acknowledge that ombuds’ information is almost always hearsay. And yet, when leaders trust their ombuds, they take it seriously. One ombud prefaces any report to leaders with,

"What I'm telling you is not something that I have investigated, or I know to be true. This is a red flag to you. This is what I'm hearing in your organization. You now can take that information and do with it what you think is most appropriate. I trust that you're going to do something with it, but I'm not going to dictate what that is." And 100% of the time, people act on that information. Even though they're not required to, they will come back to me to let me know that they have acted on that information.

Another said that they feel that if they bring something to their direct leader, “he knows he's got to act.” In such cases, the ombud said the leader would try to assess the situation by asking questions such as, “I know you can't tell me specifically, but is your
gut telling you it's more than this? What does your gut say? Does your gut say I need to bring in internal audit?” The ombud appreciated being asked for their opinion, which conveyed “a level of respect” and again served to reinforce a mutual trust. This stands in such sharp contrast to the experience of the one ombud who felt so far removed from senior leadership. They mused,

Other [ombuds] have said, "Oh, yeah, we've saved senior leaders’ butt a few times. So when I come asking for more stuff, they fork it up." We don't have that relationship here. I don't feel like we've had any big saves [for leaders], at least not in the time that I've been here. But I do feel like we've done pretty big-deal things that maybe we're not getting credit for, .... We had a guy who was violent, very violent, and we had to breach confidentiality because he was such a risk, a harm. Who knows what he would have done? Then we had another guy who was terrorizing his whole department that ended up in termination. I don't know...I definitely don't feel like anybody's like, "Oh, the ombudsman!"

**On Having a Bell to Ring**

Experiences of “ringing the bell” point to the importance of trusting, respectful relationships in creating open, efficient lines of communication between ombuds and leaders. To be clear, “ringing the bell” was a rare occurrence for all participants. One leader participant shared a bittersweet take on how few acute issues had been raised by their ombud. (This ombud function was still relatively new.) On the one hand, the leader was relieved that the ombud had not uncovered scores of skeletons in the organizational closet. On the other, they were a little disappointed the closet was so empty. An experienced ombud speculated that the infrequency of “bell ringing” issues was related to their severity: The most egregious cases, they said,

tend to find their way to the doors of resources that really need to be wrestling with them. 'Cause usually those are ones that are going out of the hands of the ombuds, to the general counsel, to compliance, to HR, to whatever office you may need to get it to.

But of course, not all do. And so, by design as a zero-barrier office that is a complementary alternative to formal channels, the ombud will sometimes be where an
acute issue comes to light. It may happen infrequently, but it only takes one miss—one critical safety hazard, one violent supervisor, one inaccurate regulatory alert—to result in real and reputational harm.

Even though most ombuds had experienced only a handful of incidents that involved directly alerting a very senior leader, those few occasions were deeply meaningful. When those senior leaders ensured access, were responsive, and took the ombuds seriously, it engendered a profound feeling of reassurance and security for ombuds about the value of their role. An air of gravitas permeated the interview portions about this; participants spoke almost as if the topic were sacred. Anecdotes about how leaders conveyed their openness to and respect for ombuds were recounted with a sense of pride, care, and deep appreciation.

Relational Elements

Relational factors shaped each ombud-leader relationship. The critical importance of strong, trusting interpersonal relationships was the most dominant theme throughout the study. One participant perfectly encapsulated this when they remarked, “I think the system-wide building of trusting relationships is the story of a successful ombud.” The strategic value of ombuds establishing and maintaining principled, yet authentic relationships with stakeholders of all kinds came up repeatedly. To wit, “there is no substitute for personal relationships with everybody. ... There’s just no substitute.” Ombuds’ relationships were essential for “getting anything done,” and many ombuds spoke of the work they did to help facilitate relationship-building between others (e.g., supporting affinity groups or working with group conflicts). When it came to leaders, one ombud felt that “strong, collaborative relationships” were especially important for “getting them to listen.”
The range of circumstances under which relationships with leaders were built and rebuilt mentioned by ombuds included: When they were originating an ombud function within an organization; when they were an outside hire for an already-established ombud position; when they assumed an ombud role from within the organization; when a leader they reported to turned over due to resignation or retirement, ousting, reorganization, or otherwise; when they served alongside leaders on committees or teams; and when the resolution of case issues necessitated working with leaders. Significant additional dynamics included whether a relationship was preexisting or not, what degree of access existed, the nature of the circumstances surrounding it (crisis or calm), the reputation of the ombud office, the leader’s style, and the ombud’s comfort, prior experience, and skill with interacting with leadership.

**Walking the Line**

Even though relationships were widely understood to be the bread and butter of ombuds’ work, the web in which they thrived, the topic was always tempered by concerns about upholding the ethical principle of independence. This tension was apparent throughout the interviews, with ombuds trying to walk a line between prioritizing relationships and maintaining independence. One ombud considered,

I'm not exactly sure where that line is. I do know that we're probably too far on one side of not being as connected [via relationships] as it would be good for the organization to be. And I think that ultimately comes down to what type of connections are we talking about? What type of interfaces? How do you do that, while still preserving the independence of the office kind of thing? Because one of the great paranoias here is perceived alliances. ...And how does that play out in terms of people's willingness to engage in our work? Very legitimate stuff.

Any impingement on the real or perceived independence of the ombud office is a major concern. It can effectively countermand the very purpose of the office and cause serious reputational damage. Yet again, having a wide network of trusting relationships
was essential to ombuds’ work. Erring on the side of caution, to the detriment of those relationships, was a major concern as well. One ombud insisted that adhering to a purist interpretation of “independence” would effectively sink their role:

It is really important to maintain that independence. However, my view is you also have to know your organization. I can tell you in my organization, if I were to do that, I would become so ineffective so quickly, because my organization is very much built on relationships, and if my function is not seen as being really integrated into the organization and a part of the organization, we are quickly going to become dispensable, because people will not value us. If they don’t think we’re tied into what’s going on in [my organization], nobody’s going to come and talk to us.

All of the participants spoke of the need for ombuds to be visible in their organizations. Visible in a highly controlled way, of course, but actively getting the office in front of people—visitors and leaders included—instead of passively awaiting some foot traffic. Visibility was often the first step in establishing relationships. One leader participant said, “My sense is that the more visible the ombuds is, the more likely it is that people are going to go and talk to them if they have issues. And the more, with respect to that sensibility where [the ombud] can communicate what kind of person they are and that they’re nice and that they care, the more likely it is that people will go and talk to them.”

The ombud participants increased their visibility in several ways:

- Annual reports to all constituents
- Fliers next to the coffee machines in the break room
- Ombud office featured on the front page of the website
- Writing a column in the newsletter
- Outreach visits to other offices or groups
- Seminars and trainings on conflict or communication topics
- Merely walking around their organization so as to be seen

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The leader believed outreach like this was key: “Things like that are helpful because they remind people, oh yeah, we do have an ombuds. And their name is [Name], and they seem like a really nice person. So if I've got a problem, maybe I'll go see them.” Ideally, the ombud’s reputation and role would precede them when establishing relationships with visitors and leaders alike.

**Building Relationships**

In this section, ombuds’ experiences of building relationships with senior leaders are discussed. While each ombud-leader relationship was unique, they all involved the following activities to some degree, and often simultaneously: introducing the role, establishing parameters, forging a connection, and guarding against disposability. Here the term “incoming leader” applies to any new senior leader with whom an ombud needed to liaise, though it was most often someone to whom the ombud reported through a direct or dotted line in the excerpts below.

*Introducing the Role*

Ideally, an incoming leader would be well-versed in the purpose, principles, and practice of an ombud function before working with one. They may have collaborated productively with a different ombud before or perhaps even used an ombud’s services at some point. One of the leaders who participated in this study said their first exposure to the concept of an ombud came while employed at a firm that had one, for example.

A far more likely scenario is that an incoming leader may have a vague sense of what an ombud is or does, but no experience working with one directly. This may seem better than the alternative—a completely clueless leader—but that is not always the case. A little information can sometimes be worse than none at all if it is incorrect or ill-formed. This is especially so if it has inclined the incoming leader to be skeptical of or

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hostile toward the ombud function. Consider a leader who may have come from an organization like the one an ombud participant experienced early in their career (long before becoming an ombud themselves) where, “I heard about the fact that we had an ombudsman and was told never to use it. That was pretty consistent throughout the culture. People were just told never to go to the ombudsman, we’ll handle our own problems.”

A best-case scenario may be when an incoming leader has already had positive experiences working with an ombud in the past and is committed to ensuring that pattern will continue. The two leaders who participated in this study, however, described what could be an even better one: Both of them had been involved in designing and staffing the original ombud function in their organizations. Throughout that process, they had consulted with established ombud experts and thought deeply about the role, its structure, the organization’s purpose in having it, and what type of person should staff it. This seemed naturally to set them up to value and work well with the role. The leaders were both knowledgeable and invested—there was no introduction to the role (and hence, no re-education) needed. “They understand my role better than anyone in the firm,” one of the ombud participants said confidently about their corresponding leader participant.

In organizations where the ombud role already existed, however, there were many different ways an incoming leader might be introduced to it. At one study site, an incoming leader’s search committee included strong advocates for the ombud position. It was at that level—before the leader was even hired or ever met the ombud—that the ombud role was introduced “as a part of the mix, and important to the life of [the constituency served].” That ombud described their first meeting with that leader:
So when we had our introductory meeting, and I went through a bit of a 10,000-foot view educational thing of, "This is who we are, what we do, how we got here, what value it brings, ...and how would you like to see it?" he pretty much played hands-off and said, "If it's functioning, I'm not gonna touch it. I don't want to break something that's working."

A public sector ombud arranged to be part of the onboarding experience for all senior leaders at their organization. Every time a new senior executive was hired anew or promoted from within, the ombud was given a 30-minute meeting to "educate them about what we do, what our role is, how we would work with them, what kind of things we might come to them with, what kind of things they can come to us with." In a similar vein, one of the academic ombuds presented at all new employee orientations and also wrote a regular column for a campus newsletter, both of which helped keep the role front-of-mind for members of the organization.

In other situations, it falls entirely to the ombud to reach out and introduce the concept of their role—a “cold call,” as one put it. One of the corporate ombuds described how they initiated contact with a new board member to invite that introductory conversation:

I immediately sent an email...and introduced myself, “I’m the corporate ombudsman. You might not know a lot about my job but I’d like to set up some time to meet with you.” He immediately responded and I think it took about three weeks [to meet face-to-face]. He came in and sat down here with me in my office, which was great. He gave me a full 30 minutes. And I started out by asking him, “Have you ever worked with an ombuds? What do you know about it?” And he had some understanding, so whether he had researched it or whatever, I don’t know, but he had some understanding.

And I let him lead the meeting. I had my agenda, my key points, but I let him take the lead. And he was very gracious. He wanted to know about me and my background so we started there. And then he wanted to know what I thought was important for him to know about my role. And so I led with the fact, well I led with the history, just very quickly, of the fact that the role is here due to a [regulatory] order but that over the years, there were over a dozen companies at the time that had been placed under an order. And that most of those other companies had gone back to the [regulatory body] and said we’ve gotten our act together, we don’t need an ombuds, but here at [my organization], our senior management has always taken the stance that this is an added value to our employees and our clients, so we want to keep the ombuds.
After that, they walked the leader through the ethical framework for ombud practice, explaining that every visitor also receives that spiel. They touched on a few other finer points of practice and summed up by saying that the value to the company is in having someone whom anyone can come to, a stress relief valve. The leader listened intently, asked a lot of questions, and claimed to be “fascinated by the role.”

**Continuing Education**

Ombud and leader participants’ efforts to educate incoming leaders about the ombud role were ongoing. After the introductory conversation, there were usually subsequent interactions in which ombuds and existing leaders were continuing to help new leaders grasp the concept, see the value, and understand the mechanics. Often this was simply answering questions such leaders might have. One leader participant had seen three different CEOs come and go and had helped each of them “get” the ombuds concept. They remarked,

> All three of them, in somewhat different ways, have been very supportive of the ombuds program. Not that we had a choice because we had to have one. But they felt, as did I, that it was an important mechanism designed to take the pulse of the firm with respect to issues. And also facilitate the escalation of significant issues up to senior management so that we could deal with them. All three CEOs are different, obviously, and they have different management styles, but they all got it and they were all enthusiastic and supportive of it.

An ombud who originated the role from the ground up in their organization described a years-long effort to educate senior leadership. It began with a presentation to the board of what the ombud-to-be thought the program should look like. The response was uniformly positive: “They were 100% supportive. … They made zero changes. They didn’t really know what this program was all about. I was really teaching them, but they gave me total leeway.” The next step was a series of c-suite meet-and-greets, starting with the chief executive:
I literally sat with him one-on-one, and each of his direct reports one-on-one, to explain what this really was, because my feeling was, I needed to have those guys really buy into this for it to be successful in the organization. If they were just giving it lip service and thinking, "Oh yeah, we're just doing this because we have to settle some litigation," that's not what I wanted it to be. I wanted them to really understand it, and believe in it, and think that it would really benefit the organization, because if they weren't talking about it in a good way, I knew it would never...we'd never make it. So I needed them to be the champions of this, and in order to do that, I needed them to really understand it.

In addition to ongoing conversations, some ombuds also provided new leaders with copies of articles about the ombud role, mostly brief "explainers" from various trade publications (See Table 3, Articles Given to New Leaders By Ombuds). These helped both legitimize the role and situate it in the context of other formal channels (thereby addressing Redundancy, Competition, and Risk Creation Myths).

Table 3

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publication</th>
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<tr>
<td>A Fresh Look at the Organizational Ombudsman</td>
<td>Society for Women Engineers</td>
<td>Professional association trade magazine</td>
<td>5 pages (2730)</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Holmes, M.</td>
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<td>How an Ombudsman Can Foster Collaboration, Cut Risk</td>
<td>Corporate Counsel Magazine</td>
<td>Legal and compliance trade magazine</td>
<td>2 pages (1074 words)</td>
<td>2013a</td>
<td>Clark, D.</td>
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<td>HR &amp; the Organizational Ombudsperson - What's the difference?</td>
<td>The Daily Record</td>
<td>Regional legal and real estate trade website</td>
<td>2 pages (724 words)</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Sullivan, D.</td>
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<td>Ombuds Programs: Creating a Culture of Trust rather than Compliance</td>
<td>Corporate Secretary Magazine</td>
<td>Governance trade magazine</td>
<td>5 pages (2411 words)</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Bogoslaw, D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in an Ethical Culture? Build an Ombuds Program</td>
<td>EthicalSystems.org</td>
<td>Guest blog post</td>
<td>2 pages (753 words)</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Zinsser, J.</td>
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Establishing Parameters

Establishing clear parameters of practice came up again and again with ombud and leader participants as both a point of continuing education and practice. The driving metaphor again emerged: One leader referred to the ethical principles as “the rules of the road” for understanding the ombud role and how to work with it. Two ombuds and the other leader used the phrases “it’s a two-way street” and “we stay in our lane” to convey how they collaborated. Nearly all ombud participants said that reinforcing the ethical principles (independence, informality, confidentiality, impartiality) was essential when building relationships with leaders of all sorts.

An originating ombud participant described the importance of their conversations with leaders about bringing the standards of practice for ombuds in general and the particular needs of that institution into alignment. As they put it, “I was able to say, ‘Here are the parameters of this role that we have agreed are non-negotiable… We’re not trying to create our own version of an ombuds. We’re trying to have an ombuds that actually works within our culture.’” Since stepping into their role, a different originating ombud had sustained a vigilant effort to ensure the ombud function was perceived as distinct and unique within the organization. As they described it,

When we started this, I was almost maniacal about making sure that everybody understood that we were different. That was my mantra. Constantly reinforcing the fact that we are different. Reinforcing the fact that this is a very special place, and I almost drove people crazy with it in the beginning.

This included studiously avoiding any conjoint presenting with functions such as human resources or compliance to prevent any association of the ombud with those formal channels (staving off the Redundancy Myth). Now, years later, that ombud feels those efforts to make the boundaries of the role very, very clear from the beginning have paid off tremendously. They have managed to differentiate the role without alienating it
from the organization. People do seem to feel that there is something different about the ombud. As they said,

It really now is to our benefit, because people have put us in that place. They're like, "Oh my god, the ombudsman." They have almost this overreaction to it, but I like the fact that they overreact, because it shows that they really get it. I want them to think that it's this really unique and special place, because it is. They don't react that way when the Chief Compliance Officer steps on the elevator, you know?

Reworking Existing Relationships

It was also important for people who had held other positions in their organizations before becoming an ombud to transition roles in existing relationships with senior leaders. This involved the interpersonally complex work of setting new boundaries, managing expectations, and finding a balance between maintaining healthy connections with others while also establishing independence. One ombud shared a very illustrative example of just that type of work. It centers on an interaction they had with the CEO, with whom they had a very friendly rapport, at the gym shortly after the ombud function had officially launched.

I was there one afternoon, and our CEO's locker happens to be right next to mine. I know them very well, I've known them for years. But I came walking into the locker room, and they're like, "How are you? How's it going?" I said, "Oh, it's going great." They go, "Yeah, I know you launched! So are people going to see you?" And I go, "Well, I can't tell you that."

They, like, literally backed up. And they got all sort of flustered, and I just sort of looked at them. They go, "Oh, oh. That's right. That's right. Yes. Yes. Oh, I'm so sorry I asked that." They got all flustered. And of course, I could've answered the question, but by not answering it, it made it that much more.... And I will tell you, probably about three weeks later I walked into the locker room and I saw them again, and they go, "Hey [name],...I'm not gonna ask!" That was a really good thing, because it was like, okay, now they know this is something different, and that's exactly what I want them to know and understand. So it could not have been better. I could not have planned it better, because that moment was so impactful and so meaningful for them to understand, I'm dealing with something very different here, and I can't ask the nonchalant question, "Oh. Who's coming to see you?" I can't even go there.
In another situation where an ombud was hired from within, they and the leader had crossed paths on some projects before. Even though they had not worked closely together, a sort of warm familiarity existed between them. The ombud felt this exposure gave the leader “a good sense of who I am” and also helped resolve the question of “whether or not a white person was the right person for this role in our really diverse organization.” Having worked together before on issues involving race, “probably helped, because it gave her some insight going in into who I was, and how I thought about those things.”

*Forging a Connection*

Mutual regard makes any relationship more pleasant, and ombud-leader relationships are no exception. All participants underscored the benefit of genuine connection in their reporting relationships. Shared understanding, mutual appreciation, and respect clearly contributed to an experience of effective working relationships.

In both the ombud-leader participant sets, a sense of genuine warmth and regard was very apparent. (It was very likely a contributing factor to the leaders' participation—the ombuds felt they could ask and the leaders were willing to do the ombud a favor.) In both those cases, the individuals involved had known each other for at least three years. As was mentioned earlier, both the leaders were involved in hiring the ombuds. One ombud described their leader as, “One of the most delightful people that I know. Smart, just, I think, a wonderful leader. He's a wonderful leader.” It was clear across participants that many had experienced an ombud-leader relationship characterized by deep affection and respect, at some point in their careers.

It takes time and effort to build those connections, but they are worthwhile because they lead to trust. The vital importance of trust will be discussed in following sections, but here I will outline the practices or behaviors participants described as
essential for making a connection. These can be considered precursors to building trust and were present even in organizations where the ombud role was already very well established and respected.

**Starting Off on the Right Foot, Fast**

A crisis is a terrible time for introductions. Establishing a relationship and feeding it through regular fair-weather interactions is essential so that ombud and leaders can work together well when a squall hits. As one ombud learned over their long career,

> If a matter comes up, and you need to have a conversation with Vice President X, ...the first interface you’d have with them should never be based on a problem. And I’ve had that. It’s a terrible way to start a relationship. And so if you have even just a beginning acclimation prior to that, it’s different. ... This one’s in your vested interested: Get to people before you have a problem in their area, or before they bring a problem to you.

This may sound simple but can be tough, especially when a new leader is installed on short notice. An ombud whose organization weathered a surprise shake-up in senior leadership, including turnover in their dotted-line reporting leaders, spoke about the predicament of needing to build new relationships very quickly yet realizing “everybody else in the firm was trying to do that, too, and were ahead of me in line, for good reason.”

Another recommendation from one of the ombuds was to “get more face time” and push for a commitment to a standing meeting with new leaders. Over time, the regularity of those meetings might relax, but that ombud felt it was essential when first starting. (A key component here was also establishing good relationships with the leaders’ executive assistants. A few ombud participants spoke about how vital those powerful gatekeepers were for access to the leader. They should never be overlooked.)
Learning about Each Other

Recall in the earlier exchange between the ombud and a new board member, “He wanted to know about me and my background so we started there.” It can be difficult to find time to lay the groundwork for appropriate interpersonal connections in any working (much less reporting) relationship. But a skilled leader/ombud knows that making an effort to learn about others tends to pay off. Participants discussed a variety of ways that they came to “get to know” others. Most were very routine, but these two examples stood out:

When a new president was announced at one of the sites, the ombud immediately went online to see if the incoming leader’s current institution had an ombud and assess that institution’s “approach for dealing with organizational concerns.” They were trying to anticipate the incoming leader’s mental models about governance, organizational learning, and working with a role like the ombud in advance of beginning their reporting relationship.

One organization clearly prioritized establishing a connection between its originating ombud and reporting leader. Shortly after they were hired, the ombud was flown to the city where the leader lived to spend two days together in person discussing, “What did we hope for this? What would it look like? How would we work together?” and getting to know each other (i.e., eating dinner at the leader’s favorite restaurant). The ombud felt that investment of time to forge a solid interpersonal connection “made it easier” to work well with the reporting leader.

Learning is an ongoing process, of course. Ombuds described the practices they used to continue learning about the leaders. Chief among them was asking questions and seeking performance feedback. For example, one ombud would always ask leaders about their written reports, “Is this data the kind of data that’s helpful for you in your
role?" Another, after their very first report to their chief executive, asked, “Do you have any instructions for me?” The accompaniment to this is, of course, then considering the feedback seriously.

Making the Role Relevant

Learning about each other didn’t just feel good—it also helped ombuds position themselves to be most useful to leaders (and therefore their organizations). By getting to know what leaders valued, what mental models they had, and what their priorities were, ombuds were able to communicate with and engage leaders more effectively. One ombud described coming to realize this when they were first in their role:

I started going to these [board sub-committee] meetings and the way my mind works is, What are the patterns here? ...I don't know finance. I don't know law. But I know business, and here are these people who are asking questions. So what is this? What do I hear over and over again? What are they looking for? And once I started developing that, then I could go to the head of finance and say, “Hey listen, I heard you talking about XYZ. How is that important? Help me, what should I be looking for?” And that does two things: It builds my knowledge, it builds relationships.

By continually learning about the individuals but also the organization and its priorities, this ombud was able to make their role more and more relevant. They figured out how to connect the ombud’s information and perspective with leaders’ questions and priorities. This ombud had such success with their board relationships, they began doing the same across the organization:

And so I started doing that with all of the places where I had regular access, and I get to sit in on quarterly meetings, on the ethics oversight committee meeting, on the compliance oversight committee meeting. These are things that I can just sit and listen to. And that gives me a nice broad scope. So again, if you just learn to figure out what they're talking about, how they're talking, and then you start to realize the different players have very different senses of what's important or how they like information delivered to them. And then you adjust.

A related way ombuds enhanced their relevance was by communicating in the currency of their organization’s culture. One of them in a “top-down, command-and-
control” culture talked about ensuring a power analysis was part of their strategy when working with leaders. Another in a science-based institution used data and statistics at every opportunity. A third said their culture was very research-based and so also relied heavily on empirical data. A fourth noted that their culture valued learning and improving processes and so they were always looking to connect the dots (the right people with the right resources in the right conditions) to find traction. “You’ve got to know your culture,” one ombud reflected. “Presenting them with [a relevant] format in that way really resonated with them, and they could get their arms around that and they could understand that, you know?”

All the effort to make the ombud role relevant to leaders made the difference between just issuing a report versus getting individuals information that they could use in a way that mattered to them. This may vary on a person-to-person basis, but there are likely at least one or two dominant frames of mind shared across the senior leadership of any organization. Identifying it and using it could be key to unlocking relationships with leaders. One ombud shared,

The big ah-ha for me in this role is, I have to take on a risk management perspective and present it in that way. So if I can come to [leaders] and say, “I don't know exactly what's happening in your business, but here's what I've heard and here's what I think the risks are,” you know, then they'll say, “What do you think we need to do?” But if I just come and say, “I'm hearing this, this, and this...” now I'm setting up a you-against-me, or I'm setting up a challenge. [They react defensively with.] “How do you know?”

Establishing Credibility

Credibility is the quality of being believable. Someone becomes credible “by consistently providing accurate, valuable information or by always acting responsibly” (Sobel, 1985, p. 557). Ombuds spoke about needing to establish credibility with leaders to be effective. It was more than just being trustworthy; it was about demonstrating they had enough knowledge and context to discern degrees of significance. That is,
expertise. Even though an ombud could not be reasonably expected to be an expert in any given issue, they were expected to be experts in their organization, its espoused values, how it was supposed to work, and how it worked.

The word “credibility” was used most often in the context of conversations about ringing the bell and being taken seriously. But the concept came up frequently when ombuds were talking about the choices they made, the caveats they gave, the way they tried to convey—explicitly and implicitly—that they were believable. For example, ombuds did this by trying to be relevant and show that they understood leaders’ priorities, challenges, and values. They did this by demonstrating restraint in carefully choosing when to speak up: “I think I have a pretty powerful voice, and I don't choose to use it very often, which is one reason why I think it is powerful.” They did this by establishing clear “rules of the road” and staying in their lanes. Being visible, and operating in the sunshine (outside of confidential casework) as often as possible allowed leaders (and others) to gain exposure to the ombud’s conduct and contributions. For some ombuds, this was a good reason to participate in onboarding sessions or a senior leadership group, even if it seemed to go against a rigid interpretation of the independence principle. It helped leaders see who the ombud was and build a relationship based on that understanding.

*The Insider Advantage*

When people are trying to decide whether to trust someone, a good reputation matters (Sobel, 1985). There did appear to be a reputational advantage for the “insiders” when it came to establishing credibility. The three participants who had held other positions within their organizations before becoming the ombud each acknowledged the usefulness of that experience. When asked why leaders were so responsive to their
requests, one ombud said perhaps it was their placement in the hierarchy but attributed it mostly to "my history and relationships with these people." They continued,

I have worked alongside them, or they know of me, or, I think, I am just established as a person within the organization. That really, really helps. It just matters a lot, and I think that's one reason why I really felt like the decision for us to hire from within when creating this position was the right one, because I don't think it would be the same.

A different ombud, who had held many positions in formal channels within their organization before becoming the ombud, speculated that they were chosen for the job in part because, “I had the experience, and having been in all those functions, I sat in all of those chairs, so I could be credible.” It was not just that they had the experience, the organizational context, or even the personal relationships, but also that leaders had observed them in those roles over time. “Insider” ombuds had proven track records of credible decision-making and conduct within their organizations. “Outsider” ombuds had to build that reputation incrementally to give leaders a basis on which to evaluate their credibility. A leader participant spoke about their decision to hire from within:

A clear choice point once we decided we were going to have an ombuds and we were going to launch a role, was do we bring in that external talent? Or go with someone from our own walls? And so you know, we went with someone from our own walls, and I don't think where we landed on that is the universally right answer in every situation. But I do feel good with where we landed for us with that answer. In terms of choosing someone who had some sort of internal context, particularly at that moment with all that was going on, ...I think [that] probably helped quite a bit.

Well-regarded and established ombud programs could also bestow some reputational advantage on a new ombud. One explained, “I have to credit the people who came before me in this role.” Because of the effort and care their predecessors had put into building a respected and well-connected program, the new ombud felt they were at an advantage in working with leaders: “I think that speaks volumes to why I was able to build good relationships from the get-go. … They really set this up properly for me to
be able to come in and do my job.” Of course, that ombud still needed to establish their regard and credibility with leaders, but the good reputation was theirs to lose.

**Guarding Against Disposable**

Even when ombuds enjoyed the strongest possible footing in an organization, leadership transitions could make them extremely vulnerable. For example, one ombud participant in the study was originally brought into their organization by the then-chief executive to start an ombud office. This executive had had an ombud in their prior organization and hired this new ombud with “carte blanche” to establish a gold-standard office. In addition to reporting directly to the chief executive, that ombud also sat on their leadership team alongside 10 or so other senior leaders such as chief of finance, security, and so on. The ombud described their relationship as “a match made in heaven”—they were a skilled, experienced ombud and the executive was a knowledgeable, supportive, and proactive leader.

That divine arrangement was dashed in an instant, however, when that chief executive was ousted and replaced via political appointment. The new leader dramatically winnowed the leadership team, unceremoniously cutting out the ombud. Far more concerning, they allegedly also discouraged employees from using the ombud office, resulting in a drop of 50% in the ombud’s caseload within one year. When asked to speculate on why that leader kept them at such a distance the ombud reflected, “From the outside looking in, it just looked like she kept things close to the people that she trusted that she brought into the organization, and so they minimized the role of the ombud.” Ultimately, that ombud was relegated to report into a communications function, “which told me that they didn't understand the role.”

The types of leadership transitions experienced by participants ranged widely, from long-anticipated retirements to jolting overnight change-ups. Even for ombuds who
generally felt quite secure in their organizations, a leadership transition was always a
time of uncertainty. An ombud who had endured a few throughout their career reflected,

> When [an ombud office] is already in place, and functioning, and resourced, it's quite a gift for new administrations, unless they just don't believe in it. ... And well, if they don't believe in it? We serve at the will, and plenty of offices have closed because leaders just don't believe in it.

One participant relayed a story about an ombud colleague at an academic
institution whose new president summarily decided to shutter the ombud office shortly
after arriving on campus. In the end, the office was kept open (and with an improved
reporting structure) in large part due to action by faculty at the institution who advocated
(over the summer break, no less) for the ombud position to remain. The participant's
perspective on their peer's situation was thus:

> What had [the ombud] done? [They] had established a set of relationships founded on methodical, careful, kind, elemental ombuds work. And it turned around that president. You and I could think, “Well, she wasn't really turned around, tell me what's going to happen next year…” and so on and so on, but as a single instance of the ability of a part-time, very hard-working, highly-skilled human being to build trust that worked, I've hardly ever seen a more clear example.

This, of course, illustrates the resilience of the embedded ombuds, someone
whose practice has situated them in a nexus of strong collateral relationships. Such a
web may protect the ombud from the whims of a new chief executive, or at least provide
resistance.

Even though a fully functional ombud office may be “a gift” to a new leader, it is
not unreasonable for that leader to conduct due diligence. New leaders should inquire
about the ombuds at their institutions; hopefully, what they find will affirm a commitment
to the function. An ombud who learned, long after the fact, that new chief executives had
initially asked around about them ruefully reflected, “Whatever they heard about us, my
colleague and me, led them to keep us.” Even though the loss of a supportive
relationship with their former senior leader was disorienting and sad, that transition also pleasantly revealed just how much “the [peer and collateral] relationships sustained us, too.”

**Simultaneity**

The relationship-building activities outlined here are discrete, yet they often happened simultaneously. Ombuds commonly have to do all at once—introduce and educate about the role, forge a connection and learn about leaders, set and reinforce parameters, and guard against disposability—while also transmitting information and establishing trust. Many ombuds’ interactions with leaders were also no more frequent than quarterly meetings, an added challenge. Building authentic, trusting relationships under these conditions and constraints is extremely skilled interpersonal work. It is arguably a significant component of the work of leadership. As one ombud observed,

> There are a number of things that I think point to successful leadership. It is the honesty and credibility. It's the relationship building...I think it is relationships. You get more done based on relationships, and credibility is huge. People want to trust you and they have to trust you to get stuff done, and so it is also about continuous learning.

**Trust**

The theme of trust came up over and over again with all participants. For those who felt they had it, they talked about how essential it was. For those who lacked it, or had experienced losing it at some point, they reflected on the myriad negative consequences of its absence. Ombuds talked about how trust functions at three levels in their work: with visitors, with leaders, and with the organization. If visitors do not trust the ombud office, they will not use it. If leaders and ombuds do not trust each other, communication will break down (and the ombud office may be closed). If ombuds are functioning optimally, it should increase trust in and throughout the organization overall.
A leader participant shared their perspective on how the ombud contributed to trust in the organization: “It gives people a confidential outlet to engage a thought partner, which...then builds trust in the organization as a place where they can do their best work and show up and be themselves.” Ombuds regularly help people move beyond assumptions, stereotypes, or defensive routines to connect as individuals. Working through an issue with the ombuds office provides an opportunity to save face, gain confidence and perspective, speak one’s truth, hear others’ truths, improve communication skills, and learn how to positively engage conflict in the future. All of this is predicated on and contributes to trust.

**Trust as Prerequisite and Precondition**

An ombud’s ability to establish and be worthy of trusting relationships was described by participants as an essential quality for the job. Two ombud participants discussed having been approached for guidance by leaders at other organizations looking to start ombud programs. One of them has consulted with many dozens of leaders about new programs, and their advice is always: Choose people who can “build trusting relationships and fast, and be worthy of the trust.” They would also ask leaders, *Is there already someone at your organization doing the work naturally?* This simple question “produced extraordinary ombuds for a whole bunch of institutions,” ranging from high-ranking officials to food services staff. Another ombud relayed an exchange with a senior leader in a tech company inquiring about how to start an ombud program. When discussing what to look for in a candidate, the ombud said, “You need someone who can build trust with you, you need someone who can build trust with your people, you need someone who has the executive presence to be able to talk to your board.” (The inquiring leader’s somewhat surprised response was, “Well, that's going to be expensive....”)
Ideally, trust flows in both directions. It was the linchpin in how one of the originating ombuds came to start the function at their organization. The now-ombud was happy and successful in a different role at the company when they were asked to accept the considerable task of building an ombud function for the organization.

The person who was asking me to do this was my then-boss's boss.... I had known him for years. I knew him when he first came into the organization. I worked very closely with him, trusted him, knew him. He and I had a very good and trusting relationship. He personally was the one who came to me even though he was not my boss at the time. He came to me and said, "Look, if we're going to do this, you're the guy we want to do this."

The now-ombud was flattered, but they only wanted to take the position if it was going to exist in earnest. They said, "I didn't want to just sit in a room somewhere and hang a sign on my door saying, 'I'm the ombudsman,' just to satisfy this requirement that we start a program. That was not going to do it for me." They wanted assurance that the program was going to be taken seriously, built correctly, and held to the highest possible standards. Interestingly, it was not a chorus of support this person needed to hear, but rather the personal assurance from this one trusted leader:

I very much trusted him, so when he gave me his personal assurance, because his name was going to be on this too.... I knew that his name would be attached to it, so I felt, and you know he was a very well-regarded person within our organization, so I knew if he was comfortable with it, I would be comfortable with it. So it was just a level of trust. I didn't need any further assurance other than him.

Even so, it "cemented the fact that folks really trusted me to do this" when the chief executive of that organization was quoted in an internal press article as saying, "Somebody in this role needs to have the highest level of integrity, and needs to be at the highest level of trust, and I can think of no better person to do this than [the ombud participant]." Now, after nearly a decade in the position, this ombud identified three important conditions for efficacy in the role. The first was credibility, the second was deep organizational knowledge, and the third was trust.
Then the third and final thing, it's just gotta be somebody that you trust. Right? ... Because [a leader is] basically telling this person, "Look. I'm gonna put you in this position where people are gonna come and talk to you about stuff, and you're not gonna tell us about it. I need somebody who I trust out there to be doing and saying the right thing." Right? Because there is a huge, really high level of trust in all of this. Because nobody knows what I'm saying, nobody knows what I'm reporting to the board.

The likelihood of a productive ombud-leader relationship without a solid base of trust was virtually non-existent. It was a precondition for even the most nominally productive connections between ombuds and leaders. “There's nothing simple about how to tell a CEO how to deal with their ombuds, or how to tell the ombuds how to deal with the top,” one participant mused, “but the CEO and ombuds have got to trust each other.”

*How Trust Formed*

Even though ombuds and leaders spoke adamantly about the importance of trust, they were less explicit about how trust formed. Three factors did emerge, however: exposure to the other; the passage of time; and the principles of neutrality and informality. Insider ombuds in particular referenced the importance of previous experiences with leaders in trust formation. It did not seem to matter if they had worked closely together or just intersected on a few projects superficially; they believed some interaction with the other was essential for promoting trust. For example, one ombud had interacted with their to-be leader on diversity efforts, which gave them exposure to one another’s values, style, and ability to handle difficult conversations. Interestingly, “values” were casually mentioned in two other discussions of trust. One ombud said, “There was never any question about their values” when reflecting on why they trusted in and felt trusted by a former leader.
Ombuds without preexisting exposure to leaders (either because they were “outsiders” or in the cases of leadership transitions) all referenced the time it took to build trust. One ombud reflected,

The first six or nine months or so, it like took a while to build the trust and understanding of, like, how I work and how she works. So we didn’t work that closely, I would say, like the first six or nine months or so as we were getting to know each other and stuff. And, then, I think as she saw I was a good worker and, you know, capable, and was confidential, and she started looping me in on more things.

Recall the example of the ombud who intentionally put themselves in as many meetings with peer leaders as possible to observe and learn about what mattered to whom, why, and how they could make the ombud role (appropriately) relevant to their interests. This ongoing work over months and years all led to increased trust with stakeholders. Another ombud observed that “trust builds most swiftly off the subject at hand” and talked about the trusting connections that formed as they were working side-by-side with peer and collateral leaders on a committee, or in the course of routine administrative interactions, or just by being out in the organization chatting with people about their kids or vacations or the weather. When asked how they had persevered through some very low-trust relationships with peer leaders, one public sector said with a sigh, “Time and space. It was just time and space.”

That ombud also felt that the principle of neutrality/impartiality helped them gain trust. Over time, people saw the ombud was fair, accessible to all, and not advancing any particular agenda. “They realized I wasn’t a wingnut,” was how one ombud put it. Another ombud felt strongly that informality, the lack of any management decision-making power, was essential to building trust. It helped people understand that the ombud could not impose any course of action on a situation. The importance of extending trust was also mentioned by one participant, specifically as it related to the
formal channels. They said, “I need to trust every one of my formal channels and I really do. If I didn’t, I couldn’t do this job.”

It was also interesting to note that the more experience ombuds had in working with leaders (both as an ombud and before), the more often the word “trust” appeared in their interview transcripts.

**Being Perceived as Trustworthy**

Participants spoke about being perceived as trustworthy. Some mentioned the importance of seeming well-balanced (i.e., not a wingnut), others of seeming self-assured and able to confidently assume a “seat at the table” with other leaders. A high degree of social acumen was mentioned as useful and effective. Emotional intelligence, humility, approachability, and authenticity, as well as humor, warmth, and composure were all considered trust-positive attributes. Extreme degrees of introversion and extroversion, however, were mentioned as potential liabilities.

**Trust Talk**

A consequence of trust is not just that leaders listen; it is also that they talk. Trust seemed to permit exchange, which contributed to the mutually beneficial flow of information that helped ombuds work better with constituents and to the ability of ombuds to be a resource for leaders. Such was the case in this exchange between an ombud and a new chief executive:

> When I met with him yesterday, I led with, “So how have your first 10 months gone?” And he said, “I'm glad you asked, let me tell you.” And that was the whole first part of it, listening. And then he started saying, “So what's your take on this?”

What a powerful invitation.
Power & Influence

Reactions varied when participants were asked what power or influence they thought the ombud had within their organizations. Some ombuds balked predictably at what I came to think of as the p-word: “I would never use that word, ‘power,’ because it just has such an ugly kind of connotation to it.” Others pondered it: “This is something I guess that we all struggle with, like, how do you influence without authority?” The responses fell into two categories: Those describing what power the ombud did not have, and those describing what power they did have. Those in the first column were exclusively about formal authority. Some emphasized that ombuds do not make decisions, especially vis-à-vis management, or even offer advice. Others emphasized the confidential and “off the record” aspects of ombuds’ practice.

When describing the types of power ombuds did have, however, the responses were almost all centered on either the work they do with individuals or the personal relationships they held with others across the organization. The influence ombuds felt they had with visitors was often framed in terms of helping them see new ways of moving through conflict. One ombud described this as helping to “shine a light,” and “listen to people, maybe bring people together in some ways, or connect them to resources.” Another said something similar:

I think folks who have interacted with this office come to realize it's not the sanctioned power of, “I make a phone call and heads roll.” It's the power of thinking out of the box, and the power of influence, of encouraging people to talk through situations that they might not have felt like they could have talked through before.

Three participants notably emphasized the influence the ombud had across the organization. One gave the example of policy awareness, saying that making the recommendation to fix policies that were inadvertently causing problems was influential.
Another spoke about the power of getting people to raise important issues through formal channels. The third spoke more broadly about the influence accorded by a combination of the ombud office’s distinct role and its reputation:

So I think our influence is significant, and a lot of it is what I already talked about, because it is now identified as being a unique function within the organization. It is in that, that the influence is that much greater. Right? Because it’s not more of the same, so its uniqueness allows us to gain that influence because it is a source of information different from all other sources of information within the organization. And in that, I think is where we have our greatest influence. And as I said, because the function is respected within the organization we get that immediate attention. You know? If we were not respected, nobody's really going to listen to us, and we're not going to have that influence.

This echoed the ombud who felt their function had little-to-no influence outside the personal relationships they had built because the larger ombud office itself simply was not well respected in their organization.

**Ombuds’ Means of Influence**

While participants’ direct responses to questions about power and influence were somewhat limited, many examples of influence were described or expanded upon in other portions of their interviews. As mentioned above, relationships and relationship building were key sources of influence, as was the work ombuds did with individuals (the influence of being helpful), and their potential effect on policy development.

“Uniqueness” as Influence

Being such an unusual and distinct function was influential in large part because of the novelty of the perspective and insight an ombud could possess and offer to others. Their unique vantage point in the organization positioned the ombud to see things no one else possibly could. The ethical principles also served to set them apart from other functions in a way that had the potential to garner reverence (“Oh my god, the ombudsman!”) and spark curiosity (“Ooh, I wonder what the ombuds is calling about!?”).
Reporting and Recommending as Influence

Ombuds have immense power in their choices about if, when, and how leaders’ attention may be called to an issue. Both typical update cycle and ad hoc reporting are used to make leaders take notice of, and sometimes take action on, a matter the ombud has determined to be important. One of the leader participants explained,

If [the ombud] sees patterns where employees, for example, don’t feel that the firm is being as transparent as it could be about an issue, they will usually in writing, send some sort of a report to senior management and the board saying, ‘I’ve heard this issue, and I recommend that you do the following to address it.’ People pay attention to that.

Ombuds can approach virtually anyone in the organization about any issue (access as influence). One relayed an example of choosing to go to a very highly ranked person about a problematic pattern they had identified in their area of responsibility. This leader listened, asked good clarifying questions, and then said, “Well, what do I need to do?”, listened closely to the ombud’s recommendations, and ultimately implemented most of them. In that particular case, the ombud had significant influence over martiaing resources, capacity building, and a change to the organization’s structure.

Education and Outreach as Influence

The proactive work that ombuds do—in onboarding work, conflict competence training, or other capacity-building contexts—can influence the overall environment of the organization. Ombuds have the power to help shape expectations, frame issues, and also provide skills and education that permit people to interact in new and different ways. This includes the work ombuds do to connect people in an organization to each other, helping smaller special interest or affinity groups to form around common problems or opportunities. One ombud said of the affinity groups they helped catalyze, “They were how to get anything done!”
Information as Influence

IOA Standard of Practice 1.4 specified that ombuds are meant to have access to all information in an organization, as permitted by law (IOA, 2009). It did not define “information,” but practitioners seem to commonly interpret this as data, documents, reports, policies, etc. Not only are ombuds supposed to be able to go and get information, it is often brought directly to them, as we saw in the case of mutual info exchanges in ombud-leader relationships. Ombuds also create information in the data they collect and statistics, insights, and recommendations they may report.

Knowledge as Influence

Philosophers and researchers alike have disagreed on the definition of knowledge though most may agree that knowledge is mediated by process, possession, or use for action in a way information is not (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Ombuds have access to so much knowledge and so much unique knowledge. The ombud office is often the only place in an organization that can and does receive knowledge in any form from anyone at any time. By design, ombuds tend to learn about things—experiences, perceptions, values, interpretations, assumptions—that often remain hidden from other sensing mechanisms in the organization. Because it is unique and because much of this knowledge is extremely sensitive, it gives ombuds tremendous power, both interpersonally and institutionally. Ombuds keep others’ secrets, yes, and in doing so develop a rich body of knowledge about what goes on behind the scenes. Ombuds also contribute to the creation of knowledge as they assist others in making sense of their experiences and contemplating action.

Being a Reliable Resource as Influence

A few ombuds shared examples of people seeking them out for their perspective on a problem. These instances were different than normal casework or consulting to a
committee; they were ombuds being approached as trusted thought partners and sounding boards. One ombud described this type of encounter:

People who will just call in because they're having an issue. They'll have had a successful, you know they got value out of working with me and so they'll call back when there are other things in the future, either their problems or like, “Well, the ombudsman helped me with this, maybe they can help me with that.”

That is the influence of being a valued and reliable resource.

**Personal Elements**

Personal factors were also at play in how ombuds and leaders related. Chief among them seemed to be an ombud’s sense of their own maturity in the role; their executive presence; their integrity; and the degree to which they actively identified as a leader or had prior or concurrent experience being a leader. When asked about their comfort and skill levels in working with leaders, responses ranged from novice to expert. The youngest participant identified this as “my biggest area for growth” on one end of the spectrum; on the other, an older yet equally experienced ombud said explicitly that the opportunity to use their leadership skills was central to why they had accepted the ombud role. One ombud, on the cusp of retirement, noted that working with leaders, especially in the form of a resource (troubleshooting or being a sounding board, for example) presumes that the ombud “has the skills, and inclination, and capabilities to do this. If they don't, that conversation's over before it starts.” This comment jumped out at me, both because it took for granted that many ombuds would not have those qualities and because it hints at the speed with which an ombud lacking them might be dismissed out of hand by a leader.

**Maturity in Role**

A factor that came up in a few different ways was what one participant named “maturity in role.” They explained,
Over time, you gain far more confidence, especially after that first one, two, three years, where you're really finding firm footing. Once you find that footing, you kind of know where those boundaries are. You know how hard to push, when to push, when not to push, when to simply make a phone call and refer a matter, when to leave something completely alone kind of thing.

Part of it was institutional knowledge, but much of it was also self-confidence, a feeling of being well established, and a groundedness in their ability and worth. This was echoed in how other participants described their growth over time. One repeatedly called themselves “naïve” when reflecting on their early years as a practitioner and emphasized how much they had learned and changed over time, in part through meaningful interactions with senior leaders.

**Executive Presence**

Each of the ombud participants seemed aware of the importance of their executive presence for their work with leadership, though only two directly named it. Executive presence is often thought of as a “you know it when you see it” type of personal quality that involves gravitas, competence, and esteem. The ombud participant who was most explicitly thoughtful and purposeful about working with leaders had a book about executive presence on their desk. As we spoke about this ombud’s career path, however, it became clear that their journey had included many formative opportunities to witness and develop executive presence (not just read about it). They defined executive presence like this:

I think executive presence is the ability to interact. To show up with senior leaders in a way that not only builds trust, mutual respect, but allows for mutual influence. … So it's not just about appearance and how you dress and how you speak and make a presentation. It's about how you connect. It's about the practical aspects of substance. Like I said, I don't pretend to be a [subject area expert], no matter who I'm dealing with. But do I have enough practical knowledge of the business and the issues, the risks and the issues that are important to them? And how can I communicate those things in a way that will be meaningful? I think that goes to the heart of executive presence.
Those questions echoed the concerns the youngest ombud voiced when describing their lack of assuredness when working with leaders. They gave this example:

I have a meeting with the policy director tomorrow. I've gone through and I have some questions I want to ask him about what he's doing, but...I don't really have anything of value for him. And so, I am conscious of that, I think, a lot. What am I bringing? What if he stops taking my meetings? What am I writing? Sometimes, I'll provide things and I feel like I didn't do a good job of presenting. ... I mean, obviously I don't get mad in his office or anything. But I do feel deflated or, like, it must be that I didn't do a great job raising that or I wasn't convincing enough. Yeah. I think those are things that I struggle with.

**Self-Confidence, Courage, Composure, and Humility**

Other important components to executive presence seemed to be self-confidence, courage, composure, and humility. (These closely parallel the qualities mentioned in the context of trust building.) While some individuals may come by these traits more naturally than others, it seemed that a climate of support from leadership had a positive effect on ombuds’ confidence in their role. In the example above, that ombud did not feel supported by leadership. A different ombud had the opposite experience, feeling enormously supported by a president who had provided them “an executive platform” and conscientiously worked to “elevate” the ombud role. Recall the warmth with which many ombuds recounted the responsiveness of leaders to their calls. That sort of positivity seemed to nurture an ombud’s sense of security and worth within the organization, as is natural.

Participants shared examples of where courage was required in their work, too, such as when they had to point out unpleasant trends, or face down threatening colleagues, or address the misdeeds of one’s direct reports with a very senior person. The most prominent example may be that of the ombud who had carried on with the
work of ombudship even after new leadership had half-heartedly put the kibosh on their
office. This ombud had enough chutzpah to simply keep calm and ombuds on:

While they said it went away, in my mind, it never did. I continued to use the title,
ombudsman, and just, I guess, not realizing it then, but waiting for the opportunity
for it to be reborn, and so it never went away because I kept it alive.

Ombuds often dealt with upset individuals and received upsetting information.
Composure and self-control were essential to remain helpful and professional. One
ombud talked about this in the context of not overreacting whenever they encountered
something uncomfortable. Others emphasized the importance of the ethical principles in
keeping perspective. For example, one commented on neutrality as an essential check
on their role:

I think to the extent that I challenge myself to be neutral, both when working with
visitors and with senior management, I am much more successful. If I let my own
feelings, viewpoints, values, emotions, seep in, I've got to pull back. And I think
that goes to executive presence.

Another felt that the combination of neutrality and informality (of not having any
decision-making power) was key. “If you are beside yourself with fury at misbehavior of
some unit head, it's incredibly easy to be less than neutral,” they said, and if one were to
make any decisions or be seen to lean on anyone to make decisions affecting that unit
head, trust in the ombud role would evaporate. To underscore this point, that ombud
relayed a story about having been made privy to a claim of a detestable act that
ultimately turned out to be untrue. That case, they said, taught them that they “did not
know enough to make management decisions in almost all of the domains that I dealt
with in a [massive] institution....” This, in turn, cultivated a sense of humility, another trait
mentioned by other participants. Ombuds seemed to feel that humility allowed them to
ask good questions, build good relationships, appear receptive and non-threatening, and
learn an awful lot. As one said, “the habit of my own ignorance served me very well, because I was kind of forced to listen.”

**Self-Concept as a Leader**

Most ombud participants did not explicitly self-identify as a leader, though I believe many did have some self-concept as a leader. None seemed to actively recoil at the idea and, again, one clearly stated that the ability to apply their leadership skills in the ombud role was central to their decision to take the job:

And I thought about it, I really gave it a lot of thought, because I didn’t know if [working as an ombud] was what I wanted. But the more I explored it, it had all of the elements that were right for me, but it was the ability to coach people. It was also the ability to use my leadership skills if you will, you know, the sizing of an issue, knowing the organization, being able to get people to raise it and know when I had to raise it. Getting out there doing the presentations and training. And most importantly, building those senior management relationships. Many of which I had in place but many of which I had to build.

Another ombud spoke about considering whether to apply for a different job within their institution during a time when the ombud role was under threat. That position was one of senior leadership, and the ombud said that they thought to themselves, "I know that my leadership skills are better than [the shoo-in for the position]." Yet another ombud who sat on a senior leadership team expressed being at ease in that company. For others, it was more of a dawning sense of “I guess I am a leader, now that I think about it” than an active identification, however.

All of the ombuds spoke about anticipating leaders’ needs and perspectives. Some of them did so from a place of considerable speculation, but those in the most positive ombud-leader relationships seemed to speak from experience. They had either been in leadership roles before or were in them currently as volunteers in other organizations or strove to actively learn about and vividly empathize with their leaders.
**Prior Leadership Experience**

The ombuds who stood out as having a highly developed executive presence likely benefited from having had leadership experience before becoming an ombud. One had been a regional director in a national organization; three had been executives in large corporations. (Two of the other three had entered ombud work within three years of completing graduate school, another after 10+ years of social services work.) They knew what it was like to manage, to make decisions, and to be responsible for implementing strategy. One described the cumulative effect of their prior leadership experiences:

> The skill set that I developed was not only leadership of my own teams and figuring out how to influence people and get people to follow you and be a team while they did it, but also it was all about how to be consultative with senior management and to sit at the table and have the confidence to do so.

In particular, that individual had been actively recruited for their “ability to deal with really tough personalities and senior personalities,” to “figure out what they needed, how to help them grow. And they were challenging. And we made it work.” Given that experience, this ombud was especially well equipped to claim their seat at the proverbial leadership table.

**Mentorship**

While I did not ask about this explicitly, almost all ombud participants mentioned the value of having had mentorship from leaders at some point along their career paths. One participant talked about still calling a mentor for advice on how to approach leaders sometimes. Another participant relayed a story from very early on in their career where a chance encounter with a senior leader led to an extraordinary degree of insight into how that leader thought about problem-solving within their organization. This leader then empowered that future ombud to act on his behalf. They were entrusted with major
projects and challenged to figure out how to get things done independently, yet also given supportive performance feedback along the way. The ombud reflected,

I can't stress enough how important that was to me when I look back. And it's so disheartening to me to see how disconnected junior employees are, even to middle management. Here in many cases, and everywhere. And it's so hard to convince leaders who are so stretched today. But when I think back, these guys were just as stretched. There was no difference. But they got it, they understood the power of connection.

Another very established ombud felt similarly fortunate to have had senior leaders who had taught (but not spoon-fed) them early on. They modeled the way, made expectations clear, and made sure to be accessible. Experiences like this—where senior leaders took the time to intentionally and compassionately bring greener staff along—seemed so valuable to those ombuds lucky enough to have had them. Not only did they get to see how the sausage was made and learn how their leaders thought and what they valued, they got to see that these leaders were also just people, too. It disabused them of overly hierarchical interpretations of leadership and helped reduce the psychological power distance. It taught those ombuds not to lose sight of the fact that there was an important and distinct personal dimension to every leader interaction. An ombud participant explained,

You have to understand what drives them as people and as leaders, and how you can be supportive of that, and can feel like you're actually adding value to what they care deeply about and feel like a heavy burden of responsibility to do, not in a way that would ever compromise your ability to do your core work as an ombuds, but you have to know and be able to see how you fit within the work that our leaders are charged with doing, and how you can be helpful, and supportive, and challenge them as necessary. I think it requires some pretty deep understanding of organizational culture and individual leaders, and their histories, and how this group works together to actually do that effectively.

**Concurrent Leadership Experiences**

Some of the ombuds mentioned having concurrent leadership experiences alongside their ombud role. Two referenced leading other members of their own office
(e.g., staff or interns), two spoke explicitly about doing executive coaching and
development work outside their organization, and three mentioned leadership in
prominent volunteer roles in different entities including but not limited to civic groups,
faith communities, the IOA, California Caucus of College and University Ombuds, and
the American Bar Association. The one who retained their ombud title even though the
office was effectively closed had been elevated into working more directly with the
organization’s governing board. They described their new role as a peculiar hybrid of
“board relations with an ombuds twist” but said it was functioning surprisingly well. Tricky
issues still land in this person’s lap, and “not all of them are ombuds work, or require the
confidentiality or the independence, but again, similar things. I’m still running down
problems.”

Summary

I undertook this research with a view that ombuds and leaders are dialectically
related—that their seemingly contradictory positions were importantly bound together.
The findings of this study seemed to support that position and, more usefully, revealed
how the two are—or have the potential to be—complementary. Investigation of the
idealized model showed that it might be unhelpfully limited, leaving too much unsaid that
creates incorrect assumptions and gaps of understanding. Talking with ombuds and
leaders about their relationships also revealed some obvious yet critical dilemmas and
opportunities that are not, to my knowledge, explicitly addressed in how ombuds are
trained to work with leaders or in how leaders approach working with ombuds. Much of
this is based in the perennial challenges of any human relationship: How do we learn
about each other? How do we show up with each other? How do we come to trust each
other? Yet there are additional wrinkles in the case of ombud-leader relationships that
can further complicate these questions. My hope is that the findings above and
discussion below can better illuminate the nature of the dialectic so that ombuds and leaders may think more clearly about their unusual relationship and better leverage it for the benefit of their organizations. It is a relationship unlike almost all others, but that should be its strength, not its weakness.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

When I proposed this study, I was hoping to learn more about how leaders and ombuds thought about and did their work together. The modest goal of learning more has been met, and I now have more questions than when I began. Hence, this chapter departs from those preceding it in style and substance. What follows is my attempt to make sense of this small study, to situate its outcomes amongst a variety of relevant, extant research and, where fitting, connect them to my own experiences. In this section, I reflect on the observations, insights, and questions that have arisen throughout this work, as well as address its limitations and potential directions for future inquiry.

Reality Test of the Idealized Model

This study was constructed in part as a reality test of the idealized model of the ombud-leader relationship. Recognizing that the idealized model is a dominant mental model among ombud practitioners, it seemed an important area for investigation. A starting assumption was that this model was in some way problematic, given observations of ombuds’ general unease about working with leaders. Findings in this study suggested the idealized model may be insufficient in several ways.

If the idealized model of “report and recommend straight to the top” calls to mind a narrow sort of hierarchy, the realized model (such as it is, in this tiny study) reveals a far flatter and more flexible arrangement. The realized model may be best stated as “build and maintain a robust web of trusting relationships with leaders of all sorts, moving information and guiding attention in a variety of ways.” If the idealized model is a pyramid, the realized model is a matrix, and by matrix I mean both a grid of leader types by reporting types, and the space in which that grid resides, which is an environment of trust potential. Think of trust as the concrete surrounding a rebar frame of formal relationships and reporting routines: they reinforce each other. Rebar without concrete
results in a strong yet sparse framework. Concrete without rebar results in strong yet potentially unstable support. The two together are best.

An ombud’s work with leadership seems more about regularly interfacing with various strata of leaders in the organization than occasionally interacting with a few folks at the very top. My original concern with the bottleneck had (at least) two things wrong: It presumed a critical dependence on the direct leader, and it neglected myriad other ombud-leader relationships. This study did bear out the importance of being tied to a highly-ranked chief executive or governing body, but it also demonstrated how an ombud’s contribution to the leading of an organization is a factor not of their one or two ties to the tippy top but their dozens of relationships with leaders of all kinds. It is not an either/or, it is a both/and. While a tie to a senior-most leader was important for status, the web of interrelationship was essential to “get things done.” The model is even more three-dimensional than I had anticipated and also thoroughly systemic, which aligns with my conceptual framework for the ombud role and its value, both in general and to leaders.

All that said, the quality of any given ombud-leader relationship did have an impact on information flow and knowledge development. At the outset, I thought of relationship as a conduit, that its value was largely in providing an open channel for information to move between ombuds and leaders. I now see the relationship and the information (be it a typical update cycle report, a recommendation, or a “red-hot chili pepper” ad hoc alert) as inextricably intertwined in creating knowledge. They cannot be separated. Communication between ombuds and leaders is not transactional—it is highly dependent on factors of relationship. It is a question of this knowledge from this person at this time based on this history. The medium is the message.
Irony of Independence

Most ombuds endeavor to uphold their standards of practice and ethical principles conscientiously. The principle of independence, however, seems to be one where practitioners have struggled to find clarity when it comes to working with leaders. On the one hand, independence is viewed as the structural arrangement where ombuds report only to the highest possible level, thereby removing them from the influence and obligations of typical line management (even though this arrangement is codified in the Standards of Practice’s [IOA, 2009] section about neutrality). On the other hand, independence is also interpreted as requiring remoteness by some, especially when cross-referenced with an interpretation of the principle of neutrality as having no bias. Many ombuds try to keep their distance, to manage the perception that they are under anyone’s thumb. Ombuds are especially sensitive, I think, to the perception that they are swayed by or in league with senior leaders, whose power they exist in part to be a check on.

This study suggests that an effective way to diffuse the perception that an ombud is overly attached to any one person is not to emphasize being equally unattached to all persons but, rather, to encourage the perception that the ombud is equally attached to every person. Ombuds might expand rather than shrink to best embody the principles of independence and neutrality. Relatedly, the IOA has used the term impartiality to describe its ethical principle of remaining neutral, not taking sides. Some practitioners have advocated instead for an approach of multipartiality (Gadlin & Sturm, 2007; Wing & Rifkin, 2001), pithily described as taking all sides. This view not only avoids the objection that humans cannot be neutral, it also acknowledges the existence of all perspectives and, in doing so, enervates the connections—the relationships—between them. Instead
of an inert tableau, the ombud observes from a cool distance, issues or conflicts become alive as a dynamic system of human interaction with which the ombud can engage.

The IOA (2009) Best Practices Supplement to the Standards of Practice leaned in this direction when it stated that independence “may be supported by having the selection and evaluation of the Ombudsman, as well as the establishment of an appropriate level of funding, be determined by or in consultation with committees representative of various institutional constituencies” (p. 3). Recall the participant whose position was funded by a leader who drew monies from all the cabinet-level leaders’ budgets saying, “Now you’ve got skin in the game.” The sapience of more connections rather than fewer to maintain independence is most blisteringly captured, however, by the experienced ombud who said, “I always acted as though I reported directly to every senior leader.” Each year they would meet with each senior leader and give them a bespoke report. It included headlines from the organization-wide data and also insights about their particular area of ownership. It is such a counterintuitive yet brilliant move, almost straight from the organizational jiu-jitsu handbook (if there were such a thing). Not only did this reduce any perception that the ombud “belonged” to the direct leader, it also built multiple strong relationships over time.

**The Four Table Legs of Support from Leaders**

The theme of more relationships resulting in more independence may also be applied to the unresolved question regarding to which formal leadership role an ombud should directly report. The question should perhaps be as follows: Which roles should ombuds be reporting to, both directly and with a dotted line? Participants in this study identified (at least) four different types of support and/or access they felt ombuds needed:
• The halo effect of status that comes from a connection to a figure of high authority (what Fisher [1984] called “a legitimizing agent,” p. 35).

• A way to get their unique big-picture perspective into the hands of those who could use it to benefit the organization strategically (chief executive and/or governing board).

• A connection to someone with their finger on the day-to-day pulse of the firm, who had a combination of stature, relationships, and operational knowledge and control.

• An administrator for basic needs as an employee, such as budget approvals and supply requisitions.

Having one person play all those roles may be efficient, but it is suboptimal in at least three scenarios. First, it may be difficult to find one person in a large organization who can play all those roles well. Second, it may create a bottleneck. Third, it may leave the ombud function vulnerable. If that particular ombud-leader relationship breaks down for any reason (e.g., the relationship sours, the function is restructured, there is turnover in leadership), the ombud could find themselves quite isolated or increasingly irrelevant (See Table 4).
Table 4  
Matrix of Ombuds’ Needs and Leader Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Governing Body</th>
<th>Chief Executive</th>
<th>Cabinet-Level</th>
<th>Senior Operational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foresight, oversight, insight</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision, strategy, decision making</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area knowledge, strategic advisor</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area knowledge and operational responsibility</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is no one perfect way to arrange the ombud function at all organizations. Considering the requirements above against the governance and leadership structure at each site will hopefully help set any given organization on a path toward a good arrangement for their ombud function. I wonder if the leader participant who expressed some concern that their ombud was not officially connected to the governance structure had considered the possibility of multiple rather than one reporting relationship. A vision of the ombud role as intentional redundancy measure—a backup and failsafe for the larger CMS and learning systems—might also ease concerns that multiple reporting relationships would be inefficient.

Relationships as Central to Ombud Work

Organizations are no longer built on force but on trust. The existence of trust between people does not necessarily mean that they like one another. It means that they understand one another. Taking responsibility for relationships is therefore an absolute necessity. It is a duty. (Drucker, 2006, p. 16)

So by the time I got to my third [chief executive] who was from outside [the organization], I had a thousand relationships, and he didn’t have any. ...So one of
the things that leads to variance between ombuds and leaders is who has the relationships within the organization that can serve the mission and sustain the values. ...Somebody has to have relationships. (Ombud study participant)

Relationships are an ombud’s job site. They are where—and how—the work of ombuds get done, where they have the most influence, where they uniquely, expertly, and almost exclusively operate. This was a dominant theme throughout the study and one very significant for understanding the ombud’s role from a complex systems perspective. Oshry (2007) described organizations as “a web of relationships” (p. 117) and asserted that “systems are not simply collections of individuals, they are patterns of relationship.... We exist only in relationship—sometimes on one side sometimes on the other” (p. 121). This excerpt from Theiss and Dues (2014) about ombuds determining who, when, and how to report a trend or issue so nicely captured the complexity of decision-making and almost overwhelming degree of social acuity ombuds wield in doing their jobs:

Primary among these factors is the extent to which we, as the ombuds, have a relationship of mutual trust with an appropriate recipient of the report. “Informality” and “Independence” are standard principles in ombuds practice; we do not have line authority in the organization. While most of us “report to” a designated executive officer, that officer is not typically the most appropriate recipient of a report about any specific problematic trend. Ombuds work persistently, over time, to develop relationships with as many supervisors, managers and executive officers as they can, within their operating purview. Lacking line authority, we need to demonstrate integrity, competence, judgment and skill not only in handling specific cases, but also regarding broader issues of managing human environments. At the same time, we need to assess the extent to which we can trust each of these officers to handle sensitive information well, and to act constructively on the information we might provide. That is, we need to assess their integrity, competence, judgment and skill. When we have a relationship of strong mutual trust with a particular manager or officer, we can then judge whether it is reasonably safe, and probably useful to report the trend. (Choosing a Recipient, para. 2)

Relationships are everything. Ombuds’ skill with and access to relationships of all kinds across an organization perfectly position them as change agents and systems leaders.

As Senge et al. (2015) wrote, “transforming systems is ultimately about transforming
relationships among people who shape those systems” (Gateways to Becoming, para. 8).

The Ombud-Leader Dialectic & Leadership Dyads

Ombud’s relationships with leaders were distinct (and perhaps distorted) from most of their other relationships in important ways. Oshry (2007), who thought of organizations as webs of relationships, believed there are three types of basic systemic relationships to which we all adhere (e.g., Top/Middle/Bottom, End/Middle/End, Provider/Customer) and on “one side or the other” we find ourselves. Ombuds and senior-most leaders are perhaps similar in that each is relatively static in relationship position—by dint of their extremely unique positions, they do not often find themselves on one side or the other. No matter what the interaction, the senior-most leader is always the senior-most leader. The ombud is always the ombud. Neither is likely to find themselves on the other end of a grievance or a dispute with someone who has more of their own primary type of power over them.

This again calls to mind a dialectic, where opposites are bound together. The near-complete positional authority of the leader is well balanced by the complete lack of positional authority by the ombud, allowing dynamic tension and interplay between the two. Another dialectical throughline may be that the more senior the leader, the less likely they are to have direct contact (relationships) with “ordinary” members of the organization. The ombud, on the other end, is one of the people most likely to have such relationships, and plenty of them. Setting aside quantity, the quality of these relationships is also likely to differ significantly. People are usually on their best behavior in front of senior leaders; people are often in their lowest moments in front of ombuds. Ombuds have relationships established in vulnerability, almost by definition. Leaders
often have relationships built on the strength of success. What other qualities do ombuds and senior leaders mirror (See Figure 3)?

![Ombud-leader dialectic wheel.](image)

**Figure 3.** Ombud-leader dialectic wheel.

Another way of thinking of a dialectic is as a paradox. Empson (2017) identified paradox theory as an important site for leadership research. Her work on leadership in professional service organizations (e.g., hospitals, universities, financial institutions, consulting firms, etc.) contended that leadership in such places is particularly fraught. In these contexts, she found that leaders are often people distinguished by professional expertise more so than any formal leadership training or experience. They in turn are then charged with leading other professionals, “highly educated, highly trained, highly motivated, and highly opinionated individuals” (Empson, 2017, p. 2). She found the concept of plural leadership, which views leadership as something collectively constructed by peers working together in interaction, well suited to these complex, challenging environments (Empson, 2017). Empson argued,
It is notionally possible for one individual to be in charge of a professional organization and to embody and reconcile the inherent tension between the individual and collective, but it is much easier when two are involved. ...[E]ven the most discordant dyads can be effective if their members are able to embody, express, and repeatedly resolve the conflict which permeates the organization as a whole. (p. 11).

Who better to help leaders “embody, express, and resolve the conflict which permeates the organization as a whole” than an ombud? Empson’s research has focused on the leadership dyad, commonly found in the form of CEO and board chair or president and chancellor, but that may also occur in a variety of combinations throughout an organization. Her framework locates four types of leadership dyads across the dimensions of structural roles and personal relationships. Empson’s four categories of dyad are Intuitive Collaboration; Structured Coordination; Negotiated Cohabitation; Careful Cooperation (their names are sufficiently descriptive; See Figure 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Overlapping</th>
<th>Distinct</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harmonious</td>
<td>INTUITIVE COLLABORATION</td>
<td>STRUCTURED COORDINATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discordant</td>
<td>CAREFUL COOPERATION</td>
<td>NEGOTIATED COHABITATION</td>
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</table>

*Figure 4. Leadership dyads in professional service firms (Empson, 2017).*

These dyads may prove useful for thinking about individual ombud-leader relationships. If applied to this study, I believe that the positive ombud-leader reporting relationships primarily fall under Structured Coordination. Both ombud and leader knew
the “rules of the road” (structure) as well as believed their work was mutually beneficial and enacted it to be so (coordination). Reflecting on the peer relationships described, I would characterize many as having begun as Careful Cooperation (think about the Competition Myth). Where they ultimately ended up seemed to depend on how the individual peer leaders came to think about the ombud’s role (as overlapping or distinct) and how the ombuds were (or were not) able to build trusting relationships with those leaders over time. The example of the ombuds who could call peer leaders any time, get in to see them immediately, seem like cases of Structured Coordination, for example.

I do wonder if the ombud’s unique role means that it is always “distinct” from other roles, therefore ruling out the possibility of Intuitive Collaboration. Or does the ombud’s role as informal CMS coordinator, as the “glue” or triage function in such a system, mean it fundamentally “overlaps” with formal channels such as HR, ethics, legal, and so on? Interestingly, Empson (2017) pointed out that while Intuitive Collaboration may seem ideal, being overly harmonious defeats the primary purpose of the leadership dyad, which is “to embody and enact conflict within the partnership” (Intuitive Collaboration, para. 3). A degree of conflict and distance is essential to avoiding groupthink and to generating fresh yet grounded perspectives. Empson’s model helps show how the differences between ombuds and leaders can serve to improve organizational leadership. The tension inherent in their differences is generative, and good for the organization as a whole when productively engaged as a form of plural leadership.

It is worthwhile to note that the two least positive ombud-leader reporting relationships were in the public sector, in organizations that do not qualify as professional service firms. Perhaps the culture of such organizations was so traditional (i.e., hierarchical, authoritarian, bureaucratic) that the potential for ombuds to be
recognized as valuable halves of a leadership dyad was extremely low. It may be that the environment of a professional service organization is necessary for the model of ombud-as-leadership-role is to find any footing. (This is not to say all public sector organizations cannot have environments similar to that of professional service firms, merely that the two in this study did not.)

Empson (2017) emphasized role structure and personal relationship. A related but distinct line of inquiry into ombud-leader relationships is that of communication. This study found that the quality of information (what the ombud or leader had to say) was affected by the relationship between the two. In the extreme negative examples, no relationship meant no communication—no information flow, the dreaded bottleneck. In the extreme positive examples, a strong, trusting relationship meant exchanges like a leader asking the ombud, “What is your gut telling you?” This appreciation of intuition and the ability to communicate with ease was important not just for the experience (less awkward) but also for the ombud’s ability to convey meaning without breaching confidentiality. There may be a certain kind of “ombud speak” used with leaders, where ombuds have to imply and insinuate more so than tell and advise to get their messages across both effectively and ethically. It seemed the relationships modulated the information.

Wilmot (1995) described three paradigms of relational communication. In Paradigm I, people see themselves as loosely connected individuals. This view "emphasizes the self, de-emphasizes the other, and reduces the relationships to a fragile connecting mechanism" (p. 37). In Paradigm II, people can see the dialectical connection between self and other—that they are bound together in some way—but focus on trade-offs and exchange (Baxter, 1984, 1994; Roloff, 1981). In Paradigm III, the thinking shifts “from two people trying to send accurate verbal and nonverbal messages
to each other to two people generating meaning conjointly” (Wilmot & Bergstrom, 2019, para. 15). This perspective may track with a similar characterization of ombud-leader relationships. The least positive seem to have a very individualistic and transactional view; the more positive, an appreciation of mutual investment and benefit; the most positive, an ability to co-create meaning through true dialogue and not just information exchange. Research into ombud-leader communication practice and patterns through the lens of relational communication may be a fruitful area for future study. Again, I am curious to know if ombuds and leaders might ever progress into Paradigm III or if the ethical principles and design of the ombud role somehow prohibit it. Most likely, ombuds and leaders capable of that level would know how to shift between Paradigms II and III as required for the conversation (and ethical constraints) at hand.

Both Empson’s (2017) and Wilmot’s (1995) frameworks might be viewed as representing relationships along a spectrum from highly competitive and untrusting to highly cooperative and highly trusting. For ombuds and leaders to tend toward the more cooperative and trusting end (Structured Coordination or Paradigms II and III), the relationship likely has to be experienced and understood as collaborative and emergent. This view, however, runs counter to very dominant cultural norms that emphasize and value individualism, competition, efficiency, and causal rationality (Meadows, 2008; Morgan, 1983; Senge, 1990). These values are often hypercharged in organizations, with leaders promoted because of their uber-embodiment of such norms (sometimes referred to as “the dark side of leadership”; Conger, 1990; Hogan & Hogan, 2008). This may make it rather hard for such leaders to fathom ombuds’ worth to them in the work of leadership, much less figure out how to enact a generative partnership with them.
The Dilemmas

This research identified two potential dilemmas in ombud-leader relationships. The dilemma for leaders centers around trust, vulnerability, and the confidentiality principle; the dilemma for ombuds also centers around trust (albeit differently) and the independence and neutrality principles.

The Leader’s Dilemma

There is a potential dilemma here for leaders, especially chief executives. Without an ombud, they may forgo the comfort of knowing there is a failsafe in place, that someone exists to find the bugs in their organizational system. With an ombud, they may face the discomfort that someone else in their organization will—by design—know detailed, sensitive information that they may not. Additionally, the ombud bears little-to-no accountability for organizational outcomes. An ombud’s name is not on the masthead. The chief executive’s is. When framed like this, it may be easier to empathize with senior leaders’ potential ambivalence about ombuds. It also underscores why leaders’ understanding of the role and its parameters, and their trust in the individual(s) performing the role are key. Joyce (2014) articulated this ambivalence as belonging to the organization (perhaps euphemistically), but I believe it is highly applicable to individual leaders:

Many organizations have a deep ambivalence about their Ombuds offices. The value of the office as a resource and problem-solver is weighed against the discomfort of knowing that an Ombuds receives information about issues that the broader organization may not be aware of, especially issues that could put the organization at risk. Although there are steps that may be able to reduce this ambivalence, such as education about the Ombuds profession and the IOA Standards of Practice and building relationships with key decision makers with an emphasis on shared goals, the ambivalence remains. (p. 17)

It may take a very self-secure and humble leader to welcome, value, and empower an ombud function (Conger, 1990; Fisher, 1984; Higgs, 2009; Hogan & Hogan,
2008). Some leaders may not be open to acknowledging information that is unflattering to or troubling about their organizations (or themselves). Some leaders may be threatened by the degree of access that an ombud has, or their expansive web of relationships. Some leaders may resent that ombuds know considerable detail about an important issue but will only raise it while protecting confidentiality, thereby making the issue more tricky or time-intensive to resolve. All of this may make leaders feel quite vulnerable, which heightens the importance of trust. A leader needs to be willing to take the risk that the ombud will handle what they learn appropriately (Bogoslaw, 2015; McBride & Hostetler, 2008), and accept that they have very little control over whether, how, and when that happens (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007).

And what are a senior leader’s options if they do not trust their ombud? Ignoring or keeping distance from the role may, in fact, be their wisest choice. Ousting the ombud could look like an ugly power play. Shuttering the entire ombud office is dramatic (and may not be permitted). Installing someone they do trust may result in a perception of the ombud as the leader’s “plant,” compromising the whole function. It is no wonder that leadership transitions can be precarious for ombuds and that those embedded in a web of well established, trusting relationships felt most secure. (Recall the example relayed by a participant whose colleague had their office spared from the presidential guillotine by direct action from outraged faculty members.)

**The Ombud’s Dilemma**

All participants said that trusting relationships between ombuds and leaders were essential. Yet a belief that ombuds should maintain distance in all relationships—and with leaders in particular—to avoid any perception of non-independence or non-neutrality persists amongst many ombud practitioners. This can lead to ombuds
restricting interactions with leaders (and others) to a bare minimum to comply with their interpretation of IOA Standards, which makes it very difficult to build trust and rapport with them. Ombuds therefore face a dilemma: If they do the things required to build trust with leaders, they risk being perceived as non-compliant to standards. If they do not do the things required to build trust, they risk having ineffective relationships with leaders, which impinges on the efficacy (and perhaps also security) of their role. Experienced ombud Bruce MacAllister (2018) explored this scenario in a blog post entitled “Independence & the Two-Edged Sword.” He wrote,

One might assume that it is imperative to maintain a healthy state of “remoteness” and distance from those with whom the ombuds may need to engage to avoid any perception of non-neutrality. However, when one factors into the equation the key elements necessary to foster trust, effective communication, and an appropriate degree of influence (not over the outcome, but relevant to the need for action) that remoteness can work at cross purposes to building trust and rapport. (para. 3)

He went on to contrast two experiences of working with chief executives to address brewing organizational crises. In one case, he had built a warm rapport with the executive. In the other, he had not. The outcomes were starkly different: The executive with whom there was rapport took him seriously and acted swiftly to avert the crisis. The one with whom there was no rapport brushed him off, and the crisis eventually landed on the nightly news. He concluded, based on his experience and with the benefit of hindsight, that it is “important for the ombuds to reach out and to build trusting relationships and good rapport, while remaining mindful of reasonable limits and the optics that each relationship itself projects” (MacAllister, 2018, para. 10). Reese Ramos, another well-established ombud practitioner, shared a compelling piece of ombud lore in a comment on that blog post. He wrote,

Don Hartsock, the first Ombuds at UCLA for over three decades until his retirement in the ‘90s, shared with me in 2001 the one question he would ask every time he met with the President/Chancellor of the campus at every meeting
in which Don gave upward feedback:

Do You Trust Me?

I have to admit that initially my response was that that was a silly question to ask. It didn’t take me long to understand and appreciate (as Bruce points out) that without Trust, and engagement with leaders leading up to that level of rapport, we are simply not as influential. (Ramos, in MacAllister, 2018, Comment 5)

Relationship-building leads to trust, which leads to influence. Ombuds must establish trust with leaders if they are going to be most effective at carrying out their mandate to help improve the organizations they serve.

The Role of Trust

Tompkins Byer (2017) lovingly observed, “The ombuds field is remarkable in the way that it enables people from different backgrounds to enter different contexts and to become the one individual in a complex institution that constituents trust the most” (p. 236). What a wonderful way to think about ombuds: the most-trusted individuals. And yet the word “trust” appears only once in the IOA Standards of Practice (2009), in its very last sentence:

4.8 The Ombudsman endeavors to be worthy of the trust placed in the Ombudsman Office.

This seems a remarkable understatement—and perhaps oversight—given how critical trust is for the formation of relationships and how essential relationships are to ombudship (Griffin, 2010). Perhaps it is just so fundamental that it is almost invisible, barely registering as worthy of comment. Or perhaps trust seems so ephemeral, so situational, it seems impossible to codify in a set of standards. The theme of trust arose in all participant interviews, however, and seems to play a vital role in relationships between ombuds and leaders.

So what is trust? Participants spoke of it as though it required no definition, but it certainly does. Schoorman et al. (2007) defined it as the “willingness to take risk” (p.
346). Feltman (2009) and Brown (2018) believed it is “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person’s actions” (Feltman, 2009, p. 7). Hurley (2012) defined it as “confident reliance on a person, group, organization, or system (for example, the financial system) in the face of risk and uncertainty” (p. 34). It is a “living process” requiring “ongoing attention” (Brown, 2018, p. 232), and one based in relationship (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). In short, trust boils down to relational vulnerability.

**How Trust Fits into Ombuds Work**

Trust is the special sauce that makes any relationship *zing*, be it a relationship between an ombud and a leader, an ombud and a visitor, or an individual and the organization. An ombud office should be considered a trust center for its organization, helping build, repair, and monitor trust on many levels. Galford and Drapeau (2003) identified three distinct yet interlinked types of trust, strategic, personal, and organizational: Strategic trust is that put in decision-makers to make good choices for the organization. Personal trust is that between persons. Organizational trust is that which people have in the organization itself to be consistent, fair, and well thought through. They are linked, however: “Every time an individual manager violates the personal trust of her direct reports, for example, their organizational trust will be shaken. (Galford & Drapeau, 2003, para. 3). Ombuds help create and embed each type of trust throughout their organizations. How they participate in and contribute to senior-most leaders’ decisions speaks to strategic trust. How they model personal trustworthiness and assist individuals in building or rebuilding relationships in conflict is a large part of how ombuds spend their time. Ombuds’ work to be advocates for fairness, to look for gaps between the values an organization espouses and those it evinces, and to ensure
policies work as well in practice as they do in theory all feed organizational trust. The very presence of an ombud office affirms strategic and organizational trust:

Just knowing that it is there adds value. I have had countless people tell me over the years that even though they have never used the office, they are glad it is there. It is comforting to know there is an alternative to the formal system. Furthermore, establishing the function sends a strong signal to the people in your organization that you care about them, that you are willing to provide a neutral, confidential place for them to go without risk when they have a problem. It reinforces the credibility of any organization that places high value on people and its public posture (Furtado, 1996, p. 15)

Trust is crucial for organizational effectiveness (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Covey & Conant, 2016; Covey & Merrill, 2006; Feltman, 2009; Galford & Drapeau, 2003; Hurley, 2014). This is not just because it helps individuals communicate clearly and get along better, but because trust indicates an organization itself is coherent and aligned. Research by Hurley et al. (2013) has shown that “major organizational trust violations are almost never the result of rogue actors. Rather, they are predictable in organizations that allow dysfunctional, conflicting or incongruent elements of their organizational system to take root” (Why Trust Violations Occur, para. 2). Ombuds can help leaders spot imbalances and unfairness that compromise both strategic and organizational trust. “The development of a company strategy (and, in turn, the allocation of resources) that either accidentally or deliberately favored the interests of one stakeholder group while betraying those of others” has been identified as a primary cause of trust breaches (Hurley et al., 2013, Why Trust Violations Occur, para. 5). Trust is as much a systemic quality as it is a personal quality. Galford and Drapeau (2003) underscored the sting of losing organizational trust by reminding us that people can walk away from individual relationships if trust is lost, yet “[t]hat’s not usually an option for people in an organization, so they stick around. But if they think the organization acted in bad faith, they’ll rarely forgive—and they’ll never forget” (Galford & Drapeau, 2003, para. 2). This is
perhaps particularly so in cases of institutional betrayal, where an institution’s response (including lack of response) to a harm experienced by one of its members is itself harmful to that member, who trusts or is dependent upon that institution (Platt, Barton, & Freyd, 2009; Smith & Freyd, 2014).

**Establishing Trust**

While an ombud function’s contributions to strategic and organizational trust may be apparent prima facie, ombuds in this study had to build personal trust with leaders on a case-by-case basis. Behavioral science research has much to say about how personal trust forms generally. Feltman (2009) asserted there are four assessments people make when evaluating one’s trustworthiness: sincerity, reliability, competence, and care. Maister, Green, and Galford (2000) described four different variables: credibility, reliability, intimacy, and self-orientation. Bryk and Schneider (2003) found that relational trust grows out of four areas: respect, personal regard, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity. Hurley (2012) outlined six: similarities, interests, benevolent concern, capability, predictability/integrity, communication. Brown (2018) had seven elements in her anatomy of trust. (See Table 5 for a comparison of trust model components.)
Table 5

Comparison of Trust Model Components

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<td><strong>COMPETENCE</strong></td>
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<td>Competence in core role responsibilities</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
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<td>Personal regard</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Vault</td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>Similarities</td>
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*Note. Bates (2016) components are the Character dimensions of Executive Presence, which she describes as “fundamental to the decision to trust.”*
Ombuds may excel at indicating care, respect, or nonjudgment, but it is less obvious to me how ombuds demonstrate other components of trust models. How, for example, do ombuds demonstrate competence, accountability, or even integrity to senior leaders in particular when so much of their work is confidential and done behind the scenes?

When comparing trust models, I saw four common threads: competence, reliability, integrity, and care. These align most closely with Feltman’s (2009) model, except for the word “sincerity” instead of “integrity.” Competence is that you can do what you say you will; reliability is doing what you say you will do, keeping your promises; care is that you have the other person’s interests in mind as well as your own (Feltman, 2009). Integrity is that your words and actions align, that you choose courage over comfort (Brown, 2018). Let’s consider each thread in turn:

**Competence**

The importance of an ombud’s credibility—the quality of being believable—came up often in participant interviews and is echoed in ombudship literature (Houk et al., 2016; Rowe & Gadlin, 2013; Rowe et al., 2019a, 2019b). A key component of credibility is competence, that one can do what they say they will (Sobel, 1985). In the case of insider ombuds, they felt their credibility had been established in part because they had “sat in those chairs,” as one ombud participant put it. They had a track record and/or a reputation that spoke to their knowledge, skill, and experience. A good organizational reputation could bolster perceptions of an ombud’s competence, even with new incoming leaders who had no personal experience with them. But how do outsider ombuds establish their competence?

Feltman (2009) wrote that competence in the workplace “usually means the other person believes that you have the requisite capacity, skill, knowledge, resources and
time to do a particular task or job” (p. 35). Yet not one ombud participant felt that senior leaders had a very thorough understanding of what they did day-to-day, of the core elements of their work. If a leader does not know what the ombud’s particular task or job is, how then do they evaluate an ombud’s competence in it? This ignorance seemed to point to high trust in the interviews, however, as leaders just trusted that ombuds were doing whatever they were supposed to be doing, leaving me to suspect competence was assessed another way. Most ombuds realized they were fortunate in this regard. One remarked of their direct leader,

He trusts that we do good work that he never really learns about. And not all leaders go there. They don't trust at that level. So if they don't hear the specifics, they presume nothing, or presume something negative.

What then are “the specifics” that ombuds might ethically share with leaders, and that leaders would have the time and interest to hear? Feltman has advice for helping build trust in one’s competence:

Make a list to clarify to yourself and others the areas you claimed competence in. Define the standards by which your competence is assessed. When you don’t know something, say so and ask for help, clarification, training, or whatever you need to perform what was asked. Ask for feedback from others about your performance. (pp. 37-38)

Brené Brown (2018) wrote, “Asking for help is a power move” (p. 229), and her research identifies it as a behavior that is key to building trust. Recall the ombud who made a point of asking leaders, especially when forming new relationships, for help in understanding the nuances of their areas of expertise and responsibility. Or the ombud who said their habit of ignorance served them well because it meant they were always asking questions, asking for help. This may be one clear way ombuds can (paradoxically) show competence.

In its 2018 report about the role of communication and workplace trust in fostering ethical cultures, the Ethics & Compliance Initiative stated that workplace trust
consists of two dimensions, accountability and genuine interactions (p. 6). I see competence and accountability as importantly linked for ombuds in the domain of building trust with leaders. Senior leaders are accustomed to having accountability from others in the organization, and usually have clear accountability to the organization themselves. Accountability is perhaps a defining characteristic of most senior roles. Yet it is unclear to me how organizational ombuds are held accountable, and this may be why some leaders do not recognize their value. Brown (2018) defined accountability in terms of owning mistakes, apologizing, and making amends. The Ethics & Compliance Initiative defined it similarly. If something goes wrong, the accountable person(s) takes responsibility. What does (or would) this look like for an ombud, whose work is confidential, independent, and informal? Perhaps the IOA Standards of Practice should be how practitioners are assessed and held accountable. The Standards as currently written are largely aspirational, however, and difficult to “assess.” How might they have to change to be an accountability mechanism that leaders and others can recognize and respect, which in turn might help ombud practitioners convey credibility and build trust?

Reliability

Reliability is doing what you say you will do, consistently. I like how Covey and Conant (2016) expressed reliability as it contributes to trust building:

Deliver the results you declare—consistently and confidently. Delivering results in a way that builds trust is more than just accomplishing tasks—it’s doing the right thing, in the right way, for the right reasons, in the way that you said you would. (Delivering Results para. 1)

Reliability is aligned with integrity when it comes to trust. Being reliably awful is obviously not going to build trust. Ombuds might think about what it is they can do consistently, confidently, and ethically to demonstrate reliability in relationships with leaders. I think of the ombud who made a point of delivering a report in person to each senior leader each
year. I also think of the leader who said they wished their ombud provided reports more frequently, that they would welcome a reliable flow of information. It may not have to be a report cycle at all, but considering interactions through the lens of reliability may illuminate new ways in which ombuds can seek to build trust.

Care

Feltman (2009) defined care as one having the other person’s interests in mind as well as one’s own. In a work relationship, care may mean that you have an individual’s, a group’s, or even the organization’s interests as a whole in mind (Feltman, 2009, p. 38). The practice of care needn’t be saccharine or even obvious—its expert practice is typically so subtle as to be virtually invisible (Frost, 2011). Care is demonstrated by asking questions, listening closely, pointing out common interests, and sharing your own hopes and desires for the work you are doing together (Feltman, 2009, p. 44). Covey and Merrill (2018) characterized this as intent. I think of the introductory conversations some ombud participants talked about, in which expectations, interests, and intentions of both leaders and ombuds were sussed out. In particular, the exchange in which a leader asked the ombud why they had taken the job stands out as a good example of demonstrating care by showing concern for another’s interests. Similarly, the ombud asking a new leader, “So how have your first 10 months gone?” These are small actions, but they are conducive to learning, demonstrating care, and building trust.

Some ombuds may again feel there is a line to walk between demonstrating care and remaining neutral. But care is perhaps ingredient number one for any meaningful relationship an ombud might hope to have. If people do not believe that you care, either about their interests or a shared interest, they simply do not trust you. At best, you might get limited or conditional trust, where they trust you only in specific situations or transactions (Feltman, 2009, p. 41). On the other hand, when people do believe you
care, they will extend their trust more broadly (Feltman, 2009, p. 39). Showing care while also maintaining ethical boundaries is a matter of integrity.

*Integrity*

Job description samples included in IOA “Foundations of Organizational Ombudsman Practice” training course materials list integrity as a “Critical Skill and Characteristic” for organizational ombuds:

[Integrity] is a critical success factor. An ombudsman should have a reputation for integrity and for dealing fairly, comfortably, and responsibly with all constituents as well as with potential external inquirers. The ombudsman is sensitive to cultural issues within the organization. It is essential that the ombudsman be viewed as ethical and honest, as well as neutral, impartial, independent, and accessible. The Ombudsman should be seen as a role model for organizational values. An ombudsman should not be risk-averse and should understand that the ombudsman practitioner may, on occasion, feel the need to challenge even the highest levels of the organization in an effort to foster fair and just practices. (IOA, 2014, Organizational ombudsman job description, Integrity, para. 1)

In her BRAVING Inventory of trust, Brown (2018) laconically summed up what demonstrating integrity looks like: You choose courage over comfort. You choose what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy. And you choose to practice your values rather than simply professing them (p. 167; See Table 6). Covey and Merrill (2018) also identified courage as a component of integrity. The dialectical relationship between ombuds and leaders means that there will often be tension—that is why there is so much potential in these connections and also why they may feel fraught. Working with senior leaders does require courage, good judgment, self-confidence, and a willingness to do the hard but right thing. An ombud cannot be risk-averse.

Again, the concept of boundaries is important for ombuds and integrity, I think. Brown (2018) described what maintaining boundaries looks like in her BRAVING Inventory: You respect my boundaries, and when you’re not clear about what’s okay and not okay, you ask. You’re willing to say no (Brown, 2018, p. 167). Recall the example of
the ombud interacting with the CEO in the gym. They chose to risk discomfort by reminding the CEO where the boundaries were, even though it would have been an easy interaction (casual, friendly) to let it slide. I also think of the examples where leaders offered information to ombuds about upcoming decisions, and they declined, choosing instead to stay on a need-to-know basis, even though they may have been curious.

Important for ombuds to note, integrity is not just about doing the right thing but also about “leaving the right impression” (Covey & Merrill, 2018, p. 64). This involves being perceived as congruent, humble, and courageous. Congruence is synonymous with authenticity for Covey and Merrill (2018), meaning that people walk their talk. (This and humility are characteristics of Bates’s (2016) executive presence index, which is discussed in the next section.) Ombuds should think about how they demonstrate congruence and authenticity when considering leaders’ (and others’) impressions of their integrity.
Table 6

The BRAVING Inventory (Brown, 2018) “I can trust you if…” as Applied to Ombud-Leader Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Brown’s Description</th>
<th>Ombud-Leader Relevance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>You respect my boundaries, and when you’re not clear about what’s okay and not okay, you ask. You’re willing to say no.</td>
<td>Know where the ethical, professional, and personal lines are, hold firm, and be able to make such determinations case-by-case. Stay in your lane; respect the rules of the road.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>You do what you say you’ll do. At work, this means staying aware of your competencies and limitations so you don’t overpromise and are able to deliver on commitments and balance competing priorities.</td>
<td>Make expectations clear. Think about what can be done that will be seen as reliable, e.g., Bring regular reports that are contextual and useful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.</td>
<td>This may be a sticking point for ombuds. Who sees their mistakes? Are they allowed to make mistakes? How might leaders assess their accountability?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vault</td>
<td>You don’t share information or experiences that are not yours to share. I need to know that my confidences are kept, and that you’re not sharing with me any information about other people that should be confidential.</td>
<td>Confidentiality, tact, and discretion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>You choose courage over comfort. You choose what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy. And you choose to practice your values rather than simply professing them.</td>
<td>Raise issues that need to be raised, even if leaders may not want to hear them. Withstand the ire, doubt, and criticism that may result. Persist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonjudgment</td>
<td>I can ask for what I need, and you can ask for what you need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment. We can ask each other for help without judgment.</td>
<td>Neutrality/impartiality and mutual respect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generosity</td>
<td>You extend the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words, and actions of others.</td>
<td>Self-management, respect, care, and kindness.</td>
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Time

The role of time in establishing trust between ombuds and leaders is not quite clear. Counter to Covey and Merrill (2018), who famously asserted that trust building is fast, not slow, participants all seemed to feel trust took time to build. “Time and space, it was just time and space,” said the ombud participant whose peer leaders were initially quite threatened. The saying goes that trust arrives on foot but leaves on horseback, the message being that trust takes time to gain and but a moment to lose. Research has found that this is only partially accurate. Some elements of trustworthiness seem to be assessed instantaneously (Kahneman, 2013), though not necessarily accurately. One’s ability and integrity, for example, are judged quickly while benevolence/care takes longer to establish (Schoorman et al., 2007, p. 346).

The good news is that relatively superficial interactions can be sufficient for building trusting connections. Covey and Merrill (2018) contended that the fastest way to gain trust is to offer it. Trust does not require deeply intimate exchanges to take root. Quite the opposite, as Brown (2018) and Gottman (2011) found that trust grows in small exchanges, what Gottman calls “sliding door moments.” This brings to mind the ombud who said they learned that trust forms most quickly “off the subject at hand.” It was in casual chats about rather trivial matters, interactions on committees, and routine exchanges that this ombud felt they built the most trust with others across their institution. This kind of reinforcing along the fringe is perhaps what makes the center hold. It is a strong incentive for ombuds to take opportunities to operate in the sunshine—to sit ex officio on committees, have standing meetings with various groups, generally be visible. Doing so gives other people the chance to see how they operate and asses their trustworthiness.
Yet time is a critical factor when a crisis hits, and trust needs to be strong to be effective. Drucker (2006) wrote, “Without personal knowledge built up over a period of time there can be neither trust nor effective communication” (p. 63). Ombuds and leaders should start building trust intentionally and immediately so they can be prepared to work together effectively when their organizations need them most. One ombud colleague once told me that their chief executive and direct leader advised them, “See if you can help resolve something fast for someone really important” as a way to hotwire credibility and trust.

Finally, it may take time to build trust, but once trust exists, it makes it faster (and more pleasant) to do just about everything else. This is why trust is such an essential element of organizational success. I think of the example of the ombud who picked up the phone to ask a senior executive to speak directly with a visitor and in doing so swiftly averted a potential crisis—that type of exchange can only happen when trust is strong.

**Executive Presence**

Sample job descriptions say ombuds need to have a professional demeanor, composure, strong presentation skills, and the ability to communicate effectively and connect with people at all levels of the organization (IOA, 2014). That includes leaders. In my observation, many ombuds are quite thoughtful and purposeful about making sure they can connect with people “down” the hierarchy. *Would the groundskeeper feel comfortable talking with me? The secretarial staff?* Yet the same question needs to be asked looking “up” the hierarchy. The same thought and intention should be applied to connecting and communicating well with leaders.

One of the legendary “Ten Commandments” of business written by John Whitehead, co-head of Goldman Sachs in the 1970s is, “Important people like to deal with other important people. Are you one?” (Graham, 2012). Senior leaders in major
universities, global corporations, national non-profits, federal agencies, and so on are *important people*. If ombuds do not see themselves as also important and act as such—if they do not show up with executive presence—it is not unreasonable to assume that senior leaders may not take them seriously. Setting aside any objections to Whitehead’s terse phrasing, the point stands. Ample psychological research has found that people tend to prefer interactions with others they perceive to be like them (for a useful meta-analysis see Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). Yet many ombuds often intentionally accentuate the differences and distance between their role and that of senior leadership.

Most ombud participants in this study seemed to address this predicament multidimensionally. They could adamantly insist upon the ombud’s difference from senior leadership in structure and form (recall the ombud who “almost drove people crazy” by constantly emphasizing their role’s uniqueness), and yet also appreciate and leverage similarities with senior leadership in substance and style. By style, I do not mean manner of dress but rather that “fortifying inner sense that allows the leader to be him or herself,” as Fisher (1984) wrote in Power of the Presidency (p. 48). This vague yet resonant notion is expanded on in the concept of executive presence. Stanford Graduate Business School lecturer Allison Kluger explains executive presence as:

> [V]ery much how you control a room, the impressions you make, and how you affect the people around you. It’s how you communicate verbally and through your appearance and physicality. It’s not just appearance, such as how you look, but more how you communicate with people initially and convey your intentions. … If you have great presence, people will feel the remnants and echo of what you left behind when you leave a room — ‘Wow, I enjoyed what that person had to say, and I will take some action because of it.’” (Kluger, as cited in Duan, 2017, How Do You Define, para. 1)

Susanne Bates (2016) and her colleagues have taken a more scientific approach to defining executive presence, which they define as “the ability of the leader to engage, align, inspire, and move people to act” (p. 7). They developed a reliable multirater
feedback survey to assess executive presence based on “observable behaviors that inform others’ judgments about leaders” (Bates, 2016, p. 5). Their model of executive presence includes 15 qualities across the three dimensions of character, substance, and style:

**The 15 Qualities of Executive Presence** (Bates, 2016)
*Character:* authenticity, integrity, concern, restraint, humility
*Substance:* practical wisdom, confidence, composure, resonance, vision
*Style:* appearance, intentionality, interactivity, inclusiveness, assertiveness

Bates (2016) was introduced to me by one of the ombud participants. Unsurprisingly, this ombud was the most explicitly thoughtful and purposeful about effectively working with leadership. It was easy to see why the Bates model was appealing and useful to them. The vast majority of the 15 qualities seemed to me almost a perfect description of the qualities one would expect to find in an excellent ombud. (See Figure 5; The character dimension was included in the trust model component comparison in Table 6).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facets of Behavior</th>
<th>Dimensions of Executive Presence</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Character</strong>—Qualities of the leader as a person that are fundamental to his or her identity and give us reason to trust him or her.</td>
<td><strong>Substance</strong>—Cultivated qualities of mature leadership that inspire commitment, inform action and lead to above-and-beyond effort.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Appearance</strong>—Looking and acting like an able executive, projecting energy, and handling social situations with tact.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authenticity</strong>—Being real, genuine, transparent, and sincere in one's relations with others; and revealing the experience and beliefs that define oneself.</td>
<td><strong>Practical Wisdom</strong>—Displaying highly honed qualities of insight and judgment that get to the heart of issues and produce prudent decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integrity</strong>—Acting with fidelity to one's values and beliefs, living up to high standards of morality, veracity, and promise keeping.</td>
<td><strong>Confidence</strong>—Being self-assured in decision making and action; ready to accept the risk and responsibility for taking timely action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concern</strong>—Demonstrating interest in others, encouraging adaptive development, and promoting a healthy sustainable culture.</td>
<td><strong>Composure</strong>—Proving to be steady in a crisis, able to calm and focus others, and to bring objectivity and perspective to critical decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Restraint</strong>—Displaying a calm disposition, characterized by reasonableness and by avoidance of emotional extremes or impulsiveness.</td>
<td><strong>Resonance</strong>—Connecting with others; attentive, attuned, and responsive to feelings, motivations, and thoughts; deepening alignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humility</strong>—Showing awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, openness to others, and a belief that all persons have worth.</td>
<td><strong>Vision</strong>—Generating an inspiring, enterprisewide picture of what could be; recognizing emerging trends, and engaging all in strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assertiveness</strong>—Speaking up, valuing constructive conflict, and raising issues directly without shutting others down.</td>
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*Figure 5. The Bates executive presence model (Bates, 2016, p. 9).*

Even the few that might feel a little shaky at first blush have something to offer ombuds upon further inspection. For example:  

*Confidence*:  

*Being self-assured in decision making and action; ready to accept the risk and responsibility for taking timely action.* Ombuds may not make *management decisions*, but they certainly make decisions about how to take action as ombuds, which can sometimes be very difficult.
decisions about when, how, and with whom to address controversial or unpleasant issues. **Vision:** Generating an inspiring, enterprisewide picture of what could be; recognizing emerging trends, and engaging all in strategy. Ombuds do not set strategy, but they can certainly influence it and arguably should be engaging leaders about strategy. Ombuds are also not there to inspire the entire enterprise, but they do often have a picture of the entire enterprise given their unique vantage point in the organization. **Assertiveness:** Speaking up, valuing constructive conflict, and raising issues directly without shutting others down. Obviously, ombuds are very careful about when they assert themselves, but assertiveness must be a tool in their toolbox. (All italicized quotations from Bates, 2016, p. 10).

**Confidence and Self-Trust**

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are professionally insecure," declared Wayne Blair, then ombud at UNC-Chapel Hill, from the podium at the IOA 2016 Annual Conference in Seattle, WA. He was delivering a keynote address, Reimagining the Role of the Organizational Ombuds, which was also refashioned and published as a peer-reviewed article by the same name a year later (Blair, 2017). In both, Blair highlighted how an ombud office could influence its organization to successfully address complicated, ugly, and entrenched problems by carefully and intentionally building and activating knowledge and relationships. It was a perfect example of ombuds as systems thinkers, workers, and leaders. But Blair’s core message was that, to do that kind of work—that difficult, complex, tender work of rooting out truly wicked organizational problems, the adaptive work that ombuds are perfectly situated to do—ombuds need to acknowledge their capacity (and perhaps even their duty) as leaders.

Blair’s (2017) message was a wake-up call for the ombud community. “You report to the CEO or president? Hellooo, you’re leaders!” I recall him saying in the
keynote. The powerful message has been reverberating ever since. Many practitioners found the thesis that ombuds should claim their “seat at the table” and self-identify as leaders simply too much, setting a “dangerous precedent” (Blair, 2017, p. 2). Blair’s speech and article took aim at the ombuds who view the benign neglect of their leaders as a positive, a sign of true independence. But he also spoke to the ombuds who say they want to be taken seriously by their organization’s leadership and yet do not take action to make it so.

“We fail to appreciate how much our professional insecurity contributes to our self-isolation and -marginalization within our organizations,” Blair said in 2016, calling for self-reflection. If ombuds do not do tackle organizational problems with strength and care, and do it with confidence and integrity, why should they expect to be welcomed and valued by senior leaders? He expanded on this thought in the article:

We must guard against self-imposed marginalization as we mute our voices even when we have something to say. We run the risk of becoming irrelevant if we avoid engaging with the organization on a larger comprehensive level. Throughout the years, interactions with colleagues in the profession have helped me to realize that most of us are modest people which is usually a good quality, but it can prevent speaking out in ways that draw appropriate attention to ourselves. (Blair, 2017, p. 10)

Blair’s (2017) classification of ombuds as modest people accords with my own observations. This is an asset to some degree, as humility is an important trait for learning and building trust, but too much humility is a liability. According to research by Schlenker and Leary (as cited in Nasher, 2019), humble actors are often penalized because modesty is seen as hedging against potential failure. To feel more authentic when demonstrating confidence, Nasher (2019) suggested people ask themselves: “What am I good at? What was my greatest success so far? Why should others be led by me? What do I know that they don’t?” If you don’t know the answers, you have a
problem, Nasher claimed. How can ombuds convince others of their expertise and value if they themselves aren’t convinced?

Blair (2017) believed ombuds are good at “making connections and understanding consequences from [their] unique vantage point” and that this “is a form of risk assessment and change management that should be integral to our work” (p. 1). Not all ombuds are comfortable with or feel capable of this level of work, however. Some “hover safely at the level of individual cases,” as Rowe and Gadlin (2013) put it (p. 7). Such ombuds would be in what Barkat (2015) described as the passive stage of ombuds engagement. He outlined three other stages along a spectrum of ombuds’ engagement: reactive engagement, limited engagement, and proactive. Reactive engagement is where ombuds “may also begin to work with teams and groups” (p. 44) or prepare tip sheets and other resources for conflict resolution. Limited engagement is where “the conflict-resolution role and the cases handled provide the data for the systemic issues identified” and “may issue a report that goes further than simply identifying issues or problems; it may include recommendations on types of changes that the organization might explore to address the problems” (Barkat, 2015, p. 44). Finally, the proactive stage involves “an even greater emphasis on the systemic nature of an ombudsman’s work than there is on case handling,” (Barkat, 2015, p. 44) with ombuds able to make recommendations as well as “sit and engage side by side, in an informal role with staff and management, to help shape a path to improve the organizational culture” (p. 44).

For to do exactly the kind of work Blair (2017) and Barkat (2015) described, which is the work complex organizations need them to do in these emerging times, ombuds cannot be timid or risk-averse (IOA, 2014). Again, we come up against the question of whether the Standards of Practice (and the idealized model) are necessary or sufficient. Blair (2017) observed,
To some it may seem that ombuds cannot appropriately engage in activities not explicitly approved in the [Standards of Practice]. To others holding another valid perspective, the [Standards] allow plenty of room for the use of good judgment in setting boundaries in the ways we deal with the realities of the organizations in which we practice. No one wants to commit or appear to commit any form of ombuds ‘malpractice.’ But always playing it safe reduces the possibilities for making the maximum contributions to organizations and visitors alike. (pp. 10-11)

Barkat (2015) similarly remarked,

The danger in thinking of the [ethical] principles in absolute terms could be to apply them too rigidly or literally, which can be limiting. The principles, which are to inform one’s practice, end up becoming the goal: to serve the principles. The risk is that an ombudsman could begin to look for reasons why he or she could not do things. And, with each demurrant and withdrawal, the ombudsman becomes less relevant to the organization, loses opportunities for engagement, and is less effective at the portion of the role designed to serve and to improve one of the key constituencies: the organization. (p. 46)

It may come down to self-trust (Brown, 2018; Covey & Merrill, 2018; Feltman, 2009). If ombuds are so internally insecure or uncertain about their ability to maintain standards or meet principles, set boundaries, and use their best judgment, how can we expect them to show up with executive presence and engage the sophisticated work of systems leadership? How do we help ombuds see taking a more proactive stance as enhancing their ability to meet the Standards and serve their organizations rather than in any way impinging on it?

Ombuds as Leaders

Blair (2017) encouraged ombuds to consider their role as transformational leaders. Whether or not they identified as a leader, all ombud participants described several behaviors in the course of their interviews that struck me as quite leader-like. Ombuds were often bold in their outreach, wise in their strategy, unflinching in the face of challenges, and very savvy in their dealings. Each was a sophisticated professional who cared sincerely about their organization and felt responsible for its wellbeing.
I am sympathetic to why many ombuds may be uncomfortable with or flatly object to identifying themselves as leaders. “Leadership” is strongly associated with formal authority and coercive power in American culture. If leadership is defined as coercion, manipulation, or adjudicatory action, of course ombuds will not identify with it. Leadership is also not culturally associated with humility. “Terms like transformational leadership fuel such grandiosity,” wrote Heifetz (1994, p. 26), and it should come as no surprise that ombuds, who purposefully cultivate approachability and neutrality, would balk at such turns of phrase. This may be why Blair’s (2017) assertions were so disquieting to many. But what about these descriptions of leadership?

Leadership will consist not of answers or assured visions but of taking action to clarify values. It asks questions like: What are we missing here? Are there values of competing groups that we suppress rather than apply to our understanding of the problem at hand? Are there shared values that might enable us to engage competing views? (Heifetz, 1994, p. 35)

Leadership is defined as any "activities tied to the core work of the organization that are designed by organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, or practices of other organizational members." (Spillane, 2006, pp. 11-12)

One could argue but the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to understand and work with culture. If one wishes to distinguish leadership from management or administration, one can argue that leaders create and change cultures, while managers and administrators live within them. (Schein, 1992, p. 4)

The art of leadership in today’s world involves orchestrating the inevitable conflict, chaos, and confusion of change so that the disturbance is productive rather than destructive. (Heifetz et al., 2009).

I define a leader as anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential. (Brown, 2018, p. 4)

I suspect they may resonate with many ombuds.

Ombuds have much to gain by thinking of themselves as leaders, even if they do not want to self-advertise as such. One need not have a big personality, radiate
charisma, or be an extrovert to be a leader; one needs to listen, to observe, to reflect, to connect. Many ombudship skills are also leadership skills, and ombuds would be wise to leverage this overlap in service to their organizations. Also, what do we lose when ombuds do not claim their seat at the table? Heifetz (1994) posited, “By restraining the exercise of leadership to legitimate authority, we also leave no room for leadership that challenges the legitimacy of authority or the system of authorization itself” (p. 21).

Ombuds exist in part to be a check on formal authority; they cannot perform that part of their role if they are unwilling to acknowledge the leadership dimensions of their position.

Ombuds as Resources for Leaders

Self-identifying as a leader and learning more about leadership would help equip ombuds to work well with leaders, in service to their organizations. Understanding a leader’s mental models, decision-making process, objectives, values, and constraints will help ombuds connect more effectively. And it is important that they do connect because senior leaders stand to benefit from working closely with ombuds.

Both leader participants in this study said the existence of an ombud was a welcome reassurance that their organizations were doing all they could to be on top of problems and provide their members every opportunity to speak up. One explained,

It gives me a great deal of comfort that we have an ombuds, that there is a channel that permits employees who are concerned about possible retaliation or other issues to go to somebody, a neutral confidential source, just to discuss things. The ombuds have been ...quite good at getting employees who have issues to go through normal channels within the firm, such as [HR], going through the business lines, or coming to legal and compliance. And discussing their concerns, particularly in circumstances where some sort of remedial action is important. And that gives us awareness of what the issues are, and so that's the safest action. So it has, I think, been quite useful in terms of getting issues escalated to the appropriate people in the firm who then can deal with them.

The other leader participant said much the same, summing it up with, “I can sleep a little better at night knowing the ombud is there.”
One leader participant talked about the pressure of the pace of change. They said, “Things are just so dynamic right now with technology.... Things are moving so fast, people are trying to build new ways of operating that are much more agile and fast. It’s not like, ‘This is our plan for the next three years,’ anymore.” They felt that frequent reporting from the ombud coupled with the ombud’s awareness of what big strategic questions senior leadership were facing would be very useful in their emergent environment. The other leader gave an example of how having an ombud allowed their firm to feel confident they were not going to be rocked by #MeToo scandals:

Our board of directors recently, because of all of the situations that have arisen over the past year or so with respect to sexual harassment, asked us whether we have an issue, with respect to sexual harassment. They wanted to know all kinds of information about our policies, blah blah blah, and then what kind of issues existed. And we were able to say, “Well, our track record has been pretty good. Stuff has come up in the past occasionally. We’ve dealt with it very directly and severely. But what we’re hearing with our ombuds is that it’s not a major issue within the firm.”

I assume those board members also slept a little better that night. But ombuds can be resources to leaders in ways that go beyond sleep aids. Rowe et al. (2019b) found in the 2018 IOA Practice Survey that,

*Working with leaders* so that they may be perceived as approachable and fair (that is, “receptive to information”) is reported as another, almost universal ombuds function. Helping leaders to learn “receptivity” can be cost-effective, both in managing risk and also in encouraging constituents to offer new ideas to leadership to support the mission. Since high-level conflicts are among the most-costly for an organization, [organizational ombuds’] relationships can help to manage risk both for these managers and for the organization. Regular contacts with leaders also help ombuds to build trust in their capabilities, their reliability and their integrity. (p. 10)

There are so many factors that contribute to the insularity that builds around senior leaders. Gregersen (2017), Executive Director of the MIT Leadership Center, contended that leaders are living in isolation and that it is bad for business and bad for them. The further up the chain of command someone rises, the more people start telling
them what they think they want to hear and stop telling them what they think they do not want to hear. Senior leaders often have all sorts of power: positional, expert, ownership, charisma, or even fame. This sets leaders up to grow increasingly isolated and be blindsided by what they do not know that they do not know (Gregersen, 2017).

Ombuds are beautifully situated to mitigate the many deficits of leader isolation. First, ombuds have access to information that leaders do not. Leaders tend to get information that has been pre-processed through many layers of the organization before it lands on their desk. Ombuds get information that is raw and varied. (Recall the board of directors hungry to hear from the ombud how people in their organization were talking about issues, not just what issues they were talking about.) Ombuds can help leaders stay in touch with their organization organically and interrupt the echo chamber they may find themselves in.

Second, leaders desperately need honest feedback and rarely get it (Gregersen, 2017). Ombuds are independent and neutral. They serve the organization, not the leader. They are also skilled at delivering hard messages and sensitive performance feedback. They should be able to provide leaders with useful critique. This may take the form of executive coaching (which two ombud participants in this study had formal experience with) or simply being the type of “trusted advisor” Bates (2016) recommended for helping to improve one’s executive presence. Ombuds can give honest feedback to a leader about their personal style, helping them increase their approachability (Brown, 2018; Hurley, 2012; Rowe et al., 2019b), self-awareness, and humility (Hurley, 2012) and ability to demonstrate sincerity (Feltman, 2009), all key factors in building trust, which “all leaders should consider...as the central focus of their leadership work (Covey & Conant, 2016, Trust-Building Is a Learnable Skill, para. 4).
Third, leaders stand to benefit from reflective practice and yet are busy and likely surrounded by people who think as they do. Some of the ombud participants talked about being sounding boards for leaders who needed to talk through a tricky management issue (think about those interactions where ombuds raised concerns about senior leaders’ direct reports); consider how issues of identity or bias may be at play in their perspective; or get a fresh take on a big decision. Ombuds are professional question-askers and expert re-framers who can help leaders examine complex issues so they “comprehend the opportunity and challenge” of adaptive work (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009). We all need “critical friends” (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Costa & Kallick, 1993) who will provide candid yet constructive input to us in a way that builds trust yet maintains focus on the quality of the outcome. Critical friends aim to help each other improve, to keep bars high and face hard truths. Ombuds can be a resource to leaders as critical friends and integrity partners (Brown, 2018).

Houk et al. (2016) found support for all of these activities in their extensive report on ombuds in the US federal government:

A need for leaders to take time for one-on-one and team-building sessions with their ombuds as well as using the ombuds as “sounding boards” to utilize their role as an objective audience was noted as a best practice. Several of the ombuds noted that their value in having difficult and uncomfortable conversations with leaders and that leaders need to be open to participating in these challenging dialogues. They further noted that they bring value by building leadership capacity and take satisfaction in being able to identify issues for senior management. (p. 337)

It becomes increasingly difficult for senior leaders to gain perspective, to “get on the balcony,” as Heifetz and Linsky (2002, p. 51) insisted they must if they are to survive the slings and arrows of leadership. And yet, it becomes more and more important as they “rise and face greater complexity in [their] work” (Bates, 2016, p. 98).
This study began to uncover some of the many ways ombuds wield power in their work. Almost all were instances of “soft power,” the power of influence rather than coercion. Nye (2004), who coined the term in the late 1980s, wrote that soft power “uses an attraction to shared values, and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values” (Soft Power, para. 5) to motivate action. This type of power can be difficult to spot, however, as it “often has a diffuse effect of creating general influence, rather than producing an easily observable specific action” (Nye, 2004, The limits of soft power, para. 2). But many things we struggle to see still very much exist.

Ombud and leader participants in this study identified the following as ombuds’ means of influence: Relationships, Being Helpful, Uniqueness, Reporting and Recommending, Education and Outreach, Information, Knowledge, and Valued Perspective. Some of these work on the level of individuals, others on the organizational level, and some on both. Ombuds must influence individuals in some way (even if just providing information or a listening ear); otherwise, why would their services be utilized? Barkat (2015) asserted that the ombud’s role is also

…[C]learly intended to influence the organization, and awareness of the role’s influence would help the practitioner use it responsibly and strategically to increase the function’s effectiveness. An ombudsman influences for fair process, fair policies, and an environment that recognizes and embodies the corporate values. It seeks to influence for transparency, clarity, and honesty in communications, and participation and consideration of the views of people who are affected by managerial decisions. An additional perspective is that the influence an ombudsman has and uses through his or her function (that is, nonaligned, non-management, non-decision-making) helps redefine the traditional perceptions and uses of power in an organization, and helps bring focus to underlying values such as fairness and equity. An organizational ombudsman is influential and therefore has power. (p. 43)
Yet even in the face of many clear examples and exhortations of ombuds’ influence, many ombuds, sometimes more junior but unfortunately not just, strike me as almost gleefully disempowered. The consequences of such a mindset are unfortunate. Blair (2017) explored the idea in the article based on his keynote address:

Organizational ombuds routinely say we have no power. While technically true, the message others hear is that the ombuds has good intentions but is actually irrelevant and inconsequential when it comes to actually having an impact. However, a strong ombuds has plenty of influence, which is a form of referent power (French & Raven, 1959). If we have built relationships, established mutual trust, and contributed to thoughtful conversations with those who hold power, then our ideas will be sought and given meaningful consideration. Yes, it is complicated to use influence and stay neutral, but it is possible if we are careful and explain why we say what we say. I encourage you not to tiptoe or run in the opposite direction when we see opportunities or when we are invited to give our perspective, and, yes, to use our influence. (p. 12)

Ombuds are not yet running toward “power” or even influence with open arms, but I have observed a shift in the last few years. Blair’s message at the IOA conference in 2016 was met with a mixed response, but the milieu at the IOA conference in 2018 was much more power-friendly. There, keynote speaker Rita Franklin’s request for the audience to stand and strike a “superhero” stance was met with enthusiasm. The conference committee had coincidentally created T-shirts reading “I’m an ombuds. What’s your superpower?” for purchase. After Franklin’s empowering keynote, many attendees took to the conference photobooth to share their “ombuds superpowers” on a whiteboard. A few months later, I compiled some of those images alongside their subject’s descriptions of their power of choice, which formed the basis for an #OmbudsPower social media campaign for the IOA. The powers included: Being Present. Calm. Insight. Empathy. Heartfelt Caring. Love. Intuition (Supported by Theory). Reframing Issues. To Empower. Positivity. Being human.

The powers these ombuds chose to self-disclose point to an increasingly important role for the ombud in complex organizations in the Fourth Industrial
Revolution: Humanness. On March 15, 2019, I was fortunate to attend a day-long conference called “Managing Organizations in an Era of Anxiety, Polarization, and Disruption” convened by Ethical Systems, a research collaborative out of NYU Stern School of Business whose raison d’etre, as declared on their homepage, is “mak[ing] accessible the best research on systems thinking, psychology, and behavioral economics to improve the ethical culture of organizations” (Ethical Systems, n.d). The program was packed with luminaries from the worlds of research and practice, all there to explore how to make organizations more ethical. Almost to a person, the attendees and speakers had a framework of compliance. The day was filled with fascinating talks about employee surveillance, how to “engineer integrity,” and “integrity analytics” among other things. Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist and founder of Ethical Systems, closed the conference with his summary observations of the day’s proceedings and their implications for building ethical organizations. His final thought was this: A concept to watch, related to that of “ethical fading” is “human fading.” Ethical fading occurs when the ethical dimensions of a choice “fade” into the background against the allure of the fast, fun, or personally advantageous option (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Haidt’s somber parallel, I believe, was a comment on how much of what was discussed that day seemed to belie a “human fading” underway in modern organizations and its potentially deleterious effects on individuals and ethical culture. You cannot make organizations more ethical by making them less human.

Ombuds have the power to prevent human fading. They can be an organization’s equivalent of GetHuman.com, a popular website that lists telephone numbers for major companies’ customer service lines that go directly to a human being and bypass the often-infuriating automated help menus. Ombuds are an antidote to the sometimes cold and unfeeling bureaucracy of organizations, a way to move past “the company line” (or
“integrity analytics”) and get to a real person with the capacity to listen, care, and help.

This type of sincere human connection is a perfect example of the “soft power” Nye (2004) believed is particularly important when power is dispersed, as is often the case in increasingly complex and less hierarchical organizations (and perhaps especially so in the professional service firms Empson [2017] described).

Systems Leadership View

In listening to how ombud participants thought about institutional problems and reflected on how they got their work done—through back channels, webs of relationship, subtle follow-ups, affinity groups, and so on—their propensity and talent for working and thinking in systems was very clear. Even so, it did not seem that the concepts of adaptive work or a systems approach were how most participants were consciously thinking about their work. And yet, I feel even more assured that ombuds have a vital role to play in these domains. This quotation from Heifetz (1994), now 25 years old, illustrates how ombuds can be assets to leaders facing adaptive challenges:

By its nature, adaptive work does not often fall within the purview of established organizational and social structures. Pieces of the puzzle—information about the problem—lie scattered in the hands of stakeholders across divisions, interest groups, organizations, and communities. Not only is the information scattered, but the solution requires adjustments in the attitude and behavior of many people across boundaries. Hence, an authority who excludes stakeholders from defining and solving the problem risks developing an incomplete solution or a solution to the wrong problem. At a minimum, he must keep track of the missing perspectives and stakes when he leaves people out. Not only can lack of information undermine the quality of work, but the distress of exclusion can also cause people to sabotage the process and attack authority. (p. 118)

This quotation from Senge et al. (2015), barely four years old, illustrates how ombuds are systems leaders:

Though they differ widely in personality and style, genuine system leaders have a remarkably similar impact. Over time, their profound commitment to the health of the whole radiates to nurture similar commitment in others. Their ability to see reality through the eyes of people very different from themselves encourages others to be more open as well. They build relationships based on deep listening,
and networks of trust and collaboration start to flourish. They are so convinced that something can be done that they do not wait for a fully developed plan, thereby freeing others to step ahead and learn by doing. Indeed, one of their greatest contributions can come from the strength of their ignorance, which gives them permission to ask obvious questions and to embody an openness and commitment to their own ongoing learning and growth that eventually infuse larger change efforts. (Core Capabilities of System Leaders, para. 1)

If leadership scholars and ombud practitioners would only connect so that ombuds’ incredible wealth of knowledge and skilled intuition about deeply human work in complex systems could be included in the development of leadership research and practice, I can only imagine where the field might be in another 20 years.

Limitations

This small, exploratory study is limited in many ways. Chief among them is the imbalance of leaders’ voices and ombuds’ voices. I wish I had been able to talk with more leader participants to better capture that perspective. Heavy reliance on ombuds’ relaying their leaders’ experiences and perspectives is a clear weakness. In addition to having more leaders participate, I would have liked to have interviewed leaders who were less enthusiastic, or who had taken some convincing, about the ombud role. I believe that perspective could have been illuminating, as it may have helped me understand how leaders come to understand the ombud role and how to work with it over time.

A true limitation of this study was that it did not take issues of identity into active consideration. This study was so small that the value in making identity an area of inquiry was not worth the potential risk for participants’ identification. Even so, cultural, racial, socioeconomic, and gender identity have significant effects on one’s experiences, especially as it pertains to the practice of leadership (Cooper, 2013; D. J. Marquardt, Brown, & Casper, 2018; Sandberg, 2013; Warner, Ellman, & Boesch, 2018; Zenger & Folkman, 2012). I will observe, however, that systems leadership may be a rather
“female” approach, with its emphasis on relationship, collaboration, seeing the whole, and understanding non-linear feedback patterns. I have noticed a significant number of women active in the field of systems research and its application to organizational development and leadership, and I look forward to a continued increase.

In the spirit of true grounded theory, I wish I had had time for iterative interviews with each participant, a chance to talk with them more deeply about the concepts that arose in initial interviews, to return to key ideas over time. For example, I wish I had probed more deeply into ombuds’ self-concept as leaders, their past and present leadership experiences. I would ask all participants more pointedly about trust. I’m hopeful that this dissertation may prompt such inquiry in future research.

Directions for Future Research

This study is but the tiniest tip of the spear into a vast theatre of potential future research. We know very little about how ombuds and leaders work together. There is a need for research that provides thick, ethnographic description of all types of ombud-leader relationships. I am especially keen to learn more about how relationships between ombuds and leaders form when conditions are suboptimal. What are the factors that contribute to making them stronger or weaker? Also, what effect do ombuds’ ethical principles have on how the core elements of trust are demonstrated by ombuds and assessed by leaders? What difference, if any, exists between relationships where ombuds actively consider themselves leaders and those where they do not?

The contributions that research into ombud practice by true systems experts could make are equally important. So far, “systemics” seems to be of interest to a rather small contingent of ombud practitioners. The few sessions on the topic at conferences are not terribly well attended, dismissed as too abstract or tangential. Yet its devotees continue to promote understanding and skill-building in this area. Research that could
help explain ombud practice from a complex systems perspective would be extraordinarily helpful in bringing systemics into the mainstream for the field.

This study has conceptualized leadership very broadly to cast a wide net. More targeted investigations into ombuds as leaders via specific models of leadership may help us, over time, better understand their function. Specific inquiry through well-established theoretical frameworks, such as distributed leadership, adaptive leadership, and plural leadership, may prove particularly fruitful. All, I suspect, will illuminate the ombud’s contributions to systems leadership, which is itself a still-emerging theory.

Another tantalizingly rich field of inquiry is that of ombuds’ role in organizational learning. While this study did show how ombuds contribute to learning, sensemaking, and information flow, it did not even begin to scratch the surface of the organizational learning literature. How do ombuds co-construct meaning with leaders and visitors? How do they mediate knowledge creation? What is their role in a knowledge management system? How do they help surface new learning, amplify exemplary practice, and promote innovation? Critically, how do they help detect and address the gaps between espoused and actual practices in their organizations? My questions abound.

Broadly speaking, I also believe far more criticality is required in future research on ombuds in general. I think that there are many uninvestigated (and potentially quite unharmonious) norms and assumptions informing contemporary organizational ombud practice. Research explicitly designed to begin surfacing, examining, and reflecting upon such norms in a deeply contextualized manner would do much to support and advance the field. For example, this study seemed to suggest that insider ombuds and ombuds with experience in a variety of positions were at a distinct advantage in working with leaders. Both conveyed important social and human capital that was valuable in gaining credibility as well as performing the ombud role well. If true, then what are the
implications for the field? Is it ethical to be offering expensive training to young, aspiring ombuds when the reality is that a decade-plus of diverse experience may be an unspoken job requirement? Also, how do we keep the ombud role from becoming implicit in the replication of unjust power dynamics? The vast majority of leaders are white men. How do we ensure successful ombuds aren’t just those who get along with leaders because they have the same backgrounds? How do we value the “insight” of the person looking with entirely new eyes, be it from outside the field, outside the organization, and also outside the “typical” leadership profile?

Finally, there remains a gaping hole where leaders’ perspectives belong. Robust study of organizational leaders who have worked with ombuds (or better yet, have been ombuds themselves) is long overdue. We simply must collect more data on our leaders’ perspectives.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Late last year, a research agenda for the organizational ombud field was published (Bingham et al., 2018). This study specifically contributes to its Research Goals 4: To explain how ombuds carry out their work and 6: To determine how ombuds build collaborative relationships in their organizations and profession, specifically the sub-category of “Interacting and collaborating with organizational leadership.” It also met my research goal, which was to contribute to a fuller body of knowledge about the ombud-leader relationship to advance both conceptual and practical understanding of it.

Practically, we now know just a bit more about how some ombuds and leaders interact. How often they meet, what they discuss, and why they do it. Conceptually, we now have some new ways to think about ombuds, their standards, and their relationships with leaders. It would seem that the idealized model, and the IOA Standards of Practice more broadly, may be a source of insecurity rather than confidence and accountability for ombuds. Rather than bottlenecks, sites of restriction, ombud-leader relationships appear to have great potential to be sites of amplification. They amplify trust. They amplify learning. They amplify human connection, wisdom, and insight. Ombuds should also be thought of as influencers. They deftly wield multiple sources of power to improve their organizations in ways both big and small, though mostly invisible.

In the course of this research, I heard of many individual crises or issues that ombuds helped avert or mitigate: Seriously abusive managers, financial malfeasance, bullying, flawed policies, toxic behavior, illegal activity. It is easy, as an ombud proponent, to read about any given organization’s travails in the daily news and think, “Ope! An ombud could have caught that.” Ombuds are not the silver bullet, and yet neither is a CEO, board member, cabinet member, senior operational leader, or any
other individual role. It is the combination of them all, working together to enact a collective practice of leadership, that makes an organization strong and resilient.

If formal authority were excluded from the list, the requirements for any other organizational leader in the face of the Fourth Industrial Revolution might read an awful lot like an organizational ombud’s job description. Very few roles exist to help people navigate the confusion, stress, and ambiguity inherent in life within a complex organization in a rapidly changing world. An ombud, however, is built to do precisely that. In many ways, their job is to increase both individual and organizational capacity to deal with conflict; ensure processes are apt, fair, and equitable; and identify areas for positive growth and change. In other words, to help productively cope with and confront the realities of increasing complexity. This shift of mind is important for understanding ombuds’ value generally, but also for giving leaders a toehold on its value to them. It is also an argument for the fair-weather ombuds, one who exists not because there are so many things going wrong in any given organization but because there are so many opportunities for things to go right and be continually improved.

Ombuds perhaps were a “nice to have” in older models of leadership and organizational development. I think they are a “must have” for leaders who want to learn, adapt, innovate, and create healthy organizations where people trust each other and treat each other well. It is time to interrupt the narrative that ombud offices are the red-headed stepchild of their administrations, under-resourced or under-valued or perpetually at risk of being shuttered when budgets tighten or leadership turns over. Understanding and promoting ombudship as an essential complement to leadership can point us toward a future in which the very best CEOs, presidents, and politicians insist on having an ombud office in their organizations. That they would look askance at any institution lacking an ombud in the same way they would one lacking a finance officer or
general counsel. That ombuds would be viewed as a best practice for promoting good
governance, organizational wellness, and competitive advantage. There are already
signs that this is beginning to happen, and all due to the decades of good work by many
ombuds who, like the participants in this study, have repeatedly proven their worth to
leadership in their organizations. An ombud colleague recently told me that three new
leaders in their organization (in the areas of HR, risk, and legal) all knew what an ombud
was before they arrived and expressed gratitude and excitement to my colleague that
their ombud role existed. The paradigm is shifting.

When ombuds work well with leaders, those leaders come to understand the
value of ombuds. They then spread the good word as they occupy other positions of
formal power in their organization or in the next organization to which they move. The
assistant dean at who worked well with an ombud at University X may someday soon be
the president at University Y, where an ombud office surely will take root. It is a pull from
leadership more so than a push from ombuds that will likely bring the profession to a
tipping point, but that does not mean ombuds should not put their backs into it.
Behavioral and social science research has much to offer the ombud who wants to
improve their abilities to build trust, form relationships, or enhance their executive
presence. Learning to think systemically is something anyone can do with practice
(Armson, 2011; Senge, 1990); books, trainings, and courses are widely available.
Leadership, much like ombudship, is a skillset.

None of this diminishes the vitally important casework that all ombuds do,
including the talented professionals who graciously participated in this study. The
ombudship-as-leadership work described here is predicated on their skilled conflict
engagement work. It is precisely the ombud’s dual existence—their feet on the ground
and their head in the clouds, if you will—that uniquely qualifies them to contribute to the
collective leadership of their organizations. My work here is not an attempt to shift the definition of an organizational ombud, only to highlight a portion of it that has been overshadowed too long.
EPILOGUE

An Origin Story: Ombuds as a vital component in a systems approach to leadership

It may not have been the first, but the ombud office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is perhaps preeminent in influence due to the prolific efforts of its inaugural ombud, Dr. Mary Rowe, to publish and educate about the role. Dr. Rowe, an esteemed elder of the ombud profession, practiced at MIT for 42 years. In addition to writing extensively on the ombud role, Dr. Rowe has also consulted with countless organizations and served as a leader in The Corporate Ombudsman Association, the Ombudsman Association, and University & College Ombudsman Association. Dr. Rowe recently co-authored the 2016 ACUS report, The Use of Ombuds in Federal Agencies, and is now an adjunct professor of negotiation and conflict management at the MIT Sloan School of Management. She is honored each year by a titular keynote address at the IOA annual conference.

Toward the end of this study, I spoke with Dr. Rowe to learn more about her long experience at MIT vis-à-vis working with leadership. She began by describing what it was like to step into her initial appointment as Special Assistant to the President and Chancellor for Women & Work in 1973. It was a position created by the president of MIT at that time, Dr. Jerome Wiesner, partly in response to a report drafted by women faculty and staff (of which there were roughly 17 faculty and two senior officers at the time) describing a need to help correct for the inequity or unfairness they experienced at work. Dr. Rowe’s role was to be a resource to individuals but also to the organization as a whole and the president and the chancellor in particular.

Even though she was not called an ombud until 1980, the outlines of modern organizational ombud practice are evident in the structure of her initial position. Administratively, she was placed outside any other management or reporting lines
(independence). She was explicitly told to remain impartial and not to keep case records, maintaining strict confidentiality “unless a life was at stake.” She was to have no management decision-making power (informality). If she encountered an issue that she felt the senior leadership should know about she, in her words, “Not only had permission, but had a request to bring it to the top” in a way completely consonant with confidentiality.

As intriguing as it was to hear about early instantiations of what were to become IOA’s core ethical principles, I was thrillingly taken aback when Dr. Rowe said, “This was one of the first—and one of the most explicit—directives to me: That I was to take a systems approach in anything that I did.” While a systems approach is, to me in 2019, absolutely critical to understanding an ombud’s value to an organization, this was in 1973, shortly after Bertalanffy’s seminal book General System Theory was published in 1968 and well before the 1990s vogue of “systems thinking” in management (much of which came out of MIT, it should be noted). So, what made two leaders in the 1970s insist upon a systems approach to information flow and problem-solving in their organization?

Well, this was an institute of science and technology after all, and President Wiesner and Paul Gray, the chancellor, both were professors of engineering. Wiesner’s particular areas of research were “in the fields of microwave theory, human and machine communications, scatter transmission techniques and engineering, signal processing, radio and radar propagation and phenomena, and military technology” (MIT Libraries, 1995/2005, para. 3). Gray’s were semiconductor electronics and circuit theory. It should come as no surprise that they instituted a role for their organizational system that was intended, as Dr. Rowe described it, “as failsafe, checks and balances, and backup.”
As Dr. Rowe has been recently reviewing presidential archives and her own papers at MIT, she said she was struck by how intentionally her position had been designed to play a systems role. She described Wiesner and Gray as “entirely systems persons” and MIT as “all about systems.” Dr. Rowe said that what both the president and the chancellor “wanted in this job was a person who would do what we now hope automated systems could do, which is to find the faults in any system before they do damage and start a process of mitigation, remediation, and prevention.” In particular, Wiesner—the scatter transmission, radar, and military technology expert—wished “an information pickup device” that would capture delicate, sensitive information—those signals that other devices were missing. Clearly, this engineer was also an astute humanist: “If he [Wiesner] had been writing a job description I think he would’ve said something like, ‘Mary, behave yourself in such a way that everybody who was here would feel comfortable talking with you about anything.’”

Dr. Rowe’s role was not just one that could detect fault or spot opportunity early; it was also “a device that would get swift action from good managers as fast as possible with no red tape.” Mary was charged with getting line managers the information they needed to do their jobs well (while also maintaining confidentiality). Over the years she also was supported to foster dozens of “affinity groups, some ephemeral, some still alive and well,” who would identify their interests and concerns, discuss them, and propose ideas for management. In the 1970s, Dr. Rowe kept track of at least 600 large and small changes in policies and procedures and structures at MIT that ensued. Now, decades later, Dr. Rowe can characterize her work as ombud as a type of distributed leadership. She reflected,

Jerry Wiesner and Paul Gray were distributing their leadership responsibility every way that they could and expected me to do that as well, and I now see...that they opened the door for me to follow their path, and expected me to
follow it. ...I guess in retrospect I can claim I was exercising some leadership but I can't for a minute tell you that I thought of it that way at the time.

Dr. Rowe’s mental models about the organizational ombud role have fundamentally influenced the profession. Hers, in turn, were fundamentally influenced by Wiesner and Gray’s, two leaders who saw clearly the ombud’s value for optimal systems function. The modern organizational ombud role was designed to be a vital component in a systems approach to organizational leadership. This is its past and this is its future.
APPENDIX A: IOA STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

PREAMBLE

The IOA Standards of Practice are based upon and derived from the ethical principles stated in the IOA Code of Ethics.

Each Ombudsman office should have an organizational Charter or Terms of Reference, approved by senior management, articulating the principles of the Ombudsman function in that organization and their consistency with the IOA Standards of Practice.

STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

INDEPENDENCE

1.1 The Ombudsman Office and the Ombudsman are independent from other organizational entities.

1.2 The Ombudsman holds no other position within the organization which might compromise independence.

1.3 The Ombudsman exercises sole discretion over whether or how to act regarding an individual’s concern, a trend or concerns of multiple individuals over time. The Ombudsman may also initiate action on a concern identified through the Ombudsman’ direct observation.

1.4 The Ombudsman has access to all information and all individuals in the organization, as permitted by law.

1.5 The Ombudsman has authority to select Ombudsman Office staff and manage Ombudsman Office budget and operations.

NEUTRALITY AND IMPARTIALITY

2.1 The Ombudsman is neutral, impartial, and unaligned.

2.2 The Ombudsman strives for impartiality, fairness and objectivity in the treatment of people and the consideration of issues. The Ombudsman advocates for fair and equitably administered processes and does not advocate on behalf of any individual within the organization.

2.3 The Ombudsman is a designated neutral reporting to the highest possible level of the organization and operating independent of ordinary line and staff structures. The Ombudsman should not report to nor be structurally affiliated with any compliance function of the organization.
2.4 The Ombudsman serves in no additional role within the organization which would compromise the Ombudsman’s neutrality. The Ombudsman should not be aligned with any formal or informal associations within the organization in a way that might create actual or perceived conflicts of interest for the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman should have no personal interest or stake in, and incur no gain or loss from, the outcome of an issue.

2.5 The Ombudsman has a responsibility to consider the legitimate concerns and interests of all individuals affected by the matter under consideration.

2.6 The Ombudsman helps develop a range of responsible options to resolve problems and facilitate discussion to identify the best options.

CONFIDENTIALITY

3.1 The Ombudsman holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence and takes all reasonable steps to safeguard confidentiality, including the following: The Ombudsman does not reveal, and must not be required to reveal, the identity of any individual contacting the Ombudsman Office, nor does the Ombudsman reveal information provided in confidence that could lead to the identification of any individual contacting the Ombudsman Office, without that individual’s express permission, given in the course of informal discussions with the Ombudsman; the Ombudsman takes specific action related to an individual’s issue only with the individual’s express permission and only to the extent permitted, and even then at the sole discretion of the Ombudsman, unless such action can be taken in a way that safeguards the identity of the individual contacting the Ombudsman Office. The only exception to this privilege of confidentiality is where there appears to be imminent risk of serious harm, and where there is no other reasonable option. Whether this risk exists is a determination to be made by the Ombudsman.

3.2 Communications between the Ombudsman and others (made while the Ombudsman is serving in that capacity) are considered privileged. The privilege belongs to the Ombudsman and the Ombudsman Office, rather than to any party to an issue. Others cannot waive this privilege.

3.3 The Ombudsman does not testify in any formal process inside the organization and resists testifying in any formal process outside of the organization regarding a visitor’s contact with the Ombudsman or confidential information communicated to the Ombudsman, even if given permission or requested to do so. The Ombudsman may, however, provide general, non-confidential information about the Ombudsman Office or the Ombudsman profession.

3.4 If the Ombudsman pursues an issue systemically (e.g., provides feedback on trends, issues, policies and practices) the Ombudsman does so in a way that safeguards the identity of individuals.

3.5 The Ombudsman keeps no records containing identifying information on behalf of the organization.
3.6 The Ombudsman maintains information (e.g., notes, phone messages, appointment calendars) in a secure location and manner, protected from inspection by others (including management), and has a consistent and standard practice for the destruction of such information.

3.7 The Ombudsman prepares any data and/or reports in a manner that protects confidentiality.

3.8 Communications made to the ombudsman are not notice to the organization. The ombudsman neither acts as agent for, nor accepts notice on behalf of, the organization and shall not serve in a position or role that is designated by the organization as a place to receive notice on behalf of the organization. However, the ombudsman may refer individuals to the appropriate place where formal notice can be made.

INFORMALITY AND OTHER STANDARDS

4.1 The Ombudsman functions on an informal basis by such means as: listening, providing and receiving information, identifying and reframing issues, developing a range of responsible options, and – with permission and at Ombudsman discretion – engaging in informal third-party intervention. When possible, the Ombudsman helps people develop new ways to solve problems themselves.

4.2 The Ombudsman as an informal and off-the-record resource pursues resolution of concerns and looks into procedural irregularities and/or broader systemic problems when appropriate.

4.3 The Ombudsman does not make binding decisions, mandate policies, or formally adjudicate issues for the organization.

4.4 The Ombudsman supplements, but does not replace, any formal channels. Use of the Ombudsman Office is voluntary, and is not a required step in any grievance process or organizational policy.

4.5 The Ombudsman does not participate in any formal investigative or adjudicative procedures. Formal investigations should be conducted by others. When a formal investigation is requested, the Ombudsman refers individuals to the appropriate offices or individual.

4.6 The Ombudsman identifies trends, issues and concerns about policies and procedures, including potential future issues and concerns, without breaching confidentiality or anonymity, and provides recommendations for responsibly addressing them.

4.7 The Ombudsman acts in accordance with the IOA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, keeps professionally current by pursuing continuing education, and provides opportunities for staff to pursue professional training.
4.8 The Ombudsman endeavors to be worthy of the trust placed in the Ombudsman Office.

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APPENDIX B: IOA CODE OF ETHICS

PREAMBLE

The IOA is dedicated to excellence in the practice of Ombudsman work. The IOA Code of Ethics provides a common set of professional ethical principles to which members adhere in their organizational Ombudsman practice.

Based on the traditions and values of Ombudsman practice, the Code of Ethics reflects a commitment to promote ethical conduct in the performance of the Ombudsman role and to maintain the integrity of the Ombudsman profession.

The Ombudsman shall be truthful and act with integrity, shall foster respect for all members of the organization he or she serves, and shall promote procedural fairness in the content and administration of those organizations’ practices, processes, and policies.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

INDEPENDENCE

The Ombudsman is independent in structure, function, and appearance to the highest degree possible within the organization.

NEUTRALITY AND IMPARTIALITY

The Ombudsman, as a designated neutral, remains unaligned and impartial. The Ombudsman does not engage in any situation which could create a conflict of interest.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The Ombudsman holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence, and does not disclose confidential communications unless given permission to do so. The only exception to this privilege of confidentiality is where there appears to be imminent risk of serious harm.

INFORMALITY

The Ombudsman, as an informal resource, does not participate in any formal adjudicative or administrative procedure related to concerns brought to his/her attention.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Ombuds</strong></th>
<th><strong>Leaders</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational ombuds are still pretty rare. When did you first encounter</td>
<td>Organizational ombuds are still pretty rare. When did you first encounter the concept of an ombuds, and what have you learned about them since?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the concept of an ombuds?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can you tell me the story of how the ombud office at X was originally</td>
<td>What is your understanding of why THIS organization has an ombud office? How did it come to be and why is it still here?</td>
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<tr>
<td>created? And of how you came to occupy the role?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How have you come to learn about the organizational ombud role? Any</td>
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<td>particularly formative sources or experiences?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you know about [the person in the leader role], if anything,</td>
<td>What did you know about [the person in the ombud role], if anything, before working together in this capacity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>before working together in this capacity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What sort of understanding was initially established about what your</td>
<td>What sort of understanding was initially established about what your working relationship would be like, and how did you go about establishing it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>working relationship would be like, and how did you go about establishing</td>
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<tr>
<td>it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can you tell me a bit how the relationship functions[ed] on a routine</td>
<td>Can you tell me a bit how the relationship functions[ed] on a routine basis? How often do you communicate, when/where do you meet, what do you discuss, etc.? - Has it changed over the course of your work together?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>basis? How often do you communicate, when/where do you meet, what do you</td>
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<tr>
<td>discuss, etc.? - Has it changed over the course of your work together?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How is the leader useful to you in your role? Can you share an example or</td>
<td>How is the ombud useful to you in your role? Can you share an example or two?</td>
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<tr>
<td>two?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do you decide what issues/information to bring to the leader’s</td>
<td>What sort of issues/information would you hope the ombud brings to your attention? And how do you prefer they raise these sorts of things?</td>
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<tr>
<td>attention, and when/how to do so?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can you tell me about a time when [the leader] was particularly responsive to an issue or situation you brought to their attention?</td>
<td>Can you tell me about a situation or issue that [the ombud] was really instrumental to addressing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What sort of influence do you think the ombud has in your organization?</td>
<td>What sort of influence do you think the ombud has in your organization?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think an ideal ombud-leader relationship is supposed to be like? Why?</td>
<td>What do you think an ideal ombud-leader relationship is supposed to be like? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you wish [the leader] better understood about the ombud role, if anything?</td>
<td>How would you change the ombud role if you could?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me about a time when you and [the leader] were in disagreement or conflict about something? How did you handle it?</td>
<td>Can you tell me about a time when you and [the ombud] were in disagreement or conflict about something? How did you handle it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think you [the leader] is the right role/person for the ombud to report to? Why or why not? Is there anyone else you the two of you both work closely with?</td>
<td>Do you think that you/your role is the right one for the ombud to report to? Why or why not? Is there anyone else you the two of you both work closely with?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you encountered any leadership transitions in the past? If so, how have you handled them? If not, how do you think you would handle them?</td>
<td>What advice would you have for someone stepping into your role/a leadership role about working with an ombud?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything you wish you knew more about in terms of effectively working with leaders, either now or earlier in your career?</td>
<td>Is there anything you wish you knew more about the ombud role itself or how to effectively work with it, either now or earlier in your career?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you had to sum up your relationship with [the leader] with just a few adjectives, what would they be?</td>
<td>If you had to sum up your relationship with [the leader] with just a few adjectives, what would they be?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anything else you want to add?</td>
<td>Anything else you want to add?</td>
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APPENDIX D: SITE PROFILE TEMPLATE

Narrative Site Description:

Location:
Sector:
Size:
Office founded:
Genesis:
Funding:
Charter:
Office structure:
Ombuds reports directly to:
Dotted-line reports to:
Organizational culture:
Description of the ombud role:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OMBUD PROFILE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenure in office</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
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<td>Gender ID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational Background</td>
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<td>Professional Background</td>
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<td>Prior ombud work</td>
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<td>Prior work in org</td>
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<td>Leadership positions</td>
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<th>LEADER PROFILE</th>
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<td>Tenure in office</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Educational Background</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Background</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior leadership experience</td>
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<td>Prior experience in org</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior work with ombuds</td>
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<tr>
<th>Reporting relationship</th>
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<tr>
<td>Annual report</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standing meeting</td>
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<td>Ad hoc availability</td>
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<td>Urgent case</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to other leaders</td>
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</table>
APPENDIX E: DATA CATALOGUE

Hours of interviews (8)
Interview transcripts (216 pages)
Researcher memos (19)
Site Profiles (7)
Hierarchy diagrams (7)
Observation/Member checks (5)
Document review (not exhaustive):
  Personal documents
  Personal correspondence, private blog contributions and comments,

  Official documents
  Charters, websites, annual reports, IOA Standards of Practice, Code of Ethics,
  Best Practices, FAQs, Annual Reports, job descriptions, memoranda of
  understanding, outreach materials, training materials

  Popular culture documents
  Websites, newsletters, social media posts, press releases, blog posts, preferred
  articles, podcasts

Five years of observations from many IOA and other conflict engagement
conferences
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