Office of the
Ombudsman

ANNUAL REPORT 2024



Resilience. Reflection. Renewal.
From concerned to confident

Working together
to find solutions

UNDP UNFPA unicef for every child UNOPS UN WOMEN



Colleagues and on-call consultants with the Office of the Ombudsman for UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS and UN-Women met to deepen collaboration and reflect on standards in tools and processes in conflict resolution for the nearly 62,000 employees covered by the Office.

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I. INTRODUCTION, PRINCIPLES AND SERVICES

Introduction

The year 2024 was marked by numerous challenges that tested personnel's resilience and adaptability. At the time of preparation of the 2024 annual report, moreover, 2025 has already presented an entirely new set of unprecedented challenges and significant geopolitical changes. Evolving circumstances have required the Office of the Ombudsman for UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS, and UN-Women (the Office) to continuously innovate and adapt its conflict-resolution methods and strategies to navigate the complexities of the global United Nations workplace landscapes.

Tight deadlines, funding pressures, intercultural misunderstandings, increasingly poor email tone by some, and generational differences continue to underpin and impact conflicts, which in turn move beyond substantive work disagreements. As already addressed in the 2023 annual report, the Office again observed that visitors accessing ombudsman or mediation services frequently reported that work conflicts negatively impacted their mental health and well-being. Case engagement further reflected a significant increase in visitors to the Office reporting general anxiety caused by organizational uncertainties. The Office strives to provide neutral yet highly empathetic services and, among the options explored in open conversations, continues to guide colleagues to professional staff counselling or medical services. In addition, the Office has adjusted case-specific conflict-resolution processes, in particular in mediations, to address significant health challenges (including mental-health issues) and to ensure that engagement in the resolution process is fair and effective.

The reporting period was one of the busiest and most productive years for the Office, with 712 cases and outreach to over 9,600 personnel, exceeding the previous year's cases by 26 per cent and outreach activities by 38 per cent. The Office now also offers more easily accessible online skills-building courses in the management and resolution of conflict in multiple languages. The present report provides detailed breakdown data on casework, mediation and outreach, as well as general conflict-related observations applicable in all five organizations. It also highlights emerging issues when they have been observed in two or more organizations.

A closer relationship was established between the three Executive Boards (of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, of UNICEF and of UN-Women) and the Office. The Office has been invited to present its annual report to the Boards in 2025.

The Office made progress on complex administrative matters requiring coordination among the five organizations. Full implementation of the 2023 audit observations is expected to improve budgeting, finance, human resources, and contracting processes in 2025, thus enhancing the service delivery of the Office.

The Joint Inspection Unit also launched a new, system-wide review of the ombudsman and mediation functions in the United Nations system in 2024, with its report anticipated in 2025.

In 2024, the team grew closer on a personal and professional level, by meeting for the first time in person in a planning retreat, fostering collaboration on conflict-resolution tools and processes for the nearly 62,000 employees covered by the Office. The Office also increased collaboration with other ombudsman offices in the United Nations System Network of Ombudsman and Mediators, for which it served as Co-Chair.

Principles

The Office operates under the terms of reference for the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services contained in the Secretary-General's bulletin of 22 June 2016 (ST/SGB/2016/7). Its key principles of operations are independence, informality, confidentiality, and impartiality, as well as voluntary participation.

In addition, the Office adheres to the principle of minimal intervention level for conflict resolution. In practical terms, it accordingly prioritizes addressing conflicts at their source or at the appropriate level of line management capable of effectively managing the situation.

Services

Under the Standards of Practice of the United Nations System Network of Ombudsman and Mediators[1], "the Ombudsman is the only designated neutral resource that provides confidential, impartial, and independent services within their organizations to informally address workplace-related concerns." A primary service is listening to visitors to ensure they feel truly heard and seen, and discussions of options—both informal and formal, if applicable. The paragraphs below contain the guidelines on categories of services that form an integral part of the work of the Office. These guidelines have been prepared and agreed on within the Integrated Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services, of which the Office is a part.

> "Case engagement reflected a significant increase in visitors to the Office reporting general anxiety caused by organizational uncertainties."

Discussion of options

Following an exploration of the concerns raised, the various perspectives, and the underlying needs and interests, the Ombudsman helps the visitor to examine a variety of options that could potentially address the issue. The Ombudsman also provides visitors with information on workplace policies, procedures, and rights, helping them to understand their options and potential courses of action. Options are assessed together with the visitor, considering the advantages and disadvantages of each, thereby enabling the visitor to make an informed choice. Options generated could include continued engagement using other conflict resolution processes or connecting the visitor to another office with a more appropriate mandate to handle the relevant issues.

Mediation

Mediation is a structured and collaborative process used to address and resolve workplace differences, concerns, or conflicts with the help of an impartial and neutral

1 https://www.un.org/ombudsman/sites/www.un.org.ombudsman/files/standards-of-practice-network-en.pdf

> The reporting period was one of the busiest and most productive years for the Office, with 712 cases and outreach to over 9,600 personnel, exceeding the previous year's cases by 26 per cent and outreach activities by 38 per cent.

third party—the mediator. It may take the form of a facilitated dialogue between two colleagues or involve a more complex process with multiple individuals or offices. Mediation can be conducted through joint meetings or separate discussions, or both, depending on what best supports the parties. It is particularly useful when parties seek to resolve a specific issue constructively and confidentially. Parties may request mediation on their own—individually or together—or a matter may be referred by others (such as supervisors, or colleagues in human resources, legal advisory, or ethics functions, or the United Nations Dispute Tribunal), with the parties' consent. When successful, mediation may result in an agreement. The parties are responsible for documenting the terms—either in writing or by email. A mediated agreement with a relevant United Nations organization can be enforced by the UN Dispute Tribunal.

Feedback about systematic trends

The Office collects and analyses data derived from its casework. It publishes its annual report and offers feedback to the administration on systemic issues and suggests recommendations on how to address some of the root causes of conflict within the organization.

Shuttle diplomacy

When parties are unable or unwilling to interact directly with one another, for whatever reasons, an Ombudsman may act as the intermediary, conveying each party's concerns, positions, and interests. Often, shuttle diplomacy constitutes or is part of a mediation process.

Conflict coaching

Visitors may opt to avail themselves of one-on-one conflict coaching with a conflict resolution practitioner. The aim of such coaching is to improve current or future professional relationships and empower the visitor to handle and take control of issues involving workplace relationships. Through the conflict coaching process, the visitor can prepare for difficult conversations and explore new ways of communicating with others. It helps the visitor create better strategies to address workplace issues before they escalate or become entrenched. Several of the Office team members are International Coaching Federation (ICF)-certified coaches; available in addition to on-call professional conflict coaching consultants.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE WORK OF THE OFFICE

A. Overview of cases

For the 2024 reporting period, the Office recorded a notable 26 per cent increase in cases, rising to 712 from 565 the previous year (figure 1). This upward trend reflects a continued rise in engagement with the Office, pointing to greater awareness and trust in available conflict-resolution mechanisms to address workplace matters.

By organization, UNDP accounted for the largest share of cases (277), followed by UNICEF (215), UNOPS (87), UNFPA (79), UN-Women (52), and 2 cases from other entities. All participating organizations saw increases from the prior year (figure 2). The total workforce covered by the Office in 2024 numbered approximately 62,000, distributed roughly as 37.7 per cent with UNDP, 38.9 with UNICEF, 7.9 with UNFPA, 9 with UNOPS, and 6.5 with UN-Women.

FIGURE 1. Caseload by year, 2016-2024

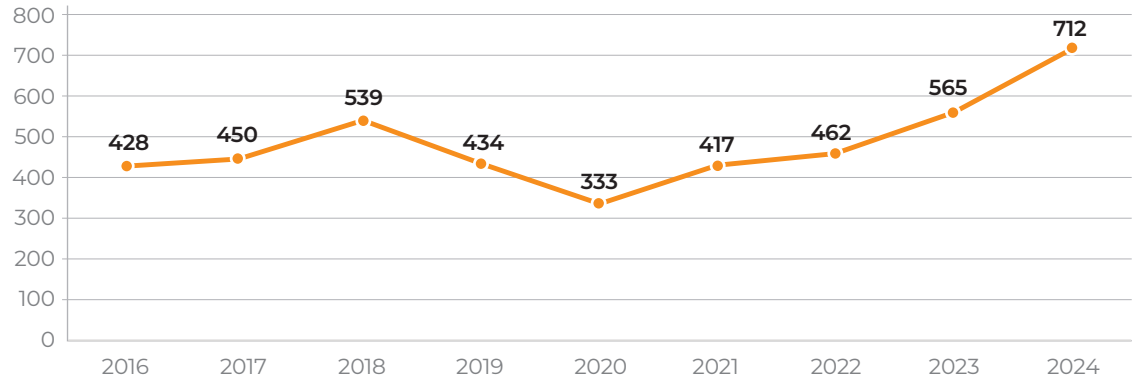
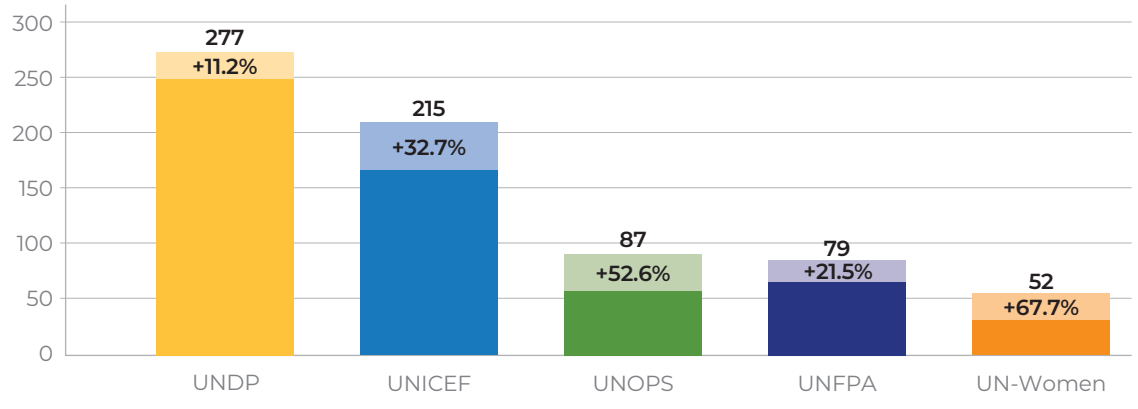
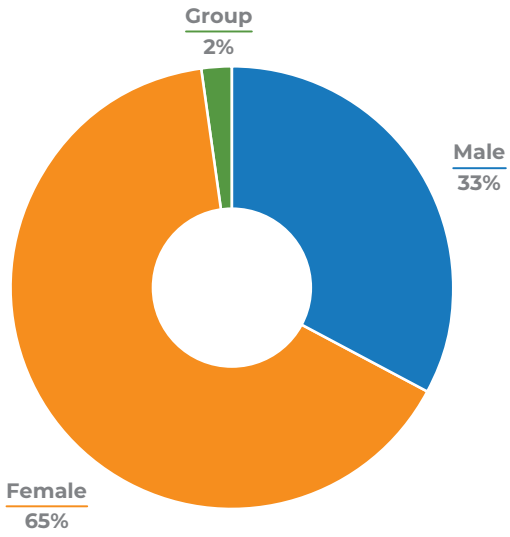


FIGURE 2. Cases by organization (2024) and percentage change from 2023



From a gender perspective, female personnel accounted for 65 per cent of all individual cases, compared to male personnel at 33 per cent (figure 3), and 2 per cent for groups. Since 2020, cases from female personnel have risen by 182 per cent, versus a 75 per cent increase for male personnel. This trend highlights the opportunity and need to reflect on gender-specific workplace dynamics and support systems.

FIGURE 3. Caseload by gender



In 2024, staff members (international Professional, national Professional, and General Service) together accounted for 71 per cent of all cases received while 16 per cent were for affiliated personnel (consultants, individual and service contractors, United Nations volunteers), and 13 per cent were from other categories (former staff/retirees, or not specified). This suggests that affiliated personnel, while not having the same institutional formal recourse channels, are actively consulting the Office. The Office observed, however, that overall, many colleagues still appear unfamiliar with the services available to them and may benefit from clearer guidance on mechanisms available for staff and affiliated personnel on addressing grievances at the workplace. In response to this, section I of the present report contains an overview of the services that the Office offers, and further outreach will also address this issue.

Regionally, the highest number of cases came from Asia and the Pacific (26 per cent), followed by the Middle East and Africa combined (24 per cent), and Latin America and the Caribbean (21 per cent) (figure 4). Overall, offices away from headquarters (OAHQ) accounted for 80 per cent of the caseload while 20 per cent

FIGURE 4. Cases by region

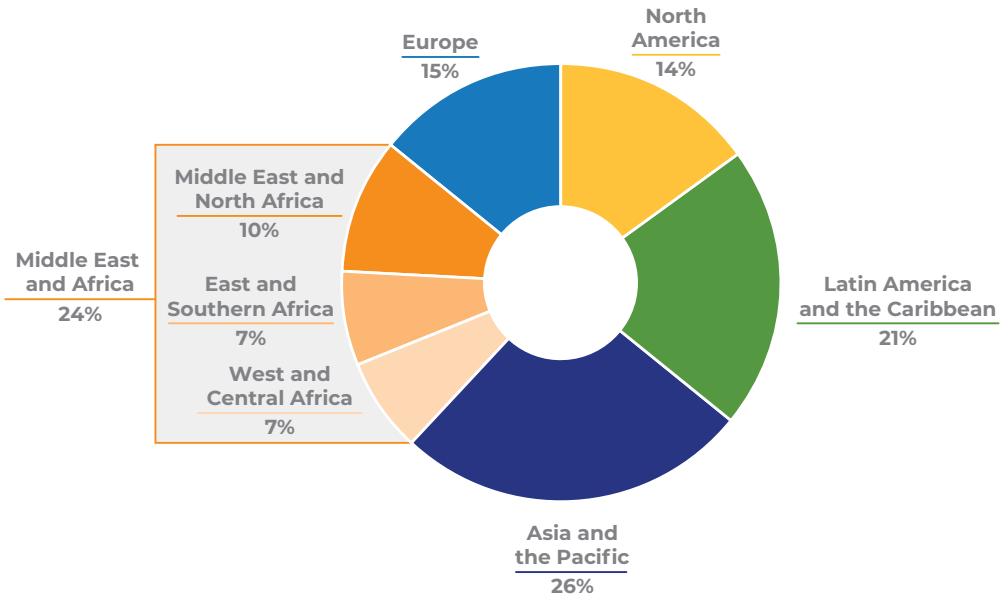
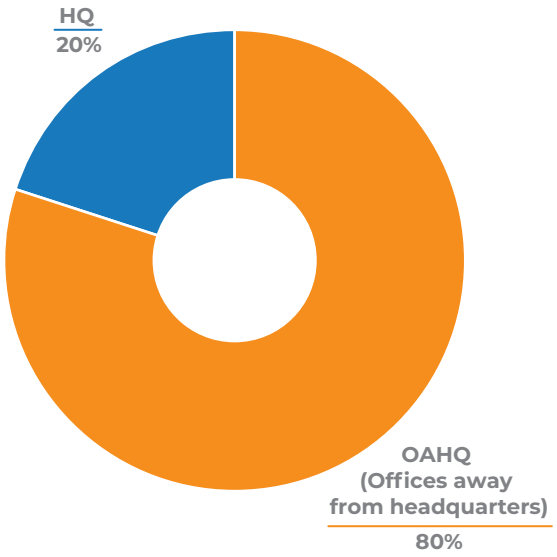


FIGURE 5. Percentage of cases at offices away from headquarters and at headquarters (New York and Copenhagen)



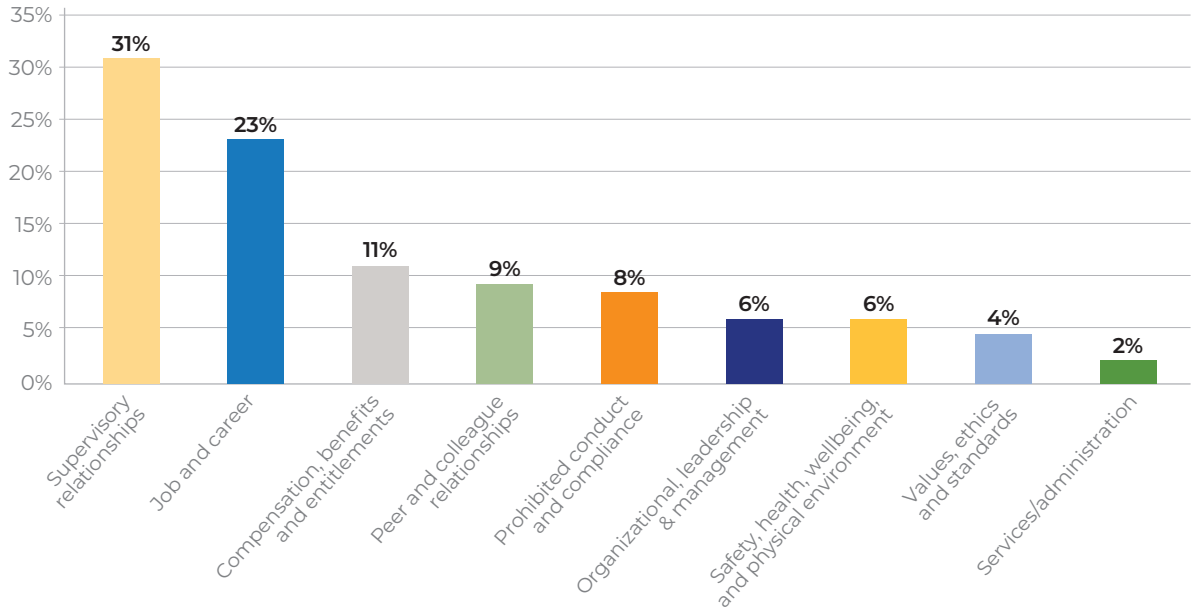
originated from headquarters duty stations (i.e., New York and Copenhagen) (figure 5).

The caseload was largely driven by three core issues that accounted for the largest share of cases overall: supervisory relationships (31 per cent); job- and career-related issues (23 per cent); and compensation, benefits, and entitlements (11 per cent) (figure 6). There are some regional deviations (figure 7).

A total of 83 per cent of the cases were addressed using ombudsman services and 17 per cent using mediation. The most common ombudsman services[2] delivered included listening, providing guidance and information, evaluating options, conflict coaching, and channelling the visitor within the system (figure 8). This distribution reflects the Office's vital role in early conflict resolution, where many personnel seek informal support and conflict coaching at the outset of workplace concerns. Mediation, while applied in a smaller number of cases, continues to play a vital role in the Office's service offerings, providing a structured, transformative process for parties navigating more complex or persistent challenges (see section II.C).

Taken together, the 2024 trends underscore the continued value of the Office's conflict-resolution services across geographic regions,

FIGURE 6. Percentage of cases by issue category, 2024



2 Based on service categories applicable for case management in 2024, which were updated for 2025.

FIGURE 7. Issues by region in 2024, by percentage

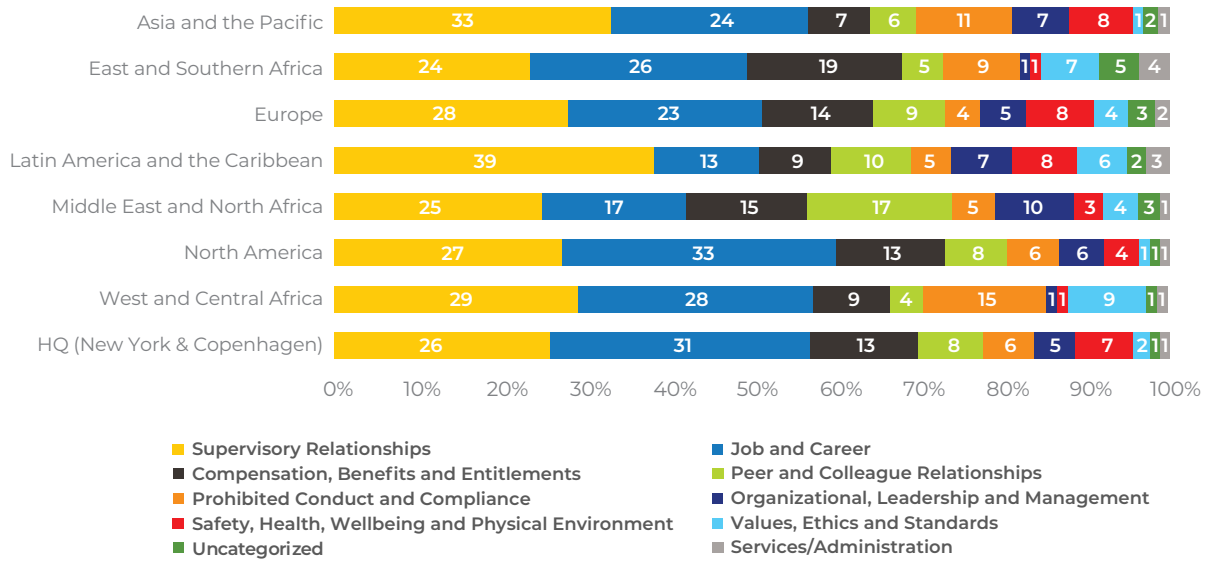
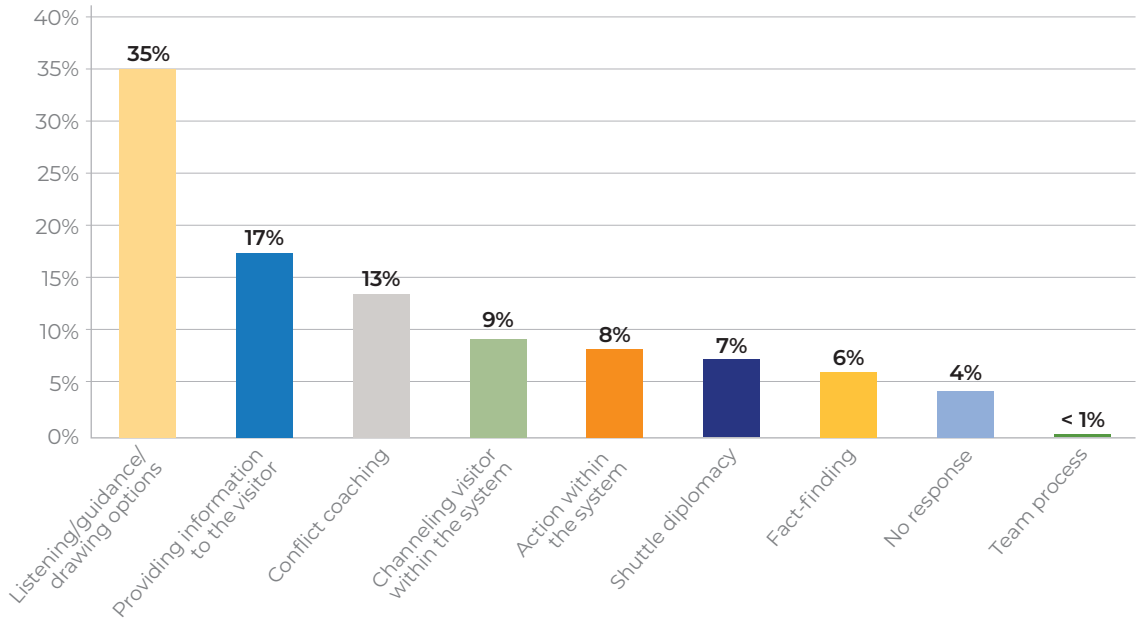


FIGURE 8. Breakdown of ombudsman services delivered in 2024, by percentage



personnel categories, and participating organizations. As engagement grows—particularly among underrepresented groups such as affiliated personnel—the Office remains committed to adapting its presence, services, and outreach to meet emerging needs and to support a respectful, inclusive workplace culture.

B. Training and outreach activities

In 2024, the Office delivered a total of 160 learning and outreach activities, offered both in-person and virtually, reaching at least 9,687 colleagues across the five organizations served. The aim was to promote awareness, build capacity, and foster a respectful, inclusive work

environment while helping to prevent conflict or equip personnel to deal with conflict constructively.

Core offerings included Getting to Know Your Ombudsman—a key initiative in raising awareness about the Office's role—along with sessions on Conflict Management, Managing Emotions, A Conversation with the Mediator, Psychological Safety in Teams, Civility Cafés, Challenging Conversations, Effective Communication, and Dignity and Respect.

In response to specific needs, the Office also provided customized sessions such as: Effectively Managing and Dealing with Conflict in Teams (for supervisors); Managing Upwards (for supervisees); and dedicated sessions for specialist groups, including human resource professionals and staff representatives.

Learning sessions were delivered in English, French, and Spanish. Several sessions were open to all five organizations jointly on site, promoting inter-agency learning and collaboration.

C. Mediation

1. Overview

The mediation programme saw significant growth in 2024, continuing the upward trajectory since its launch in 2020. The Office received 119 mediation cases, marking an over 30 per cent increase from the previous year. Mediation cases are included in the total number of cases reported in 2024 above.

The Office successfully closed 128 mediation cases received in 2023-2024, representing an over 30 per cent increase compared to 2023. Of these, 76 per cent resulted in resolution (full, partial, or prior to mediation). Figure 10 presents a breakdown of mediations by organization while figure 11 indicates the time required to conclude mediations (based on the post-mediation survey results). Consistent with previous years, most mediations were concluded within two to four hours.

Post-mediation surveys reflect a continued high level of satisfaction among parties, with an average rating of 4.5/5 for mediator effectiveness and overall satisfaction. Notably, 90 per cent of respondents indicated they would recommend mediation to a colleague,

FIGURE 9. Annual mediation caseload: cases received and closed (2020-2024)

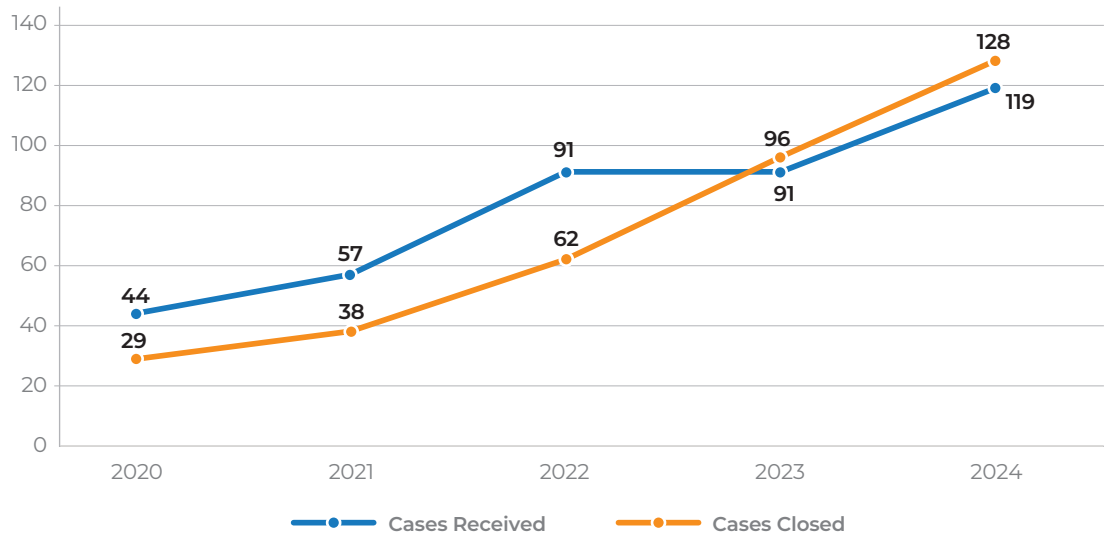


FIGURE 10. Mediations closed in 2024, by organization

	UNICEF	UNDP	UNOPS	UNFPA	UN Women
Received	40	32	27	11	8
Closed	42	36	30	12	8

(Medications closed in 2024 include cases received in 2023)

FIGURE 11. Time required to complete mediation

	As percentage of all cases
Up to 4 hours	44
4-8 hours	22
8-16 hours	10
Over 16 hours	24

reinforcing confidence in the programme value regardless of the case outcome.

The Office also expanded its Conversation with the Mediator programme, delivering sessions to teams at headquarters and in 37 country offices in 2024, reaching at least 2,437 participants[3] (a 59 per cent increase from 2023), demonstrating the growing recognition of the role of mediation in fostering healthier workplace environments.

The Office appreciates the continued active support of all five organizations for the mediation programme. The Office reiterates the recommendation made in the annual report for 2023 regarding the development of a joint, comprehensive mediation strategy among the five organizations. This strategy could include requiring specific categories of personnel in conflict situations to engage in an informal intake conversation with the Mediation Unit of the Office to assess potential for mediation. This would allow the individual to make a fully informed decision regarding participation in mediation, without limiting access to formal reporting channels. It could, in particular, apply to legal disputes between any of the five organizations and affiliated personnel by modifying existing contractual arbitration clauses, as arbitration tends to be cost-intensive and lengthy, compared to the flexible mediation process already offered by the Office without additional costs. Mediation would also allow such colleagues to explore amicable, empowering resolution. The Office is already working with some of the organizations on the design of such an approach.

The Office believes that such a strategy would be consistent with the elements of General Assembly resolution 77/260, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to increase awareness among staff regarding informal resolution, including mediation, as a first step, where feasible, prior to filing a formal complaint and of General Assembly resolution 78/248, in which it emphasized that all possible use should be made of the informal system in order to avoid unnecessary litigation.

2. Restorative team processes and mediation: building a foundation for healing and collaboration

A key development in 2024 was the preparation for the introduction of restorative processes. The Office defines those as

3 Included in the total outreach numbers presented above.

"processes that emphasize repairing relationships when harm has happened. They can be individual or multiple processes, stand alone or part of other conflict management interventions. They can be used for ongoing relationships, or ones that have ended."

In 2025, the Office will place particular emphasis on further developing its restorative mediation services, with a special focus on offering support to teams following other processes, including formal ones, or challenging conflict experiences with one another. The Office can help colleagues to recognize each other's humanity and reflect, heal, and rebuild trust in a fully confidential setting by a designated neutral. It aims to strengthen team cohesion and further foster a positive workplace culture for longer-term collaboration.

Examples of situations where the Office observed personnel expressing the need for a safe space to process challenging experiences are the impact of a public newspaper article about their office's workplace culture, or the re-integration of a previously disciplined senior staff member into the same team, or major organizational changes causing job losses and internal competition to demonstrate the significance of a particular position during funding cuts. In situations such as these, the Office adheres to the following actions:

1. **Acknowledge the impact:** team disruptions affect more than just those individuals who are directly involved in the conflict or circumstances. Teams may experience tension, communication breakdowns, or disengagement. Acknowledging these challenges openly—without assigning blame—creates a foundation for moving forward for the team as a whole;

2. **Create safe spaces for dialogue:** provide opportunities for employees to express concerns in a confidential, structured manner, facilitated by a neutral party, which can help to rebuild trust. When people feel truly seen and heard, they are more likely to engage in solutions;

3. **Embed long-term cultural shifts:** healing is not a one-time process—it requires an ongoing commitment. Organizations that proactively foster psychological safety, open communication, and conflict-resolution skills are better equipped to handle future challenges without lasting disruption;

4. **Provide restorative processes, mediation and support:** restorative processes and mediation focus on understanding the harm caused and identifying ways to rebuild professional relationships. It allows teams to move beyond past difficulties and establish shared commitments for a healthier workplace culture.

In line with the Office's principle of voluntary participation, such a process requires full commitment from all participants and offers potentially impactful, long-term benefits.

The Secretary-General's bulletin of 10 September 2019 addressing discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority (ST/SGB/2019/8) explicitly supports workplace restoration and aftercare, allowing the Office of the Ombudsman and Mediation Services and the Staff Counsellor, within their respective terms of reference and confidentially, to "assist in workplace restoration efforts through informal resolution methods" in the context of discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, and abuse of authority. Paragraph 6.13 of the bulletin highlights restorative interventions such as post-investigation support, rebuilding trust between individuals, and team interventions and coaching towards change. In the view of the Office, this indicates

an institutional acknowledgment that healing and moving forward may require more than procedural outcomes.

Recommendations

The Office recommends that the five organizations consider a joint, comprehensive mediation strategy. This strategy could include requiring specific categories of personnel in conflict situations to engage in an intake conversation with the Mediation Unit of the Office to make an informed decision regarding participation in mediation, without limiting access to formal reporting channels.

The Office recommends that the five organizations consider referring appropriate situations to the Office for restorative processes to provide teams with the opportunity to restore trust, similar to the approach outlined in the Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/2019/8.

D. Respectful Workplace Facilitators

In the first half of 2024, the Office evaluated operations to expand the Respectful Workplace Facilitators (RWF) programme, responding to ongoing requests from UNDP, UNFPA, and UN-Women. An independent evaluator and the RWF Programme Coordinator conducted thorough assessments, confirming the feasibility of expansion through strategic planning and resource allocation. Since the pilot phase in 2019, the Office has engaged with 78 offices, facilitated 96 nomination processes, and trained 175 out of 191 RWF nominees. Owing to personal circumstances, change in jobs that may cause a potential conflict of interest or a move in geographical location, RWFs have a high turnover rate of 59 per cent. Sustainability has nevertheless proven achievable with more effective coordination and regular engagement with the RWF network. Seasoned RWFs have increasingly planned local events in their offices or with teams, boosting confidence in the programme.

In 2024, the Office also offered conflict and resilience-related masterclasses for the RWF network on the subjects of rumours and gossip in the workplace and two sessions on health-related topics relating to conflict. These masterclasses offered opportunities for learning and professional exchanges among RWFs. The feedback of these immersion courses for RWF is generally positive and often inspires more communication between the Office and RWFs, as well as between RWFs and the colleagues they support.

Most individual engagements with RWFs concerned peer or supervisory relationships and job and career matters. The Office observed that RWF services positively impacted visitors' well-being, providing a safe space to share experiences and clarify their options. The majority of visitors leave a session with an RWF clearer about the options available to them. Similar to other peer volunteer programmes, owing to workload and other commitments, there are limits to the amount of time that some RWFs can dedicate to this volunteer role and outreach. Therefore, the levels of engagement do differ by office and the RWFs' specific job contexts.

In late 2024, the Office recruited a new RWF programme manager to enhance internal support and skills development through 2025. Priority tasks include surveying participating offices, improving procedures, gaining senior leadership support, and regularizing engagement activities.

III. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING CONFLICT

A. Psychological and mental safety

1. Psychological safety

The way that teams work together impacts staff well-being and performance. The level of psychological safety offers a measure of the health of team dynamics. The concept refers to "a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves…[W]hen people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution."[4] For example, as reported to the Office, colleagues with local or regional expertise might remain silent during a meeting involving experts from headquarters after past humiliating experiences of having their input dismissed. Personnel may avoid raising early concerns about a struggling project out of fear of being blamed or conceal small mistakes out of fear of receiving negative performance evaluations or damaging their relationships with supervisors. Over time, such behaviours can undermine learning, innovation, and trust. Absence of psychological safety can also harm mental health and job satisfaction, potentially leading to declines at both individual and team levels. On the other hand, creating psychological safety may be one of the most significant contributors to high engagement and performance.

As in previous years, several visitors raised concerns (such as being interrupted, unwelcome jokes on their contributions, public criticism) that prompted the Office to increase attention to psychological safety. In response, the Office offers a range of interventions to support safer team dynamics, including strengthened core services in areas such as coaching, communication facilitation, and mediation, as well as specialized offerings focused on psychological safety. The latter include workshops to build healthier team cultures, assessments to identify risks, and targeted interventions to address areas of concern. Improvements in this area can have cascading benefits that influence entire teams and help to prevent conflict at its source.

2. Mental safety

Mental safety (sometimes referred to as "psychological health and safety") involves a comprehensive approach to managing and promoting mental well-being in the workplace. While psychological safety concerns the team's psychological climate, mental safety centres on individual well-being and includes a focus on the potential impact of workload, mental pressure of time and money, and the tone and timing of delegating tasks. For example, as reported by visitors to the Office, deadlines may be set immediately before a weekend or holiday, and then, despite an enormous effort to comply with the deadline, the project sits idle for weeks. This might reasonably convey to an employee that their personal time is not of importance, which impacts mental safety. Similarly, a

4 Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth* (p. xvi). John Wiley & Sons.

> Management and team members play key roles in promoting psychological and mental safety. Management by encouraging open dialogue, embracing productive disagreement, and establishing healthy norms around how errors made at work are addressed. Team members can contribute by listening with attention and without judgement to colleagues' ideas in meetings and by expressing appreciation for diverse contributions.

barrage of emails late into the night, or questioning why a staff member with young children may not be available on weekends at short notice can create a feeling of pressure that an immediate response is required. Such practices have been observed by the Office in its case work and can erode mental safety in the workplace.

Other examples brought to the attention of the Office include when colleagues are repeatedly reminded that their organizations or units are facing funding pressures and there may be a need to abolish their posts. While it is important to keep staff informed about potential problems arising from decreased funding, it is not appropriate to do so through regular reminders intended to intimidate the employee, or to give a specific reminder when an employee has disagreed with a work approach. Body language also matters: communicating real risk to a person's contract but with a smirk or open smile has been perceived by some visitors as very hurtful, and undermines the values put in place by the five organizations.

Acts of exclusion, or micro-inequities—subtle ways of putting someone down or cutting them out from projects or communications—can also erode mental safety.

Visitors have also reported conditions where there is a great or sudden increase in workload but no acknowledgment on the part of the supervisory line of the consequent extra work for personnel or of the conditions that caused the increased workload. Certainty and safety are overarching themes in such circumstances. A relevant question to pose may be: do personnel enjoy conditions at work that are reasonable and predictable or is there a constant need to be on guard because they do not know what kind of additional work or new deadlines might be assigned at any given time?

As in prior years, colleagues reported to the Office that they were hesitant to raise concerns regarding these aspects of workplace culture because of job-security fears: they (rightly or wrongly) perceived the supervisor to be in a position of authority to determine their job future; be it through the performance management tools, participation in selection processes for career opportunities, or as potential future references when applying elsewhere.

In the context of mental safety, the Office also observed an increasing number of harshly worded, accusatory emails by individual personnel towards supervisors, senior management or human resources and even colleagues working on medical or social-benefits issues. The language in such communications naturally indicates a heightened emotional state of anger or despair, disappointment and frustration. It overlooks entirely, however, that such colleagues to whom they are addressed are equally performing their specific functions in good faith and are humans with emotions and mental safety needs, too. For example, colleagues in support functions who were trying their very best to assist visitors in need but had to explain the extent and limits of the regulatory framework received a series of seriously hostile emails. Frequently, such

supportive colleagues reported to the Office that they had to take mental-health breaks themselves owing to the constant stream of communications they perceived as aggressive. Understandably, the good-faith, additional effort for support and communication extended by those responding on behalf of the organization decreases over time since the latter fear being harshly insulted again in return. The Office has been able in many instances to intervene as a neutral and to channel communications between parties—essentially removing the harsh tone and accusations—and explain to visitors, confidentially, where the lines of appropriate communication tone had been crossed. Having the Office as an intermediary ensured that the substantive information was heard and understood by the visitor, who was thereafter able to pose questions for clarification through the Ombudsman to the organization in a calm, factual manner without personal attacks. In some instances, the Office also helped to clarify that decisions are not necessarily taken by someone in the human resources team but rather by direct line managers under their delegated authority. This helped to focus the conversation on the merits of what the actual decision-makers had taken into consideration.

Unfortunately, while still small in numbers, the Office also addressed more frequently than in the past situations where visitors expressed frustration, despair, fear or anger in conjunction with possible threats to their own physical safety and well-being (self-harm or suicidal thoughts). In such cases, the Office has the authority to break strict confidentiality and contact the appropriate support channels in the respective organizations without delay.

Management and team members play key roles in promoting psychological and mental safety. Management by encouraging open dialogue, embracing productive disagreement, and establishing healthy norms around how errors made at work are addressed. Team members can contribute by listening with attention and without judgement to colleagues' ideas in meetings and by expressing appreciation for diverse contributions. In the experience of the Office, it is important not to dismiss unexpected ideas out of hand or, when mistakes occur, to seek to blame someone, but rather to use them as potential learning opportunities for team or organizational growth.

> "Absence of psychological safety can also harm mental health and job satisfaction, potentially leading to declines at both individual and team levels. On the other hand, creating psychological safety may be one of the most significant contributors to high engagement and performance."

The five organizations have made considerable progress in putting in place measures to support the mental, emotional and physical well-being of their personnel and to help individuals to cope, find help, build their resilience and recover. The Office noted a comprehensive increase in resources available to support and assist personnel. Examples noted in 2024 include professional counselling, stress-management resources, increased engagement with personnel through surveys, e-learning courses on pertinent topics, generally raising awareness of the importance of mental-health, designated global mental-health campaigns and express encouragement from executive leaders to focus on and be mindful of one's health, as well as a more coordinated United Nations occupational health and safety approach.

The Office did observe, however, that the need remains for continuous adaptation of the organizational response to psychological and mental safety and for adequate resources. For example, personnel in some locations suddenly found themselves amid active armed conflict. In these cases, personnel must quickly adapt to delivering in drastically different conditions for which they may not have fully prepared, including evacuation of and unexpected separation from family members. Some personnel have voiced concerns that they are asked to stay and deliver without sufficient consideration for their mental health and skill-readiness but were also hesitant to speak out about their concerns. Organizations could recognize these realities and consider providing even greater support, including enhanced training, psychological assistance, and clear guidelines on care in such contexts, if not already the case.

In 2024, the Office continued to contribute to well-being by providing a safe space where personnel can share their workplace concerns in utmost confidentiality. In addition to listening and exploring options with personnel, the Office also provided information about and how to contact well-being resources.

> The Office commends the organizations for their commitment to flexible work policies aimed at improving workplace satisfaction and work-life balance, which in turn demonstratively increase personnel engagement and productivity.

B. Use of power

The largest number of cases that the Office receives annually concerns conflicts within a supervisory relationship. In 2024, of the 712 cases addressed, over 200 were in this category. While these cases may stem from misunderstandings or differences in beliefs, values, viewpoints or workstyles, the Office observed a common denominator that can cause escalation of the conflict: the individual with more power or authority in the organizational hierarchy is seen or feared by the other party as being able to subjugate the lower-ranking member. In these situations, visitors reported micromanagement, harassment[5] and bullying, favouritism, humiliation, threats, intimidation (referring to the supervisory authority not to renew contracts), reducing an individual's work portfolio, and use of performance-improvement plans with the aim of separating rather than developing the individual. When approached, the Office was able to address and resolve a range of conflicts, including power dynamics, by clarifying the perspectives and impact of behaviours both on the senior and less senior colleague. While somewhat difficult to define, the Office observed that cultural and personal communication preferences as well as generational differences and expectations played a role in a number of cases.

The Office also received cases where supervisors—despite being in a position of higher authority—said that they felt harassed by their supervisee/s. Examples given included when good-faith efforts in giving helpful feedback were rejected by the supervisee and taken as a personal attack rather than feedback to improve work. In these situations, the Office managed to find common ground among the parties to start a productive conversation focused on

5 The Office does not determine whether a particular incident or experience described amounts to prohibited conduct. References to 'harassment,' 'threats' and other terminology is merely language used by visitors to describe their experience.

issues so that both parties could collaborate effectively with each other again.

Further examples of the use of power in some of the organizations arose when newly recruited senior managers or leaders were given a briefing by their own supervisors that conveyed a strong expectation that the new manager was to address shortcomings assertively in the team that manager or leader was joining. The Office was informed that some of these briefings included specific indications of who in the team was already considered as problematic or seen as an underperforming colleague, albeit without any documentation in performance records. This led to the new manager or leader entering a team with pre-formed opinions about members of the team even before meeting them. In addition, such initial expectations created pressure on the new manager or leader to demonstrate that they could remedy the team issues; however, they had to do so without necessarily having the full background of the troublesome issues, an objective view of the individuals concerned, or, in some cases, the people-management skills necessary to create change in a productive, encouraging manner. Some new managers or leaders, possibly out of lack of experience in managing complex team conflict, warned their newly joined team in express terms that their new leadership come with the mandate to put in place a new management approach, including the authority to separate personnel as needed. In 2024, the Office addressed cases in different organizations where entire team collaboration broke down owing to the dynamics between a new manager or leader, the long-serving team members and the new manager's or leader's own supervisors. In the experience of the Office, positive results are achieved when new managers are first allowed to work with and get to know the new team and form their own opinion and are provided with necessary support when any shortcomings are identified.

This also requires respectful, considerate communications among all involved.

Finally, in this category, the Office observed cases with some degree of power imbalance during mediation processes concerning the negotiation of terms of settlement agreements. For example, some staff in complex medical situations faced contract non-renewals that they felt violated their rights while the organization believed that it had complied with the regulatory framework. Such staff faced the difficult choice between (a) signing a settlement agreement that allowed them to continue staying without full pay on contract a little while longer and keeping their health insurance during ongoing or anticipated medical treatment but waiving the right to formally challenge the decision or (b) not signing the terms offered by the organization during mediation. The latter meant being separated from service with immediate loss of insurance and consequent possible loss of access to life-saving treatments but retaining the formal recourse channels, which might take a long time to bring closure to the case. The Office successfully worked with the organizations' focal points, other stakeholders and the visitors to find agreeable solutions in such difficult and, for the visitors, highly emotional circumstances.

> "There is a real risk in times of significant change that personnel start working in greater silos, protecting their roles and work portfolios, and limit sharing information out of concern over job security. It is also often a time where unfounded assumptions and gossip spread widely."

Improper use of formal power and authority could also amount to prohibited behaviour.

In 2024, the Office supported colleagues by providing a safe space to speak, conflict coaching, mediation and guiding personnel to established mechanisms for reporting prohibited conduct if they could not resolve their concerns informally or chose to explore formal recourse.

Recommendation

The Office recommends that organizations consider extending learning activities in people-management skills, ideally including the proper exercise of power, to supervisors at all levels, as feasible, or to supervisors managing a defined minimum number of direct or indirect supervisees in any category of personnel.

C. Change management and restructuring

Since the Office of the Ombudsman was established in 2002, it has offered its services, on request by those concerned, to units involved in change-management processes. The process is never easy as it can involve legitimate reduction and reorganization of the work force, causing uncertainty and career-threatening situations including for long-serving staff. When approached, the Office has helped to promote as transparent and balanced a process as possible by facilitating communication at each stage, by intervening when affected staff feel unfairly targeted, by facilitating group discussions and by mediating, as needed.

The Office has found that open, clear communication by all parties involved remains key to a successful change-management process. In 2024, the Office observed some occasions when personnel perceived that they received little or no information, conflicting information, or information that came so late that affected colleagues felt they had insufficient time to plan their next career moves. This in turn made it more difficult to take measures to deal effectively with the ensuing upheaval in personal and family situations. In some cases, the Office was able to work with parties to achieve a measure of mitigation for some colleagues. For others, this was not possible, in some instances because they were too afraid of reprisals to allow the Office to raise their concerns even after discussing options and assurance by the Office that reprisals for contacting the Office are prohibited.

In the redistribution and elimination of functions and responsibilities designed to increase operational efficiency, the Office observed that decisions were sometimes taken that were perceived as arbitrary or targeted by those affected. Visitors informed the Office that critical functions and responsibilities that they had carried out successfully for years had been transferred to others prior to the structural changes. They felt it was thus easier to marginalize them in light of the changed roles, while those who had been given the new functions and responsibilities appeared less vulnerable in terms of potential job loss. The question of favouritism in these situations was also raised. In some of these instances, it was possible to redress the situation and for functions and responsibilities to be restored to those who originally had them or to clarify the basic rationale for the decisions in an objective, neutral manner.

The underlying concern for personnel is primarily job security, i.e., livelihood. When separations and organizational changes are not managed well, it can impact staff well-being as well as team cooperation and productivity. There is a real risk in times of significant change that personnel start working in greater silos, protecting their roles and work portfolios, and limit sharing information out of concern over job security.

It is also often a time where unfounded assumptions and gossip spread widely.

The Office offers several interventions to support staff and management during periods of change. Individuals at any level can receive conflict coaching to help them to express concerns effectively, and mediation can be provided for bilateral conversations to help parties to understand needs and find mutually agreeable solutions. The Office also facilitates team discussions about change and its impacts. Where appropriate, it may refer individuals to other organizational resources for additional support. The Office can also support management in a neutral, independent role by helping to ensure clear communication about change, providing guidance to anticipate and prevent conflict, and supporting staff awareness of available resources during transitions.

The Office has found that affected personnel are better able to manage the stark reality of unwelcome change when they are treated as participating partners in the process of change management if not at the decision stage, then at the implementation stage.

Recommendation

The Office recommends that the five organizations consider, if not already the case, transparent and participatory processes in restructuring exercises, and, if possible, inform the Office, as needed and confidentially, of upcoming major changes so that the Office is aware of the general context and rationale when approached by visitors.

D. Productive workplace arrangements

The Office commends the organizations for their commitment to flexible work policies aimed at improving workplace

"The Office can also support management in a neutral, independent role by helping to ensure clear communication about change, providing guidance to anticipate and prevent conflict, and supporting staff awareness of available resources during transitions."

satisfaction and work-life balance, which in turn demonstratively increase personnel engagement and productivity. It finds that each organization has highly successful offices, managers, and teams whose approaches and experiences may provide valuable input for effectively and consistently implementing flexible and highly productive arrangements.

In 2024, as in previous years following post-pandemic return-to-office mandates, the Office noted some visitors voiced their perception that the application of flexible work policies depended on supervisors' discretion. The Office often clarified that in fact such arrangements, while most often positive for engagement, are nevertheless not an entitlement and managerial discretion is foreseen under the policies.

Some visitors expressed the view that when personnel were strictly mandated to be physically present, but their work consisted almost exclusively of virtual calls from their office space (and often required differing global time-zone considerations), the time needed to commute was considered not well spent and unproductive, causing frustration among colleagues.

Some supervisors also reported difficulties in managing the schedules of medium to large teams, citing challenges in prioritizing planning flexible work arrangements amid competing demands. At the same time,

offices that managed well with flexible work arrangements and also organized regular and meaningful in-person events received particularly positive feedback.

One area that the Office observes with some concern, however, is the possibility of requesting reasons when requesting flexible work arrangements. On some occasions, usually where there was already a trust gap between supervisor and supervisee, colleagues believed they had to provide what they felt were personal reasons, even if the policies clearly indicate managers should be respectful of personal privacy and medical information. In the view of the Office, managers have no specific insights or objective standards to consider such arrangements based on the personal circumstances of individuals, they have insight only on the exigencies of the tasks to be performed. It is also quite uncomfortable for some to share these circumstances. The Office believes that personal circumstances should not normally form the basis for deciding whether a specific job at a specific time can or cannot be performed through flexible work arrangements.

E. The role of the Office of the Ombudsman in performance disputes

Performance management and conflict have been addressed by the Office in 17 of its 23 annual reports (every year from 2005 to 2019, as well as in 2021, and 2023). Despite the various recommendations made over the years, disagreements about performance-management processes continue to persist as a cause of conflict at the workplace. In line with the concept as developed by the five organizations to provide a positive, empowering mechanism for professional development, the Office sees a performance-improvement plan (PIP) as a tool to support a supervisee's performance. Deliverables in the plan are therefore to be planned in good faith, and must be achievable and measurable. Unfortunately, as indicated in prior reports, some personnel see a PIP as a threat to job security, and a PIP can consequently carry the perception of a professional stigma rather than an opportunity to address shortcomings constructively and cooperatively.

> "...the Office further suggests that supervisors consider reflecting on whether the introduction of a PIP under the specific circumstances would exacerbate the situation or truly serve its objective to provide a fair chance for improvement. [...] Where the terms of a PIP were agreed on by both parties, including through neutral facilitation by the Office, outcomes improved significantly."

During the reporting period, the Office helped individuals, line managers and the organizations to address conflicts stemming from performance management and PIP concerns. Supervisees reached out to the Office, explaining that miscommunication and interpersonal issues existed long before the decision to institute a PIP was made and expressed fear over bias or lack of good faith in the assessment of improvement. Sometimes the supervisee had already been expressly encouraged by supervisors or management to look for work elsewhere when a PIP was proposed (in fact, looking for another job is always a career option and the advice to do so may be well intended). In some instances, an agreed separation may be the most cost-efficient approach when the relationship between the staff member and the organization is no longer viable regardless of the potential impact of a PIP on both manager and supervisee. Nevertheless,

statements by a line manager regarding alternative employment or separation can be understood as an already fixed position on the outcome of the PIP before it is implemented. In this context, the Office observed an increase in requests by staff to "stop the PIP," or "find that the supervisor's decision to institute a PIP is unfair," or "stop human resources from taking sides with the supervisor and make sure there is no bias". At the same time, as indicated in prior annual reports, the Office observed that supervisees are sometimes unwilling to acknowledge that improvement is needed.

Management in some organizations provided feedback that the intervention of the Office during a formal PIP process may create inaccurate expectations by the individual placed on the PIP. The Office welcomed the feedback on its interventions during PIP processes, clarifying that its services are typically limited to acting in a facilitating, clarifying and neutral role. Yet, the Office is also expressly mandated to look into the fairness of processes and general principles of justice and may confidentially raise such concerns to the relevant parties as well, including during conflict interaction regarding a PIP. The Office in some cases can further help to manage expectations about the PIP process when in conflict, namely through coaching and mediation.

The Office's intervention is informal and not intended to impact the decision on instituting a PIP or on a specific performance rating. Its role in performance disputes is to facilitate dialogue and to evaluate options that could help to resolve an issue in dispute, and only when both parties agree to engage with the Office voluntarily. In addition to its past observations and recommendations, and in view of the cases addressed in 2024, the Office further suggests that supervisors consider reflecting on whether the introduction of a PIP under the specific circumstances would exacerbate the situation or truly serve its objective to provide a fair chance for improvement. If a PIP is likely to exacerbate the situation, supervisors might wish to delay introducing it until they have thoroughly delivered their feedback in an informal but clear, productive way and explored possibilities of how the supervisee can improve performance. Where the terms of a PIP were agreed on by both parties, including through neutral facilitation by the Office, outcomes improved significantly.

Recommendations

The Office recommends that in situations where there is or appears to be a lack of trust or where the supervisor-supervisee relationship is already challenging, both the supervisee and supervisor consider approaching the Office of the Ombudsman before the introduction of a performance-improvement plan.

IV. LOOKING AHEAD

The United Nations system as a whole is looking at comprehensive reforms in the light of changing operational and funding landscapes. Adverse impact on some personnel seems all but inevitable at this point and the Office is preparing for potential increase in workload to support change processes where they might result in conflicts.

In addition, the Office has noted over the years that in some operational contexts, personnel work in integrated settings where they are supervised by counterpart institutions or government bodies or operate under dual reporting lines. This evolving work structure presents a challenge: when conflicts arise between United Nations personnel and counterpart officials, the Office's mandate does not allow for direct engagement or support. As a result, affected personnel may lack access to the range of informal conflict-resolution services that the Office offers and that are typically available to their peers. The Ombudsman recognizes that this gap can in some cases lead to unresolved workplace disputes, increased stress, and a decline in engagement. The Office will continue to monitor this issue and explore ways to extend informal support to personnel operating within these shared accountability frameworks.

The Office will also continue to be part of several working groups within the United Nations System Network of Ombudsman and Mediators, including on Accountability of Ombudsman and Mediators, Cost of Conflict, Mediation Standards of Practice, and Artificial Intelligence (in Conflict Resolution).

Finally, the Office will continue to explore the potential benefits of the greater use in its work of contemporary technologies, in particular artificial intelligence, with due regard for the mandated principle of confidentiality applicable to the Office.



TESTIMONIALS

For mediation services:

"I celebrate this outcome not only because the journey was long and arduous, but also because I had the good fortune of working with such an effective and experienced mediator. Knowing you were just an email away was a real source of comfort. Your poise and balanced, impartial approach helped me navigate what were, at times, very troubling moments over the past year and a half."

"Some might say there's no real cause for celebration as things might change. I believe there is. Even if the picture changes again in the future, right now I feel deeply grateful—for your guidance, your support, and your steadfast presence."

"Por mi parte sólo tengo una profunda gratitud por vuestro gran apoyo y acompañamiento en este proceso que ha resultado exitoso. Su calidad profesional y humana han sido fundamentales durante toda la mediación hasta alcanzar sus objetivos." ("For my part, I have only deep gratitude for your great help and for accompanying me in this process, which ended in success. Your professional and human qualities were fundamental throughout the mediation and for reaching its goals.")

More feedback is included in the newsletter: https://fpombudsman.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/MediationNewsletter-Issue-11-Dec2024_FINAL-1.pdf

For ombudsman support:

"Thank you so much for your overall kind support again. Without your support, I would have been gone from [name of duty station] almost a year ago already."

"I'm glad to know of the outcome and very grateful for your intervention. I am satisfied and agree that the matter can be considered closed."

"In life, sometimes you look back and wonder if you had made the right decision in any given situation. Involving you in my case, looking back, was the best decision I ever made. Thank you for your intervention which ended almost three months of stress and anxiety."

"I am grateful to have met you and had you in my life during this horrible period.
I can see light again."

"I learned more from one hour with you about the processes and options than from all the webinars and townhalls. Thank you so much!"

"Thank you for your excellent facilitation and guidance throughout his process."

"Un immense merci à vous, je pense fort que le fait que vous ayez trouvé un accord... m'a beaucoup soulagé ... je vous remercie énormément pour votre suivi très professionnel." ("A huge thank you to you. I truly believe that the fact you were able to reach an agreement... was a great relief for me... I'm extremely grateful for your very professional follow-up.")

"... vous avez été d'une aide précieuse, et je suis profondément reconnaissant pour votre disponibilité, votre professionnalisme et, surtout, votre empathie." ("You have been of invaluable help, and I am deeply grateful for your availability, your professionalism, and above all, your empathy.")

"Creo que eres la única persona que está interesada en lo que me sucede." ("I think you are the only person who is interested in what happens to me.")

"I will always value your contribution on my matter at its early stages... I truly appreciate the support offered by the Office of the Ombudsman in standing with me as I navigated one of the most challenging work experiences I have had in my life."

I don't wish my experience to anyone. Thank you for your integrity and being available at all times. I never felt alone.

For training activities:

Feedback on a Get To Know Your Ombudsman Session: "We are truly grateful for the excellent training session you provided. Your ability to break down intricate information into understandable and manageable pieces is truly commendable. Thank you for making learning such a productive and pleasant experience. We are now armed with the knowledge and resources in case of dealing with any work-related issues."

"Thank you once again for the session on Respectful Communication in the Workplace that you facilitated last month, it was well received, and we are still making efforts to be Giraffes" (referring to the Marshall Rosenberg's use of "giraffe" as analogy of compassionate communication).

ANNEX. TERMINOLOGY

The Office applies the definition of a case agreed on by the UN System Network of Ombudsman and Mediators as shown below.

Ombuds Case

An ombuds case is defined as a workplace issue(s) or question(s) brought to the office by a visitor who requests information, resolution options, or assistance that requires specific ombuds skills or knowledge. A visitor who returns to the Office with the same issue(s), shall be regarded as a returning visitor and does not require a new case be recorded. One case can relate to one or more issues.

[Example: 1 visitor = 1 case]

Ombuds Group Case

An ombuds group case is defined as an issue (s) brought by a group of visitors who request information, resolution options, or assistance for the same issue(s). A group is considered more than one visitor.

[Example: 2 or more visitors request a meeting to discuss the same issue. 2, or more visitors = 1 case]

Mediation Case

A mediation case is defined as a workplace conflict brought to the Office by one or more visitors who request, agree, and/or are referred to participate in mediation.

[Example: 1 mediation request = 1 case; 1 mediation referral =1 case; 2 or more visitors agreeing to mediation= 1 case]

Visitor

The term “Visitor” refers to any individual or entity that contacts the Office for assistance.

INDEPENDENCE

NEUTRALITY

CONFIDENTIALITY

INFORMALITY

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