



My door is always open

During a vibrant and highly interactive session on the subject of mediation and workplace conflicts in a small conference room in the secretariat building, a colleague shared her experience with the group. She had once gone to the office of her Director to discuss the issue of recent discontent in the division and the increase of gossip in the corridors.

“But why don’t they come to me with their issues?” said the senior manager. “My door is always open!”

Remembering that the door had in fact been tightly closed as it was at that moment, she had reflexively glanced at the door. The two people’s eyes met and, realizing the irony of the situation, they joined in laughter.

The mood is often not as cheerful when a manager is contacted by an Ombudsperson about a staff member who has sought the office’s services. The discussion often starts with an expression of great surprise and often involves the statement “But my door is always open, why have they come to you?”

When a staff member approaches the Ombudsperson with a grievance involving senior management – a decision, a type of

behaviour, an allegation of favouritism or any other type of grievance, frequently the Ombudsperson will be given the permission of the staff member to discuss the issue with the senior manager concerned. So why doesn’t the staff member go to the manager him/herself?

There could be many reasons why a member of staff would find it difficult to take a grievance directly to the senior manager involved, and perhaps senior staff should be more aware of these, even though the reasons are really rather obvious. In a typical United Nations workplace, the differences in status, power, information, terms and conditions of employment, etc, are very great. A national general service staff member, facing a decision made by a senior international professional, might find it a challenge to directly confront the manager with a grievance resulting from his/her decision, however friendly and approachable the manager may be. The staff member concerned may also be made to feel that the grievance is certainly much too insignificant to bother someone at such a high level, especially when everyone is feeling pressurized by their workload.

It is hardly surprising that it is often easier for the grievance to be explained to the

Ombudsperson, and to have some neutral third party to discuss the issues with and to be given some idea of whether or not it is reasonable to wish to challenge the decision or otherwise take up the grievance. It is also much less daunting to have the Ombudsperson raise the issue with the senior manager: even if they are generally friendly and approachable, even if their door is indeed always open, it may not be easy to predict how they will react to a challenge to a decision, especially from someone further down the hierarchy. Staff members often also believe that an Ombudsperson, a professional in mediation, negotiation and diplomacy would be in a better position to raise and discuss their issue with management as a designated neutral.

It is interesting to note that a related problem arises when very senior managers visit country offices and invite staff to meet with them and raise any grievances they may have. After such

visits, these managers have frequently told the Ombudsperson that there really are no problems in these offices, that no one had any complaints. In fact, it is quite understandable that staff do not speak up in such circumstances, that is, circumstances where there is no real guarantee of confidentiality, neutrality or objectivity, the very principles constituting the modus operandi of the Ombudsperson.

It is certainly positive to implement and to encourage open, frank and direct discussions in the office in order to dissipate conflicts before they become real problems. Nevertheless, there should be neither surprise nor resentment if someone wishes to seek the services of a designated neutral to mediate a mutually acceptable solution.

It is good if the door is always open, but no one should be criticized for choosing not to go through it and seek other options.