

Respectful workplace advisors: RWA Pilot

Change agents to enhance workplace dignity in the UN workplace

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In an encouraging inter-agency move, three Ombudsman/Mediator offices in the Organization have piloted an important project targeting unethical behavior, disrespect for diversity, and abusive authority. In the past, the strategy for dealing with these used to be somewhat reactive: lay down the rules, wait until there is complaint and discipline those guilty of infractions. Determining guilt and innocence can often involve a long and tangled rope of due process involving the internal justice system of the organization. In a spirit of a more proactive approach to conflict, the **Office of the UNHCR Mediator**, the **Office of the Joint Ombudsperson (UNDP/UNFPA/UNICEF/UNOPS)** and the **Office of the WFP Ombudsman** hope to train and support colleagues in offices around the world who will constantly scan the work environment for threats to and opportunities for ensuring a respectful work environment. The feedback obtained from these members of staff will be included in Ombuds recommendations to top management for systemic improvement. Called Respectful Workplace Advisors (RWAs), these individuals will also be on hand to guide staff members through the informal resolution of their conflicts with colleagues and/or the organization; not by mediating, but by empowering staff with the tools to make informed choices through an understanding of all options and avenues at hand.

The pilot was launched in the West African nations of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ghana during a five-day training workshop held from 09 - 13 September 2007 in the Ghanaian capital, Accra. The workshop drew 28 WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF participants - including the UN Joint Ombudsperson; the WFP Ombudsman; the UNHCR Mediator; staff counselors from WFP, UNICEF and UNHCR; 21 UNHCR, WFP, and UNICEF RWAs from the pilot countries, all of them nominated by colleagues in their respective offices; and the RWA Coordinator in the office of the Joint Ombudsperson.



Facilitated by two retired World Bank Human Resource Officers, the workshop equipped RWAs with the knowledge and skill sets needed to fulfill their roles and responsibilities of guiding staff to identify their interests in any conflict situation, as opposed to their position, and to take steps to resolve conflicts involving those interests. Using role-play, group exercises, focused discussions, and scenario studies, the workshop explored the key challenges RWAs are likely to face in the field, and helped them work out techniques for overcoming them. Many participants hinted the workshop was grueling, but admitted they found it quite rewarding, both personally and in their new capacities as RWAs.

RWAs are different from Peer Support Volunteers (PSVs)/Persons (PSPs) in several ways. Firstly, RWAs focus on conflict prevention and resolution only, with support from Ombudspersons or Mediators; while PSVs focus on psychological support with help from Staff Counselors. Secondly, an RWA listens to the concern of a staff member and guides him/her towards possible options he/she could consider and choose from to resolve the issue; while a PSV can and may advise, as well as intervene with whom ever may be involved in the issue.

Many RWAs were nominated by their colleagues because of the advocacy and advisory roles they had been playing in their respective offices. It was initially a source of distress for some of these individuals when they learned such activities would now have to stop, as they were incompatible with the status of RWAs. They felt their colleagues back at office would interpret their new role as a sort of "sellout". By workshop end, however, it was quite clear to probably all participants that they would be of more help to colleagues by empowering them to address their issues independently through various mechanisms available in their respective organization. (...)

The initiative to deploy respectful workplace advisors comes at a time the UN is moving toward harmonizing the respective internal justice mechanisms within individual agencies by 2009. It is planned that all agencies will be affected by this reform which will maintain formal justice processes, but will also put a lot of emphasis on informal mechanisms of conflict resolution. The one-year pilot is intended to help define a minimum base of information that is useful for future ombudspersons. After one year, an evaluation will be carried out, on the basis of which the future course of action will be charted. But UN Joint Ombudsperson, Veronica Luard, was quick to point out that in the event a subsequent evaluation of the pilot identifies shortcomings in the programme, it would only mean the RWA idea needs refinement and not necessarily abandonment. She adds, "We need to be humble enough to accept that this will be a work in progress over a number of years." Few would disagree with that.

As a closing act of the workshop in Accra, participants stood around in a circle to weave a web of dreams. One participant held a ball of string, the end of which she tied to her finger. Then she stated her dreams for the group, called the name of someone across from her and threw the ball of string to him. A segment of string now hung between them. This second person wound his end of the string round a finger, said his own dreams and threw the ball to another person. This continued from person to person up to the last participant - until segments of this one continuous string were crisscrossing the circle in an intricate web, connecting people. Many of the dreams people expressed were quite moving. Some persons found it hard to keep back the tears. Space will not allow stating all these dreams here, nor is it even reasonable to do so.

But the common thread - or was it string? - running through many of the dreams was that each RWA is a candle of hope and change that has been lit.

Contributed by Aaron Sleh, WFP RWA in Liberia