

# OMBUDSLETTER



Office of the Ombudsman for UN Funds and Programmes

*-Working together to find solutions-*

## When silence is golden.

### *Why is open communication important?*

Open communication in the workplace is the foundation of a well-functioning office, as the Ombudsmen have noted many times in their annual reports. It fosters a healthy exchange of ideas among staff at all levels and can be the inspiration of new initiatives or the revamping of processes that have become cumbersome. The Ombudsmen have observed that the management of an office is in very large measure responsible for establishing and maintaining an environment in which the spirit of free exchange can flourish. The whole team takes its cue from the powerful message that ideas are always welcome and that every single member of the team is empowered to share suggestions freely.

### *What prevents open communication?*

Sometimes, however, only lip service is paid to this ideal: while managers may encourage open communication, there is never an opportunity to do so. For example, staff meetings are few and far between and may be run in an autocratic monologue by the head of office, with the other participants remaining silent because they have learned that a suggestion will be interpreted as a

disagreement with the boss, who responds by humiliating anyone with a different point of view. Some participants in this kind of meeting have learned the safety of sycophancy and find opportunities to congratulate the boss, who responds by admitting them to the inner circle, from where they, too, can wield a certain amount of power. The Ombudsmen often hear of the damaging effects of favouritism where this kind of managerial style is prevalent. In such a setting, people can easily work in silos with never a chance to exchange their ideas, not even to interact in a basic human way. A downward spiral can easily develop, causing mistrust, speculation and gossip. Staff eventually become afraid to speak out and frustration with the way things are managed in the office spreads throughout the workforce. It is at this point that some staff come to the Office of the Ombudsman.

### *Some examples of the lack of clear communication*

We sometimes hear some stark stories about the lack of clear information from visitors to the Office of the Ombudsman. For instance, there is unwillingness on the part of some managers to put anything in writing and to rely on verbal

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communication, claiming that this is a friendlier, less formal way of doing business. Unfortunately, when directives are not put down clearly in writing, misunderstanding can arise and the manager may angrily say that orders have not been followed, even indicating that the staff member has been insubordinate. **It is a very bad idea to rely solely on memory in the workplace but a staff member may have great difficulty in persuading the supervisor to put things in writing.** This is how one visitor described the situation:

“Every day I pray that I do not have to raise any question or issue with my supervisor and that I can avoid any conversation. I never know if the response I will receive will be clear, or will make sense, or grasp the situation being presented. This is why I try to present questions in writing. When I need to request a decision for a particular circumstance, I usually send an email describing the situation and asking for advice. But my supervisor sometimes avoids an email response and tells me verbally what to do.”

You can imagine the frustration that this visitor to our office expressed. Her only aim is to do a good job to the best of her ability and she feels that the supervisor is an obstacle to this. The main reason that she tries to put everything in writing is that she finds that her supervisor does not recall discussions and events as they happened but rather in a distorted manner. Of course, since hardly anything is ever written down, the supervisor can assert that his version of the facts is the correct one. In this kind of scenario, the supervisor can also use positional power to put an end to any discussion by stating that his version is the correct one. Period. What a great deal of time could be saved just by putting things into writing!

Some visitors who come to the Office of the Ombudsman tell us that they have been warned by the management that they should not contact anyone outside their own office, particularly not

the Ombudsman! While anyone daring to speak with the Ombudsman under these conditions has certainly shown courage in doing so, the ability of the Ombudsman to intervene in a meaningful way is severely curtailed. There are, nevertheless, certain techniques that the Ombudsman can share with the visitor, such as courteously repeating what the supervisor has said, adding something like “Just to be sure I have understood...” or “Thanks. I’ll send the email about deadlines to everyone in the office”.

When the supervisor’s instructions are not clearly expressed, some staff members are afraid that they might misinterpret them and be blamed for their actions when it appears that the supervisor’s instructions have not been followed. In such cases, it can be worth trying to capture in an email the main points of a discussion that has taken place. You might start such an email with something like: “As we agreed earlier today, I will...” or “In accordance with your instructions, I will process the ....” This will give some protection even if the supervisor does not respond to the email since you will have stated what you are going to do and the supervisor has the option of correcting your course of action.

### ***“Silence is golden” – not a good rule in the office!***

The mistrust, speculation and gossip mentioned above grow out of a culture of keeping information away from staff. In the modern workplace, things happen rapidly and if the team members are not aware of what is happening, mistakes and misapprehensions can easily occur. It is not a good idea to restrict essential information to a favoured few when trying to build a strong, united team. Giving some people the “silent treatment” is a strategy that other team members notice and makes them wonder when it will be their turn not to know what is happening in their own workplace. In other words, mistrust is engendered between the management and the rest of the team.

When members of the team are not informed of what is happening, it is only normal for them to speculate. And speculation, of course, leads to the birth of rumour, which quickly grows into a huge destructive monster through the help of gossip, which thrives in situations of uncertainty. One of the strongest messages that the Ombudsman gives is that clear, open communication throughout the work team is the best way to avoid these counterproductive situations.

And yet, sadly, it cannot be denied that for those at the receiving end of lack of information and the shrouding of information, silence in the workplace might indeed be golden. As another visitor to the Office of the Ombudsman put it:

Recently, I asked a simple question of my supervisor: "When will the new arrangements come into force?" The question drew such a hostile response, that I asked myself why I could not learn just not to speak to her. I am getting better at it, though."

The Office of the Ombudsman recalls its motto "working together to find solutions" and invites all those who may have experience of working in an office where clear, open communication is lacking to be in touch, whether looking for solutions or with ideas to share.

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