



OMBUDSLETTER

Office of the Ombudsman for UN Funds and Programmes

-Working together to find solutions-

#14

Poor performance

Insecurity because of performance

On very rare occasions, the Office of the Ombudsman receives visitors who admit that they are poor performers. In some cases, staff members may have worked for the organization for a long time and yet, surprisingly, feel incompetent or perceive that their co-workers or managers find them incompetent. This perception gives rise to feelings of anxiety and insecurity, which can manifest themselves in a number of ways. For example, the Office has dealt with cases where staff members lock themselves in their office in order to limit interaction with colleagues, thus hampering communication with the team and increasing their own feelings of inadequacy. In other cases, staff members may take prolonged periods of sick leave or be absent or unavailable for a long time, especially when assignments or deadlines are due.

Communication

The modern workplace changes rapidly and innovations are introduced more frequently than in the past. Employees' skills may not remain entirely relevant even just a few years after they have been recruited. For example, Matt (not his real name) was hired as a programme analyst with a specialization in governance. Shortly after he was recruited, and because of unforeseen budget shortfalls, his office gradually started moving towards focusing on fundraising and income generation. While Matt had worked on fundraising projects before and therefore had some experience in this area, it had been some time ago. He was therefore not entirely confident that he could succeed in fundraising since most of his recent expertise was in the area of governance. The result was that Matt shut himself off and his manager found it difficult to speak with him. His mid-term review reflected his poor performance. When Matt came to the Ombudsman, it was possible to encourage him to speak with his manager to see how his previous experience might be revamped to help the office in its current situation. After speaking with his manager, Matt returned to say that the manager was very pleased to have had the conversation, particularly since he had seen on Matt's resume that he had previous experience in fundraising and could not understand why he seemed unwilling to

help. As a result, communications within the team improved, Matt was able to gain confidence and his performance reflected his true competencies.

Lack of motivation

At other times, the Office of the Ombudsman has worked with employees who have the experience, knowledge and ability to perform new tasks but lack the motivation to do so. For example, Trina (not her real name) had been working with the organization for a number of years and was the most experienced person on her team. Her office had gone through a number of restructuring exercises that affected Trina's functions but she was reluctant to accept the changes because the reason for them had not been shared with her in the first place. Once she had been able to explain this to the Ombudsman, it was possible to address the root cause of the problem and speak with the management so that she could be included in any future planning. It turned out that the management had not intended to exclude her and had been so caught up in the urgent need for change that they had overlooked the importance of valuing the input of all members of the team. After the conversation, Trina felt that she had been heard and, recovering her motivation, was willing to use her experience to help to move things forward, which was of great benefit to everyone in the office.

Frustration

In both of these examples, the staff felt inadequate, disempowered and underwent a great deal of stress. Matt chose to cope by shutting himself off, hoping to conceal his poor performance from others while Trina opted to "go slow" and do just enough to not be accused of insubordination. It was clear to the Ombudsman that they were both capable employees but were frustrated at being excluded. The Ombudsman helped to address the real causes of the frustration by acting as a neutral third party and bringing their concerns to the attention of the parties concerned.

Working together to find solutions

It sometimes happens that the cause of poor performance is indeed lack of ability. In these instances, the Ombudsman can discuss the issues with the visitor in a confidential, non-threatening environment and suggest resources where the knowledge and skill required can be obtained. Such cases are very rare since most employees are interviewed for the positions they hold and have therefore demonstrated that they have the ability to do the job they were recruited for and to adapt to the changing circumstances of the modern workplace.

Finding solutions

In all the situations concerning poor performance, it is important to have a space away from the office to think creatively on ways to address performance challenges. As seen in the two examples given, the Office of the Ombudsman offers a safe space to speak freely without fear of judgment and reprisal. A discussion with the Ombudsman can help to go beyond the behaviour or the positions entrenched in cases of poor performance and lead to exploring options through which difficulties can be addressed constructively. This in turn often leads to unexpected results or observations that themselves offer solutions. The root causes of lack of performance or perceptions of lack of performance include poor time management, lack of communication skills, number and difficulty of tasks, lack of organizational or people skills and insufficient supervisory support. All these are factors that can be easily addressed through training, self-awareness – and often a dose of humility! The Ombudsman can help you frame the issues that underlie poor performance and thereby reorient you towards the possibility of finding constructive solutions. The Ombudsman may also refer you to resources for training or give suggestions based on how others have dealt with similar performance challenges.

A confidential discussion with an Ombudsman can also be a safe, helpful step for the employee whose performance challenges are caused by a lack of motivation. The Ombudsman will listen for points of frustration and help the employee to re-examine his or her employment experience with a view to exploring options of how to regain that motivation. It is possible to rebuild motivation even after many years of feeling stuck but it usually starts with a willingness to have a discussion.

Talk it through

The mandate of the United Nations is a major motivational factor that attracts and sustains many employees to the funds and programmes workplace. Nevertheless, the Office of the Ombudsman still receives visitors who are frustrated owing to lack of feedback, poor communication skills or micromanagement, for example. There are also times when staff point to the culture in their workplace as being a de-motivational factor. The Office may not have the solution to all of these challenges but it can listen and work with you to explore options of how to deal with them, including giving feedback to leadership on factors that contribute to a demotivated, disengaged workforce. It is always worthwhile talking to your Ombudsman – so pick up the phone, send a message and make an appointment to talk – if you can't talk to anyone else about your poor performance or perception of your poor performance, you can always talk to the Ombudsman!