

OMBUDSLETTER



Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.



unicef

UNOPS



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women

Office of the Ombudsman for UN Funds and Programmes

-Working together to find solutions-

Zoomed out? Teed off with Teams? Want to skip Skype?

Just want to talk to someone about workplace concerns?

The Ombudsman is here!

One of the things that we do best in the Office of the Ombudsman is to

listen. We have decades of experience and are trained to help you to relax and speak freely and openly about your work concerns in a safe place where you will not be judged but heard confidentially.

Virtual meetings during COVID-19 have become the norm, and in the United Nations, we will in all likelihood have to continue to rely on them for some time to come. They can certainly be an efficient means of communication but sometimes we need to speak one-on-one to someone who understands our workplace concerns. That is where the Ombudsman can help.

Since our office was established, we have been listening to colleagues, helping them to crystallize the situations that they are facing, to analyse options and to set a plan in motion. We haven't stopped listening during COVID-19 and want you to know that we're still here, lending a helpful ear.

We are all experiencing the monumental effects of the pandemic together: just like everyone else, we in the Office of the Ombudsman are finding new ways to work efficiently from home. One thing hasn't changed, though: we are still listening to the concerns that you share with us on the basis of confidentiality, one of the most important principles of our practice.



Working together to find solutions

You can be sure that when you speak with a member of our team, what you say stays strictly between us unless you ask us to share it with another person whom you designate. Confidential. Between us. It goes nowhere unless you tell us otherwise.



We have been listening to what you have to say during COVID-19. Some of your concerns are carried over from pre-pandemic times; others have arisen as a result of working apart. One of the things that we have learned is that trust between managers and their teams can be put to a severe test: some managers believe that they need closer control of the way in which individual members spend their time while some team members have so many other things that they need to take care of under these changed circumstances that they need the freedom to get the work done on a timely basis without having to account for every minute. “I work so much more now; I get so much more done now; I am exhausted with everything that I have on my plate but I do get my work done; my days are longer and I get to bed so much later so that I can finish what I need to do for the office.” These are some of the things we hear. We listen carefully to each one and, with the collective experience that we have gained from listening to so many people, can help to you to find ways to manage.

Working from home on a continuing basis is a huge challenge for many people.

We all have to attend to a new array of tasks during the working day that were taken care of by others while we were at work or that we could do in our free time. The lockdown means that we have to fit all these tasks into our day. Some managers who are used to seeing the team working in the office location may not know how to manage virtually and may start inquiring too often what a team member has done, is doing and will be doing in the next couple of hours. This can be counterproductive to getting the job done and can irritate and distract the team member. The Ombudsman has suggestions on how to manage remotely – without micromanaging – and can share them with managers who find themselves in this position. We do hear from some colleagues that they find it difficult to maintain a structured working day and that they find themselves working late into the night. We can help there, too. One of the factors impeding a reasonably structured number of working hours is that managers and colleagues presume that since everyone is working from home, everyone is available 24/7. The result is that people send emails late at night – even in the middle of the night! We all need proper rest and down time, particularly during a period of such stress. The Ombudsman can help you, your colleagues and your managers to keep things in perspective. Please give us a call if you find yourself in a situation like this.

We've also discovered that the power of the written word to inspire, to demotivate, to heal, to annoy, to clarify and to obfuscate is stronger than ever during this time. During more normal times, if we get an email from a colleague that does any of these things, we have the option to pop into the office of the person who sent it to say “thank you!” or to say that we don't appreciate it without starting an escalating email war; we can also pick up the phone to do so. It's not quite so easy now. We may start to stew over the email, to become more and more agitated and then let loose a

torrent of words that we may later regret, seeing that we have ourselves become the aggressor. It's always a good idea to pause for thought before sending an incendiary message – and by listening to you and your concerns, we can help you to plan the most appropriate action that you can take.

Just one more example from the colleagues we have listened to. In virtual meetings, it is sometimes difficult to get a word in edgeways – or we are totally bored (or irritated!) by the direction that the conversation is taking. We all have to remember that we are under scrutiny all the time by the other participants. Body language can be more acutely observed and have a more damaging effect than when we are in live meetings. Many of us have experienced eye-rolling, heavy sighing, "the look" in live meetings. Now that many

meetings are recorded, we have to be even more careful, not less.

While we are all apart physically from our colleagues in these changed times, we need not feel alone. We do hear some of you saying that you feel lonely and that it is difficult to deal with a work-related conflict in these circumstances. This is just the time to contact us. Just send us a note saying that you'd like to speak with us – we will listen!

Authored by James Lee – Senior Conflict Resolution Expert

© Office of the Ombudsman for UN Funds and Programmes