

OMBUDSLETTER



Have you ever been made to feel that your job is a thankless task? True, you may like what you do but you rarely feel noticed, let alone acknowledged for your efforts. I've been thinking a lot about this during these times of working away from the office, with little or no real face-to-face interaction. As an ombudsman, I've heard a lot about the feeling that colleagues have about not being appreciated, commended, thanked, for what they do. I think that a word of encouragement from supervisors – and from peers – can have an extremely powerful effect on motivation and on how we tackle problems in the workplace and that the lack of recognition has devastating consequences for the work of the individual and the team.

The lack of recognition or a negative, non-constructive comment on our work is a pervasive feature at all stages and in many aspects of our lives, and most of us suffer from its damaging effects. I remember staying with some friends when their young daughter came bouncing in from school, bursting with excitement as she raced up to her father, threw her arms round him and exclaimed, "Daddy, daddy, I got 95 per cent in arithmetic!" Her father pushed her slightly away and said, "What did you get wrong?" The smile vanished from her face and her body sank in on itself. "I don't remember," she said. "I'm going to my room". After so many years, I have never forgotten that scene, and I have seen its like played out in the family, social and work lives of a great many people.

What makes people in authority (and, yes, those not in authority) over us act like this? Sometimes I've heard from a "stern" parent, teacher, boss or friend that "it's for her or his own good"; "if I praise them, they'll relax and not do as well in the future"; "this is a job and I expect my staff to do their job satisfactorily. Why do they need thanks or praise for doing what they're paid to do?" I think that we all perform better and feel better when we get some words of recognition and thanks. I also think that this approach has a positive effect on the person expressing thanks and recognition. During the darkest days of COVID-19 in some countries, grateful people came out on the streets to applaud the health workers, some banged kitchen pots and pans and others sang or played musical instruments. Those moments of recognition and thanks for "people doing their jobs" had an all-round therapeutic effect at many levels: the public at large felt that they had done something positive and the health workers, who showed remarkable modesty, felt reinforced by those simple acts. Such gestures sustain us in trying times while many of our colleagues also find strength through their faith, with prayers offered privately and in many different places of worship during this time when so many are dying.

In the United Nations workplace over the past demanding months, colleagues have approached the Office of the Ombudsman to help them to address the challenges of working in a global organization but now in a vastly changed landscape. Over the years, the four most-reported categories by staff have been fairly constant: evaluative relationships (i.e., between supervisor and supervisee); job and career; compensation and benefits; and peer and colleague relationships. This was also true for 2020, as noted in the annual report of the Ombudsman for United Nations Funds and Programmes (<https://fpombudsman.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/FPO-Annual-Report-2020-23042021.pdf>). These categories were established by the International Ombudsman Association in a collaborative process in which representatives from the Office of the Ombudsman participated. They serve as a good gauge of organizational health, and the Office has responded with one-on-one responses in the traditional ombudsman approach, through online courses and via webinars. Are there any new elements in resolving workplace conflicts that the ombudsman team has noticed during the COVID-19 pandemic? Let's have a closer look.

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The first obvious problem is the adjustment that many colleagues must make to work efficiently away from the office. For most of us, though, those of us with young families especially, it is extremely difficult even to find the space to set up a makeshift office. That in itself is a cause of stress that visitors have brought to our office, seeking options on how best to cope. Having to get the job done and maintain the high standards expected from the international civil service while confined to the home and having to see to children, other family members, including ageing parents for some, takes its toll. Colleagues have expressed their frustration but hardly anyone has told us that they are giving up – in a few cases, older colleagues have thought about early retirement and have consulted us on how best to go about this. In all these scenarios, staff feel alone and unappreciated. What a difference a word of thanks, of encouragement and of recognition would make!

What has also been striking is that those managers who tended to micromanage in pre-pandemic times have found ways to continue to do so during the pandemic. This has been a cause of serious conflict because the managers who micromanage often do not have the domestic responsibilities of the staff whom they supervise. Telephone calls and emails come in at all times of day and night for no specific reason, asking “just to check on what you’re doing and where you are”, “when will you be able to finish that work that I sent you over the weekend [or late last night!]?” We do not hear many reports of how considerate the managers are, how flexible they are, how trusting in their staff they are or how they thank them for what they have done. Of course, the Office of the Ombudsman is an office where staff raise complaints but we do know that there are many excellent managers in the United Nations organizations that we serve who can be role models for those who lack good management skills and may make their supervisees feel that their work is a thankless task. It is only when things go wrong that staff talk to us about it and we know from experience that for every person who comes to see us, there are many others who may be affected in the office concerned. You can read in any of our annual reports more about all the problems that staff report to us in normal times—imagine how these problems are magnified during the pandemic.

We hear from colleagues who are accomplishing a lot in very challenging environments but who feel even more isolated and abandoned while working away from the office during the pandemic. Drawing on real-life scenarios, here’s a typical example of what can happen. A staff member, often a younger woman with new responsibilities, is posted to a new duty station where the head of the office, often an older male, is known to be a difficult person to work with. In her new position, the staff member sees that tighter control is needed in a number of areas to uphold United Nations principles of doing business and that the main cause of trouble lies with the head of office. Having to work from home, she meets via Teams or Zoom with the team and soon notices that the head of office is marginalizing her, questioning her motives and her competence, while he praises others and often gives them the floor. She tries everything that she can and finally comes to the Office of the Ombudsman in desperation. She has worked hard, she explains, and has introduced effective new measures, in short, she has done well – but nobody has told her so! The Ombudsman learns in a confidential conversation with headquarters senior management that they are in fact very pleased with her. With permission, he passes this on to the staff member and notices immediately the positive effect – the happy opposite of the child and her arithmetic that we saw earlier! You see how important it is to let colleagues know that they are appreciated – or take positive, reinforcing steps to address weaknesses.

At the Office of the Ombudsman, we often hear stories like this and they all cause work place conflict. We deal with individuals, as we have seen, and reach out globally to groups. Still there is an important message for managers in normal times that has become crucial in the times facing us: take the time to recognize others’ achievements and thank them for their work. Don’t wait until the annual performance evaluation because by then it’s almost always too late to repair the damage caused by not recognizing – and thanking – colleagues for their contributions.

