

**Assessing and Communicating Ombuds Value with Respect to
RISK MANAGEMENT
in Your Database and Checklists**

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A Resource on communicating ombuds value—to visitors and the organization—with respect to risk

Organizational ombuds (OOs) need to learn how visitors and the organization understand their risks. And how to communicate with constituents in their own language about risk. (This is often a language about potential and real costs and benefits.)

Consider three ideas that an ombuds may wish to communicate:

- 1) Risk has *two faces* for both visitors and the organization: Support in dealing with potential or present **harm**—and support in seeking potential or present **benefits** that might be lost.
- 2) Because ombuds offer a nearly risk-free (“zero barrier”) space for their visitors, visitors face low risks in coming to the ombuds.
- 3) Because visitors bring ombuds a lot of information that otherwise might not surface, the ombuds may, frequently, be able to lower risks for the organization in ways completely consonant with the International Ombuds Association (IOA) Standards of Practice.

There are two faces of risk: risks of bad occurrences *and* risks of missing out on good things. In simplest terms, think about (multiple) potential costs and (multiple) potential benefits—to visitors and to the organization and its mission—from concerns and from good ideas.

Most discussions of risk focus on the myriad costs of bad events. And, indeed, most of the writing about ombuds focuses, for good reasons, on ***helping to prevent or mitigate or remediate harm for visitors and for the organization.***

However, ombuds also help visitors and the organization by helping to surface good ideas. This helps because there are ***very important risks about missed opportunities***: the chance that we will give up meaningful gains because we do not see, do not believe in, or do not move quickly enough on high-value ideas and options.

That risk shows up **economically as high opportunity costs over time—good ideas, better alternatives and better systems** we repeatedly forgo. This risk shows up **competitively, as lost advantages that others capture while we hold back.** It also shows up **psychologically as fear of missing out (FOMO)**, a fear that competitors will seize opportunities instead of us.

Ask your constituents: your risk management people, your leadership and organizational affinity groups—how *they* would define the risks faced by visitors who have a concern or good idea. And ask constituents how they think about risks for your organization and its mission.

If you decide to track your service with respect to risk in your database or [Friday checklist](#), feel free to change the categories below, so the risk questions reflect the terms used in your organization. Some ombuds have a checklist in their database about the types of risk represented by each case, both for visitors and for the organization. **And do consider adding “the risk of missing out on good ideas” to the metrics about how you add value, even if your constituents think primarily about averting harm.**

In simplest terms, think about (multiple) potential costs and (multiple) potential benefits, to visitors and to the organization and its mission, from concerns and from good ideas.

- **Risks may present in a single case** or in part of a case. They may be present for a visitor, another stakeholder, leaders, the organization and/or others. They may attach to a process or an outcome.
- **Be prepared that a single case** may have just a single data point that needs review for emergency action. Your first question, for yourself—in every case—should be “Is this an emergency?”

A list of things to think about—especially in complex and serious cases—in identifying and assessing risks:¹

- 1) Is this an emergency? How much time do you have? (What factors or new events could make this an emergency?)
- 2) Whose interests (including those of leadership and the employer) are at stake? Make a list of the stakeholders. Potential benefits and costs/harm may attach to every person affected by a concern or good idea.
- 3) What are the interests of each stakeholder? Look at the potential costs and benefits for each.
- 4) What are the sources of power of each stakeholder?
- 5) What are the unconstructive and constructive options open to each stakeholder?
- 6) Which rules, regulations, laws—and norms or principles—are relevant?
- 7) What resources are available to help with the various concerns or good ideas?
- 8) With whom might you wish to consult, and if so, would you mention names, or speak anonymously, or about a “hypothetical situation?” And would you need permission to talk?
- 9) What options might be offered to the visitor(s)? Usually there are several options—even in an emergency.

¹ From Rowe, Teaching Notes: <https://mitmgmtfaculty.mit.edu/mrowe/ombuds-case-material-stories-and-teaching-notes/> . There is an example in Mary Rowe, “The Hesitant Bystander with Safety Concerns and a CEO Who Is a Bully,” Teaching case. Cambridge, MA: February 2024.

10) Consider options for the specific case—and systemic options.

11) Later—when possible, track publicly-known good outcomes for possible mention in your reports.

Topics to consider when creating metrics about ombuds work in helping manage risk in a database or in checklists

• Risks faced by Visitor(s) (in any case):	Low	Medium	High
-loss of relationships (family and work)	Low	Medium	High
-retaliation/career damage/fear	Low	Medium	High
-loss of privacy, loss of face	Low	Medium	High
-possible benefits missed or lost	Low	Medium	High

• Risks faced by leadership and/or the organization:			
-Financial	Low	Medium	High
-Operational	Low	Medium	High
-Reputational	Low	Medium	High
-Strategic (e.g. loss of good ideas)	Low	Medium	High

• Risks Faced by others			
Risks to the alleged offender?	Low	Medium	High
Risks to responders (other resources)?	Low	Medium	High
Risk to others inside or outside the organization?	Low	Medium	High

Note: This article draft is part of a Resource Repository designed to support identifying—and helping to quantify—the value of an Organizational Ombuds (OO). This Resource Repository is a work in progress. It is open to improvements, additions, deletions, critique, revision and random commentary. If any page in the repository is helpful, or needs revision, please let us know. Please contact [Mary Rowe](#) if you can help to improve these pages or have another page to offer.