



NATIONAL GEOSPATIAL-INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Know the Earth... Show the Way... Understand the World



OMBUDSMAN

Independent | Neutral | Informal | Confidential

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Rowe, Mary and Williams, Randy. "Organizational Ombudsman."
Cutting Edge Advances in Resolving Workplace Disputes.
International Institute for Conflict Prevention, 2014.

Executive Overview

Mission. The NGA Office of the Ombudsman (NGAO) provides a forum for employees (civilian and military), contractors and external stakeholders to raise concerns about NGA's mission, policies, practices and any systemic issues that arise within the agency. The NGAO adheres to the core principles of neutrality, confidentiality, informality and independence that are the foundational principles for organizational ombudsman practice. These principles allow individuals to safely raise their concerns anonymously outside of formal systems and are designed to minimize the possibility of retaliation or retribution.

NGAO provides a zero-barrier office—a safe, accessible place for anyone to discuss any kind of workplace problem. The NGAO is available to employees at all levels, including senior leadership, to discover options for addressing workplace concerns and practices through non-adversarial problem resolution methods, improved communication and collaborative efforts to increase transparency and equitable outcomes. This open environment allows the office to hear serious concerns from individuals who otherwise might not come forward.

NGAO also frequently hears about issues for which there is not an established policy or procedure, enabling us to provide recommendations to agency leadership on workplace policies. Additionally, NGAO often helps constituents learn about policies and procedures they may be unaware of to help resolve a given issue.

Ethical Standards. The NGAO adheres to professional standards of independence, neutrality, informality and confidentiality. These standards were incorporated in to, "NGA Instruction and Manual 5400.1, NGA Ombudsman, 5 October 2012." All NGAO members have been certified by the International Ombudsman Association as a Certified Organizational Ombudsman Practitioner®.

- **Independent.** NGAO, established under the Office of the Director, NGA (D/NGA), handles issues and conflicts with full autonomy and is authorized to address issues at all levels within the agency in a manner free from interference by any NGA employee or official. Independence is a fundamental prerequisite for effective ombudsman operations.

- **Neutral.** NGAO strives for impartiality, fairness and objectivity in the treatment of people and consideration of issues. The Ombudsman does not advocate for any individual or group and does not “take sides” in any dispute, conflict or disagreement. Neutrality does not preclude the Ombudsman from advocating for changes deemed necessary to improve working environments.
- **Informal.** NGAO provides informal methods for gathering a range of viewpoints and helps conflicting parties analyze complex issues, thereby identifying trends and highlighting opportunities for organizational improvement. Employees and consumers do not “file a complaint” with the NGAO. The NGAO is not part of any formal grievance, complaint or investigative process and does not produce reports of investigation. In addition, communicating a concern with the Ombudsman does not put the agency “on notice” of an alleged violation. The NGAO will share available information related to formal NGA processes, such as administrative grievances, equal employment opportunity, Office of Inspector General and Merit Systems Protection Board. The NGAO will refer individuals to the appropriate office where they can file a formal complaint or grievance.
- **Confidentiality/Anonymity.** The D/NGA supports and protects the broad and mandatory confidentiality of communications between NGAO and agency personnel to the maximum extent permissible by law. There may be rare circumstances where the Ombudsman must breach confidentiality, such as cases involving imminent harm. The NGAO holds all communications with those seeking assistance in strict confidence; takes all reasonable steps to safeguard anonymity and confidentiality; and has a duty to resist testifying as a witness in any formal process, even if requested and given permission by the individual.



Major Activities

- **Conflict Coaching**
- **Ombuds Climate Reviews**
- **Informal Inquiries**
- **Mediation**
- **Facilitation**
- **Conflict Resolution Training**

One of the important Ombudsman roles is to help people make sense of what is happening to them, by them and around them. NGAO is often contacted by employees and managers who do not know where to go in the organization for assistance. The entire gamut of employees, trainees, managers and seniors reach out to NGAO with complex, multi-issue, multi-cohort problems that reach across organizational and policy boundaries. NGAO serves an invisible “triage” role by defusing some issues immediately and helping constituents see all sides of a situation, including their own need for accountability. At the other end of the spectrum, NGAO can help get an immediate response to serious incidents requiring urgent action.

In this unique and multi-faceted role, NGAO serves the NGA workforce and stakeholders by:

- Identifying and providing early warning about new and potentially disruptive problems by tracking patterns of concerns.
- Focusing on minimizing the financial and human strains of workplace conflicts by facilitating equitable outcomes.
- Counsels the workforce on proper conflict management skills both informally through one-on-one interactions and formally through the “Conflict Resolution 101” course (#COM1301) available through the NGA College.
- Supporting continuous improvement of organizational systems.
- Helping to cultivate NGA’s reputation as a great place to work by helping to build trust and fostering an ethical, values-driven work environment.

NGAO is often able to offer generic options for handling matters in ways that do not identify the person who brought the concern. For example, if an employee contacts NGAO regarding a safety or financial concern, NGAO can supply enough information to Security and Installations, Financial Management, the Office of Inspector General and other applicable divisions to perform a seemingly routine, unannounced “spot check” by leadership, inspection or audit. If the information reported is determined to be incorrect, nothing is lost. If the reported information is found to be valid, this approach helps protect the privacy of the person who took responsible action and enables the organization to take appropriate recourse. Similarly, NGAO might ask a senior manager to discuss an issue at a routine staff meeting, such as time and attendance, misuse of equipment or harassment. This method allows NGAO and the manager to address an issue broadly rather than directly involving the concerned parties.

Organization and Resources. NGAO is established under the D/NGA and receives support from OIG for administrative purposes only. It is imperative for the informal Ombudsman to be separate from the formal IG. In practice, this translates to separate interactions, office space and visual materials. There are two permanent, full-time ombudsman billets: one PB5 Supervisory Ombudsman at NCE and one PB4 Associate Ombudsman at NCW. Additionally, the Analysis Directorate authorized one detailee to NGAO through April 2015.

Outputs. Most interactions with the NGAO are “off-the-record” to help address organizational concerns. Any temporary documents produced about specific issues are considered confidential and protected from disclosure pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 574. The NGAO publishes an annual report that provides an overview of the Ombudsman role, the number of issues shared and broad, non-attributational narrative summaries of select cases.

Community Roles and Interaction. NGAO actively engages Department of Defense (DoD), Intelligence Community (IC) and federal officials, to include ombudsman partners, to address issues of common concern that transcend organizational boundaries. In addition, NGAO team members participate in the IC Ombuds Forum and Coalition of Federal Ombudsman (CoFO).

Frequently Asked Questions

When do I need an Ombudsman?

If you are:

- Unsure about where to go to discuss a concern or work problem.
- Unclear about the agency's policies and procedures.

If you need:

- An independent facilitator to assist in working through an issue or problem
- Help with addressing an issue in a non-adversarial manner.

Or, if you just feel you have been treated unfairly, NGAO can help you assess your options.

I recently met with the Ombudsman. What is the status of my complaint/investigation?

You do not "file a complaint" when you visit the Ombudsman. As an informal resource, the Ombudsman does not conduct investigations, nor does communication with the Ombudsman put NGA "on notice" for any issue. If you decide to pursue a formal complaint or grievance process, the Ombudsman can help you locate the appropriate agency resources.

What types of issues can I address with the Ombudsman?

Any concern that involves NGA in any way can be discussed with the Ombudsman. You can seek guidance in dealing with complex agency policies and procedures and personal difficulties, including harassment, abuse of authority or other behavior resulting in unfair treatment. You may also seek assistance relating to your career development, the staff selection system or entitlement and benefits.

How does the Ombudsman maintain confidentiality?

The Office of the Ombudsman is a safe place to discuss your concerns. The office will not take action on your issue or concern without your



permission. Information provided to the Ombudsman is retained in a secure and confidential manner and will only be discussed with third parties with the explicit permission of the employee. The NGA Ombudsman and the associate ombuds are immune from any demand from any level of the NGA organization to disclose information or documents regarding an employee without the employee's prior authorization. Working notes on active issues are kept while an issue is open and are destroyed once the matter is considered closed. The only exception to the Ombudsman's standard of confidentiality is in situations where there appears to be imminent risk of serious harm.

If the Ombudsman is not in the position to make any managerial decisions, how can his or her intervention be effective?

While the Ombudsman does not have any decision-making power and cannot overturn any decisions made by NGA leadership, he or she can often effectively resolve matters through various informal tools, such as shuttle diplomacy, dialogue or coaching. The Ombudsman also makes recommendations to the appropriate offices on fair processes to address an issue. The Ombudsman has a thorough, cross-cutting knowledge of NGA and speaking to him or her can help you untangle a complicated situation and uncover alternatives available to relieve your concerns.



I am beginning to see a conflict at work. When is the best time to contact the Ombudsman?

The chances to resolve your conflict are best in the early stages. The Ombudsman Office encourages you to seek our services as the first, not last, resort. Our office is a safe, first step in dealing with a problem and is a good place to evaluate your options when you are unsure about how to proceed.

I have a serious concern about a practice within the IC. How can the NGA Ombudsman help?

In recent years, there has been an upswing in leaks of classified information. Leakers perceive that they are justified in sharing such information to shed light on events, programs or practices they believe

to be seriously problematic. While some people are sympathetic with leakers' actions, others believe such leaks impede counterterrorism efforts and threaten our overall national security.

From a broad conflict resolution perspective, it is important for IC agencies to consider whether mechanisms are in place for "whistleblowers" to address their concerns without fear of reprisal. In addition to the IC Inspectors General, an organizational ombudsman is well suited to receive and help address such concerns while maintaining the anonymity of the person expressing the concern.

Although an organizational ombudsman has no authority to make or change agency policies, they are typically empowered to address issues at all levels of an agency. The NGA Ombudsman, for example, reports to the D/NGA; is authorized to engage all NGA officials and employees; and has the power to review all information and documents necessary to help facilitate the resolution of an issue or dispute. Further, the NGA Ombudsman is authorized to contact personnel throughout the DoD, IC and other federal agencies, as needed, to address issues of common concern that transcend organizational boundaries and to raise issues with the proper authority.

In practical terms, if an NGA civilian employee, military member assigned to NGA or contractor working at NGA has a significant concern about a policy and practice that impacts the entire IC, the NGA Ombudsman has the discretion to share the broad issue with the D/NGA and the Ombudsman for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), who can then share the concern with the Director, ODNI. This would provide top IC leaders with the opportunity to review the policy and/or practice in question and consider whether changes or other actions are necessary. Although an ombudsman intervention does not guarantee any specific action, it does guarantee that an issue will be considered by principal decision-makers in a confidential manner, without any linkage to the concerned individual.

The above scenario outlines the important role an ombudsman serves, providing a means to quickly and informally address serious, systemic concerns at the highest levels of an agency. Moreover, it underscores the importance of establishing a properly structured ombudsman's office that adheres to established professional standards of ethical practice to allow agencies to glean the full benefits an ombudsman can bring to the organization.

NGA Office of the Ombudsman

Contact Information:

Office of the Ombudsman
7500 GEOINT Drive, Mail Stop N75-NGAO
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