

# There to Help: NASA's Ombudsman Program

BY RUTH McWILLIAMS AND REX ELLIOTT

“Chris” works on a project with a tight deadline as part of a small team at a fairly remote site. The new head of his group has been with NASA for six months, after a long hiring process that resulted in the selection of an external candidate. Chris’s new supervisor is technically knowledgeable but has found fault with almost every aspect of the team’s work. He shows his dissatisfaction by making belittling remarks and swearing at the employees. In one-on-one discussions, he makes personal and derogatory comments about people not in the room.



Chris isn't sleeping well. He knows his work is suffering because the work environment has become so unpleasant and he's worried about meeting all the deadlines. He heard that one coworker received a prescription for anti-anxiety medication. Chris doubts his boss will listen to his concerns; he thinks the project manager is unlikely to fix the situation because of the intensity of the project deadline pressure and the length of time it took to hire the new boss. He doesn't know where to turn for help.

One source for advice is the NASA Ombudsman program.

## The Ombudsman Program

The NASA Ombudsman program operates in accordance with the International Ombudsman Association rules and guidelines. It provides an independent, neutral, confidential, and impartial environment for employees and managers to raise issues and learn what alternatives are available for dealing with them. Every NASA center has at least one ombudsman, and most have two or more.

If you've never heard of the Ombudsman program, you may have questions about it, such as the following:

- What do ombudsmen mean by independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and impartiality?
- How does the NASA Ombudsman program guarantee these protections?
- What's the process to ask for help from your center ombudsman?
- What can the Ombudsman program do for me?
- What are some examples of issues the ombudsmen see and how do they resolve them?

The service provided by the independent Ombudsman office is not a part of any formal process. Discussing an issue with an ombudsman does not result in official notification to the agency of issues, as it would if you went to the inspector general or to the human resources director. The ombudsman can, however, provide the timelines associated with using one of the formal notification processes, in addition to other advice.

Neutrality means that the ombudsman does not represent either the agency or the visitor and ensures the ombudsman listens and advises without presenting a particular viewpoint of either management or labor. The ombudsman can report trends to the highest levels of the agency while maintaining the confidentiality of the visitors. The ombudsmen are not in a position of authority that would prevent them from listening openly and providing a range of alternatives. Ombudsmen are not advocates for any parties in a dispute. They are a resource for all parties.

Confidentiality mandates that all communications are held in strict confidence, with one exception. If the ombudsman perceives an "imminent risk of serious harm," then she may seek

immediate outside help. Otherwise, the ombudsman doesn't reveal information about visitors (as those who bring issues to ombudsmen are called) unless given express permission. This also means that the ombudsman can't be called to testify within the agency, if a formal process occurs. Communications between the ombudsman and visitor are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) process.

Informality ensures that conversations between visitors and ombudsmen are off the record. The ombudsman is the person who can listen and develop alternatives with an impartial view of the situation. She doesn't take sides and is an advocate only for seeking a peaceful resolution of workplace issues.

NASA's ombudsmen are all civil servants who perform the collateral duty of being an agency ombudsman. Their primary jobs and, typically, experience in a variety of jobs during their careers bring them a wealth of organizational understanding that informs their ombudsman work. All NASA ombudsmen are required to complete the International Ombudsman Association training course for new ombudsmen. In addition, NASA provides supplemental annual training. The agency's ombudsmen also have monthly video teleconferences to share ideas and issues, while maintaining the confidentiality of their visitors. The NASA administrator has designated the assistant administrator for the Office of Strategic Infrastructure, Olga Dominguez, as the program coordinator.

The NASA Ombudsman program guarantees independence, neutrality, confidentiality, and informality by setting the conditions and policies to ensure they are supported. Some centers have a separate area for ombudsmen to meet with visitors, ensuring confidentiality. Others meet in different locations around their campuses, ensuring there is no direct linkage between visitors and the ombudsman. At some centers, ombudsmen have a phone number that is separate from the main system and accessible only by the ombudsman.

Any employee, civil servant, or contractor can contact any NASA ombudsman. NASA's ombudsman web site lists the individual points of contact for all NASA ombudsmen. The link to the NASA Ombudsman program is [ombuds.hq.nasa.gov/index.html](http://ombuds.hq.nasa.gov/index.html). This is different from the NASA Procurement Ombudsman Program, which exists primarily for contractors and potential contractors bidding on NASA contract opportunities (discussed at [prod.nais.nasa.gov/pub/pub\\_library/Omb.html](http://prod.nais.nasa.gov/pub/pub_library/Omb.html)).

Phone calls are preferred, but e-mail can also be a way to initiate contact. If e-mailing, visitors should keep the message and subject line as neutral as possible.

Ombudsmen meet with each visitor at least once and often several times. They listen with an open mind to help clarify the issue or issues. They work with visitors to develop options for issue resolution and understand the pros and cons of each

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option. Visitors can be coached on how to communicate their concerns effectively when speaking with leadership or coworkers. The ombudsman can facilitate discussions between the visitor and other participants, if given express permission by the visitor. One outcome could be a referral to a formal process. In those cases, the ombudsman provides information about how to reach the formal process point of contact. Once a year, all agency ombudsmen compile general demographic and trend information, which is reported to the agency leadership in an annual report.

The ombudsmen's activities don't supersede any formal resources or processes. They can't conduct formal investigations or make binding decisions.

### Helping "Chris"

In the hypothetical case of Chris, the employee with the disparaging supervisor, the ombudsman might suggest a variety of ways to address the situation. Chris then decides what steps to take next, if any.

The first option might be to do nothing. Many people choose the path of least resistance. They're afraid to make waves or appear to not be a team player. But this creates stress and does nothing to fix the problem.

Another option could be to document the situation, with the intention of presenting the information through a formal process like notifying the program manager or contacting the Anti-Harassment Program. The ombudsman would likely advise Chris to clearly and carefully distinguish between facts and his perceptions and feelings. He should try to document incidents as soon as possible after they happen to record events while they are fresh in his mind.

Chris could meet with the supervisor, either on his own, with the rest of the team, or with a mediator. This could be an informal meeting or a formal one. The ombudsman can serve as the mediator or as a nonparticipating observer.

Appealing to the next levels of supervision would be another option that Chris and the ombudsman might consider. Finally, an option to file a formal complaint under one of the

employee-protection programs might be a step Chris would take (for instance, the EEO complaint process or the administrative grievance process).

The ombudsman would work with Chris to look at the pros and cons of each course of action, trying to anticipate the secondary and tertiary effects of each choice. After Chris makes his decision, the Ombudsman office remains a place where Chris can return for more ideas or alternatives.

### Broad Benefits

Program and project managers look for every tool and technique that will help ensure the smooth functioning of their teams and successful completion of their missions within budget and on time. Sometimes things happen that derail progress. Parts are delayed, funding is cut, or the team suddenly stops working cooperatively and starts exhibiting destructive behaviors. While the NASA Ombudsman program can't speed up a production line or increase the budget, it can provide a safe, neutral, informal, confidential, and independent environment for the employee or the manager to identify issues affecting the workplace and potential ways to resolve them. The NASA Ombudsman program is here to serve. ●

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In addition to being one of the Headquarters ombudsmen, **REX ELLIOTT** is NASA's contractor industrial relations officer, the NASA policy person for employee exchanges, and he also performs a number of procurement functions for NASA's Logistics Division.

