

**THE NEW OMBUDSMAN PARADIGM:  
AN OLYMPIAN IN AN ORWELLIAN WORLD**

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**A Research Study  
Submitted for Presentation  
At The Academy of Business & Administrative Sciences  
Conference, Cancun, Mexico, June 22-24, 2002**

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# **The New Ombudsman Paradigm: An Olympian in an Orwellian World**

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## ***ABSTRACT***

Whenever members of an organization interact in a continuing exchange, disagreements may arise, questions of equity may emerge, and conflict may become inevitable. Formal measures such as legal or administrative recourse to protect one's rights may prove to be time-consuming as well as very costly. Many organizations, be they for profit or not-for profit, are employing ombudsmen to resolve amicably frictions that may spark from interpersonal relations. Currently, on university campuses, the Ombudsman is a person who investigates and strives to resolve complaints, from faculty, staff, or students. Some of the models of the Ombudsman in a university environment are reviewed, as a campus resource for conflict resolution, as a powerhouse for peace, and as a catalyst for promoting a positive organizational climate and culture. As a result of this analysis, a new paradigm is proposed based on reactive and proactive initiatives of the Ombudsman. Also, a quantitative method is advanced for measuring the Ombudsman's performance periodically. What makes the true Ombudsman majestic, like an Olympian, is his or her relentless pursuit of justice and equity in a case of conflict. A number of recommendations are also made to increase the scope of the Ombudsman's involvement and investigative approaches to reactive and proactive functions in a university bureaucracy, which usually borders on an Orwellian world of sorts.

**Dedicated to  
Professor Richard Spiller  
On the Occasion of His Retirement  
From a Rich Career as an Outstanding Educator,  
A Valued Colleague, a Friend, and an Ever Ready Mentor**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Virtually all work environments are charged with politics: some are with low, most are with moderate level, and a growing number are paralyzed with high voltage intensity. When members of an organization interact, the interplay may produce either positive or negative results. All workplaces share similar experiences of friendship, romance, politics, and interpersonal conflict. The disparity is only a matter of degree. While some conflict is normal or even beneficial for change, too much of it would take the wind out of the sails of a

progress-oriented organization. Greed, envy, intolerance may create an Orwellian organizational culture full of intrigue, deal-making, and politicizing --akin to George Orwell's (1945 and 1949) fear of an intrusively bureaucratized state of the future.

Politics maybe the art of the possible, but if excessive power falls in the wrong hands, it would mean oppression. In reference to office politics, Lash (2002) maintains that "...every workplace has its share of rumormongers, backstabbers, brownnosers, and control freaks, all lying in wait to sabotage your peace of mind, or your career." An advanced case of social Darwinism, like a malefic fungus growing on the roots of a plant, will imperceptibly gnaw at the vitality of an organization.

Since conflict resolution is time-consuming and expensive, many organizations such as colleges and universities are resorting to the use of the Ombudsman (Owens 1990; Griffin 1995; Shelton 2000; Steiber 2000). Against the backdrop of increasing interpersonal conflict in the workplace, the Ombudsman is expected to become a powerhouse for peace and a catalyst for promoting a positive campus climate. Human organizations are characterized by numerous concerns, complaints, and conflicts. The Ombudsman is needed sorely for amicable settlement of differences and issues by being able to relate, as Sebok (1998) suggests, to all the players on campus. Naturally, this would be an extraordinary job for any seasoned professional.

While the appearance of the Ombudsman on university campuses is rather a recent phenomenon (Price Spratlen 1998; Singer 1994; Eurich 1980; Rowland 1970), the historical roots of the office dates back to 1809 in Sweden (Locke 1998). In the beginning, the Ombudsman was a government official, especially in Scandinavian countries, who investigated citizens' complaints against the government or its functionaries.

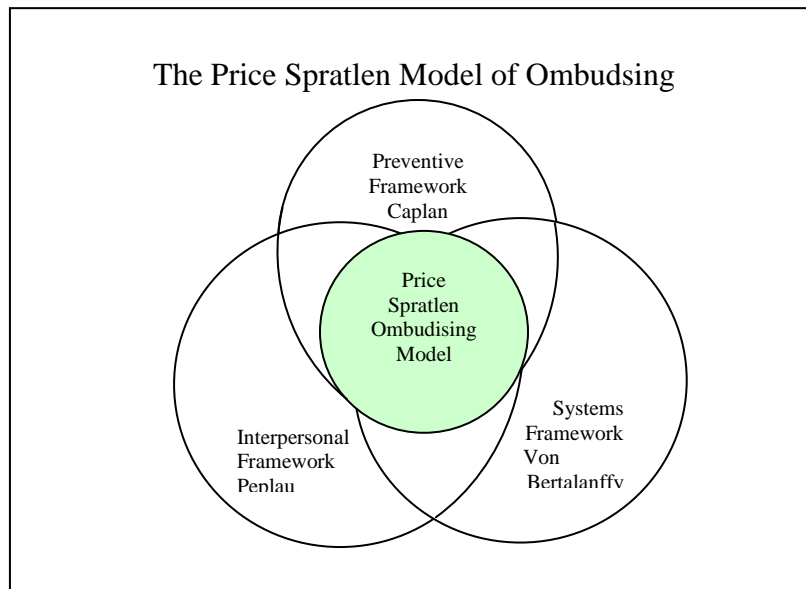
Over the years, the Ombudsman's duties have evolved (Janzen 1971; Kempf and Mille 1993). In Great Britain, the Ombudsman was officially called Parliamentary Commissioner in early 1900s, who was an experienced person having authority to inquire into and pronounce upon grievances of citizens against public authorities. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ombudsman's responsibilities consisted of investigating consumer complaints, reporting findings, and assisting in achieving fair settlements. From the government and corporate environments (Lupton 1984), the Ombudsman's role has extended only recently into the education arena for mainly resolving faculty disputes (Kolb 1987.)

Despite the growing importance of the Ombudsman's functions, a survey of the literature has shown that most models of "ombudsing" are conceptualizations which lack the step-wise applicability of the approach being recommended (Caplan 1996; Price Spratlen and Neff 1996; Price Spratlen 1997, 1998). Anderson's (1973, 1981) and Ayeni's (1993) evaluations of Ombudsman programs in various settings are mainly conceptual models. In some, as Stebier (2000) points out, the concept of the Ombudsman is diluted; in others, they are straight borrowing from related fields such as group dynamics or psychiatry (Caplan 1996).

If one were to apply the law of parsimony, one would see that there is redundancy in the Price Spratlen Model (1998). This model is based on three components of interpersonal, preventive, and systems theory advanced by von Bertalanffy (1968, 1995) as is shown in Exhibit 1. The systems theory is implied in the interpersonal theory. In fact, the systems theory is the underpinning of every model of human organization. Therefore, the inclusion of it as a third

## Exhibit 1

### The Price Spratlen Model of Ombudsing (PSO)



Source: Price Spratlen 1998

separate component does not explicate the idea, but rather clutters up the conceptualization, instead. However, this infraction does not constitute its major limitation.

Although the Price Spratlen theory is thought provoking, unfortunately it does not present an operationalized method to put the ideas into practice systematically. The field and the profession of ombudsing need a simplified model which can be applied easily by the practitioners as well as by the scholars for spearheading further research. In the spirit of Khun's (1962) proposition of scientific revolution, new paradigms are needed to change the course of our conceptual thinking in order to push ever forward the frontiers of knowledge.

After a brief introduction, a new paradigm is proposed to fill the gap, then the operationalization of the concept is presented to make the paradigm applicable. Finally, a formula is configured to aid the Ombudsman evaluate his or her performance periodically, followed by a concluding statement to place the Ombudsman in the landscape of human organizations.

## **THE PROPOSED PARADIGM**

The suggested paradigm consists of two-pronged approach to ombudsing as is shown in Figure 1. Positive interpersonal relations should either be maintained or restored for the viability of the organization. To accomplish that goal, the Ombudsman has to engage in two equally important processes: one is for conflict resolution and the other one is for conflict prevention. While the Ombudsman's role in dispute resolution is well advanced by scholars such as Rowe (1991, 1987) and Furtado (1996) including the Ombudsman's minor role as being "an ounce of prevention" (Rowe 1987), the need for a system whereby to carry out both roles at the same time and with the same sense of urgency has not been emphasized in the current models of ombudsing. Thus, a lopsided view of the Ombudsman's functions has been portrayed in the current models.

Approaching these two processes from "either or" perspective or in tandem, would compromise the Ombudsman's mission of peace sustainment. If the Ombudsman is to be an organizational "change agent" (Wagner 2000) or a "vehicle for change" (Keating (1972) for positive interpersonal relations, these two challenges should move forward abreast; namely, the Ombudsman should carry both dispute resolution and dispute prevention on his or her neck just like a yoke of equal weight of importance.

To fill the need for a practical model of ombudsing, wherein the Ombudsman would be "a pound of prevention" rather than just "an ounce," the self-explanatory model in Figure 1 encapsulates the paradigm in its essence and it also operationalizes the concept for both the Ombudsman and his or her constituents of faculty, staff, and students.

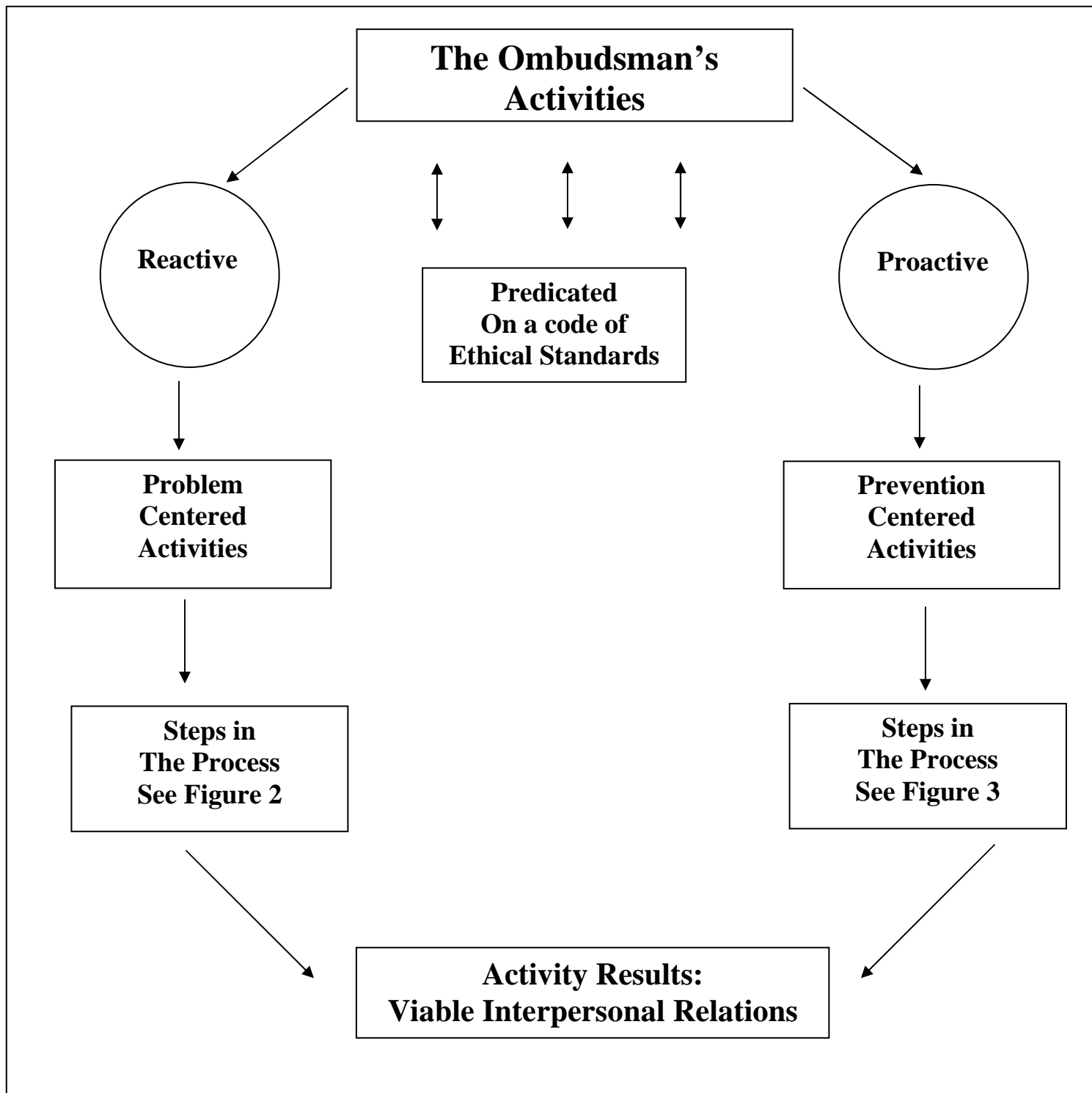
It should be noted that the two processes are simultaneously performed by the Ombudsman. While the reactive process is dependent on the incidence of conflict, the proactive counterpart must be done on a continual basis. The mission is legendary, tantamount to splitting the Red Sea. The path of the Ombudsman is peppered with challenges --from conflict resolution to conflict prevention to creating an organizational culture with a collegial climate.

At the heart of the model is the requisite that both the reactive and proactive processes should be predicated on a code of ethical standards to avoid falling victim to external political pressure. Although man is a political animal and the Orwellian world is beset with, control, corruption, and self-aggrandizement, the Ombudsman should not taint his or her judgment for personal gains or for job protection. While explicit collusion may not take place, but by virtue of the superior position held by others in the same organization, they tend to wield power over the Ombudsman.

Figure 1

**THE NEW PARADIGM OF OMBUDSING:**

**THE TWO-PRONGED APPROACH TO PEACE SUSTAINMENT**



The condition of “clientelism” or “clientelist exchanges” may also exist in the Ombudsman’s work environment (Auyero 2001); i.e., to survive in an Orwellian world, human nature has the tendency to side with the powerful for symbiotic exchanges – e.g., giving votes or allegiance for goods or services in return. For maximum effectiveness, Olswang (1998) suggests that the Ombudsman requires to have the “imprimatur,” the official sanction, of institutional power. Efforts should be waged to build a firewall between the Ombudsman and the administrators who employ the latter.

The need for the Ombudsman’s independence and autonomy cannot be overstated. The necessity of neutrality and confidentiality privilege is well stressed by Galdin and Pino (1997) and Howard and Gulluni (1996), respectively. Singer (1994) describes the Ombudsman’s office as being a “safe haven” for employees to air problems pertaining to waste, fraud, or abuse outside of the usual chain of command. Confidentiality should be respected as far as it is legally allowed.

Without independence, the Ombudsman would face the dilemmas of objectivity, confidentiality, neutrality (Rowe et al. 1993), and thus compromise an honest attempt at human rights protection. Like a true Olympian athlete who does not adulterate his or her capabilities through drugs, the Ombudsman should strive to remain impartial and be a crusader for justice.

The code of ethics for the Ombudsman as a confidence person in all his or her proactive and reactive activities can be summarized in one cliché statement: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” There is, of course, one caveat: employers in the United States can, and frequently do, terminate employment of employees who have “too much” integrity or ethics. What counts in an Orwellian organization is loyalty and not integrity. Without integrity, the Ombudsman would be hard pressed in searching for and upholding the truth. According to Standler (2000), protection against wrongful termination of employment is a developing area of the law in the United States which only rarely protects an employee. Unfortunately, without integrity or ethics, faculty and staff who are constantly exchanging news on personnel matters through the grapevine would shun the Ombudsman.

Some may question the funding necessary to put this model into practice. Funding would be another issue to address. Discussion of it is beyond the scope of this paper. The proposed paradigm is normative in nature. While the feasibility and applicability of this model is kept in the forefront of this proposal, staffing, organizing, and funding challenges are omitted from the discussion. Suffice it to say that without a competent staff, the Ombudsman would be crippled at carrying out his or her important charge.

## **THE REACTIVE PROCESS (Problem -Centered Activities):**

There are seven essential steps in the reactive process which involves problem-centered activities. Most of the steps are sequential in nature such as the problem definition which should come first, while others could be tackled recursively. The reactive steps are briefly stated in Figure 2.

These steps are exemplary and not meant to be exhaustive, but they do comprise the

major concepts involved in the problem-centered activities. It should also be noted that dispute resolution is only a fraction of what the Ombudsman should do. The new paradigm is broad, all encompassing; it transcends conflict resolution. The Ombudsman has to initiate an evolution, if not a revolution, in behalf of the organization. He or she should provide programs to keep the engine running into the right direction. To transform an Orwellian

Figure 2

**STEPS IN THE REACTIVE PROCESS:**

**PROBLEM - CENTERED ACTIVITIES**

- \* Define the problem accurately with the help of the complainant
- \* Contact the person being complained against to inform him or her about the conflict
- \* If there is no early resolution, gather evidence to determine the truth of the matter
- \* Present the evidence gathered for or against the parties at disagreement
- \* Based on the evidence presented, make recommendations for equity and justice
- \* Follow up in writing to emphasize the merits of the case and request for a resolution
- \* Send both parties thank you notes for giving the chance to act as a catalyst for peace

world into an ecosystem conducive to group advancement and self-actualization, requires an ombudsman well versed in organization behavior and management or be a past master of industrial psychology.

Whereas the reactive programs contribute to the organizational climate, proactive programs are needed for the creation of a viable organizational culture. Comparatively, it would be easier to change organizational climate than it would be to change organizational culture. As Schneider (1994) differentiates between the two variables, "Climate perceptions have direct roots in the everyday experiences of employees. Culture, on the other hand, emerges out of employees' attempts to understand why things are the way they are." To change culture, the first step would be to change climate in the political, economic, and human geography of the organization.

## **THE PROACTIVE PROCESS ( Prevention-Centered Activities):**

There are eight steps in an effective proactive process which involves prevention-centered activities as shown in Figure 3. In this process, most steps are not sequential in nature. The whole effort here is to provide the university stakeholders with information to obviate conflict. The proactive steps are listed in brief in Figure 3.

Even though the foregoing steps are exemplary and not exhaustive, they do capture the essential steps pertaining to the prevention-centered activities to create a countervailing force against the increase of conflict incidents occurring in an organization over time. Too much conflict would render the organization dysfunctional in its attempts at survival, growth, and evolution. Dynamism is an essential ingredient for progress. The Ombudsman's proactive programs can help the university officials create what Professor Kilmann (2001) insightfully calls "...a quantum organization –an organization that is designed to nurture the true essence of who we are and what we can meaningfully provide for others." The Orwellian bureaucratized, pyramidal mass of regimented human ant colony is the very antithesis of the

**Figure 3**

### **STEPS IN THE PROACTIVE PROCESS:**

#### **PREVENTION-CENTERED ACTIVITIES**

- \*Survey faculty, staff, students, and administrators for possible areas of concern**
- \*Prepare informational handouts to stave off conflict through education**
- \*Distribute them by mail and via insertion of brief news items in university publications**
- \*Present short papers appraising rules and regulations at seminars and symposia**
- \*Speak at student org. meetings to inform them of their rights and responsibilities**
- \*Establish a hotline for all to call in for consultation**
- \*Offer workshops and training for campus awareness of policies and procedures**
- \*Have annual awards for departments which promote amicable dispute resolution**

proposition for a “nurturing” organizational culture. Therefore, it is a breeding ground for much of wasteful interpersonal problems, which need to be prevented.

## EVALUATION OF THE OMBUDSMAN’S PERFORMANCE

Central to the new paradigm is the notion that the Ombudsman has to undertake two major kinds of activities with equal zeal and tenacity. The ideal situation, albeit very improbable in an Orwellian world, would be zero percent reactive activities and 100 per cent proactive activities. Reality, however, resides somewhere between the poles of the above-mentioned ideal continuum. A simplified mathematical formula based on Figure 1 explains the relationship of the two variables in the two-pronged approach to ombudsing:

$$O_e = \sum_{i=1}^n \left( P - \frac{R}{A} \right)$$

Where

$O_e$  = the Ombudsman’s effectiveness in a given period

$P$  = 100 percent, the ideal situation wherein all activities are proactive

$R$  = the number of reactive (conflict resolution) activities in a given period

$A$  = the total number of proactive and reactive activities in a given time period

$n$  = number of time periods (e.g., Fall 2001, Spring 2002 = 2 time periods)

$i$  = any specific time period (e.g.,  $i = 1$ , Fall 2001;  $i = 2$ , Spring 2002, etc.)

By way of an example, suppose within the Fall 2001 semester the Ombudsman had a total of 230 activities; of these activities, 40 incidents had been reactive (conflict resolution). Let us further assume that the Ombudsman’s evaluation is for Fall 2001.

Plugging the data into the above formula,  $O_e = \sum_{i=1}^n \left[ 100 - \frac{40}{230} \right] =$ , we get 83 out of 100 possible points. Using a standard scale of 90% = A, 80% = B, 70% = C, one would see that the performance is a B (83%) for the Fall 2001 semester.

In the event the evaluation is to be done over two time periods,  $n = 2$  (e.g., Fall 2001 and Spring 2002), first the data for Fall 2001 are plugged into the formula and then the data for Spring 2002 are applied to the formula; finally, the scores are summated and divided by the number of time periods (which is in this case 2, for  $n = 2$ ) to figure out the average score of the two time periods. Let us further assume that for Spring 2002 the Ombudsman had a total of 204 proactive and reactive activities; of these activities, 43 incidents had been reactive, namely conflict resolutions. Here is an example of the computation for the two periods:

$$O_e = \sum_{i=1}^n \left( P - \frac{R}{A} \right), \text{ when } i = 1 \text{ for Fall 2001 semester; and when } i = 2, \text{ for Spring 2002 semester:}$$

$$O_e = \left(100 - \frac{40}{230}\right) + \left(100 - \frac{43}{203}\right) = (100 - 17) + (100 - 21) = (83 + 79) = 162.$$

To find the average performance, then we take  $162 \div 2$  (where  $n = 2$ ; i.e., for the two time periods) = 81 is the Ombudsman's average effectiveness score out of 100 possible points for Fall 2001 and Spring 2002 semesters. In this way, the Ombudsman could evaluate his or her performance over any desired time period and if need be, take corrective action when performance is deemed below par.

Granted, the Ombudsman has no direct influence on keeping reactive activity incidents under his or her control. However, the challenge would be to increase proactive activities in order to “marginalize” or minimize the reactive activity incidents in comparison. Moreover, the incentive for engaging in proactive activities would yield positive outcomes for the Ombudsman as well as for the organization in the long run by curtailing the incidence of interpersonal conflict to a minimum.

The simplicity of this formula should not militate against its importance. Several other ways were devised to arrive at the same results, but they were rather complicated and required additional algebraic calculations for little or no gain in accuracy. Therefore, simplicity was preferred over highbrow mathematical gymnastics.

In sum, to inject professionalism into the practice of ombudsing, and to spawn further research in this much-needed source of assistance in today's organizations permeated with power politics, a practical paradigm was presented in this paper. Hypotheses could be derived from this model for further research. Innovative research is the only road to creating a science out of ombudsing. Two major activities of the Ombudsman were delineated along with the steps involved in operationalizing them in solving problems or in taking measures to possibly prevent them from happening. Based on the proposed model, a simplified formula was explained for periodically evaluating the performance of the Ombudsman in his trouble shouting and trouble-avoidance endeavors. To expedite maturity of the field of ombudising, new ideas and paradigms should be put into pasture land, to the crucible of construct validity testing, to see if they would grow and really yield the benefits their progenitors had promised.

## **CONCLUSION: A PASSIONATE STATEMENT**

What makes an ombudsman majestic like an Olympian is his or her relentless pursuit of justice and equity. Wilson (1997) refers poignantly to the Ombudsmen “As [being] professionals absorbed in quests for justice...” An ombudsman must be much more than a campus resource for conflict resolution. According to Ermlich (1990), “...the ombudsman must know the policies and procedures which lubricate the administrative and academic machinery on the campus.” As Wartens (1995) points out, colleges and universities contain subcultures based on age, ethnicity, discipline, etc. An effective ombudsman should develop a greater understanding of the diversity on campus –what a challenge for a mortal! The Ombudsman faces a problem of biblical proportions. His or her messianic mission is to redeem the members of the organization from

dysfunctional relations to becoming contended individuals ready to accomplish personal goals through achieving organizational objectives of survival and growth. The Ombudsman is the guardian of the fragile and elusive peace on campus.

To help humanize the organization, the Ombudsman must be trusted and respected. This trust and respect should be earned by being impartial. Based on the evidence gathered, the Ombudsman should state his or her opinion unequivocally in a case, either for or against the complainant. As Lash (2002) cogently concludes, “Control and power are at the heart of all office politics –all human relations, one could argue...” Playing politics in an Orwellian organizational culture does not help the healing process. The losers, when in fact they should have obtained restitution, would never forget the travesty of justice or the betrayal of trust. Such a situation would reflect on the Ombudsman’s overall image as being another unscrupulous charlatan puppet of some control freak administrators.

If one were to be indulged with some poetic license, one would say that the Ombudsman should cast a big shadow on campus. Although the intent is not to legendize the Ombudsman, to gain the trust and respect of the people, he or she should share the constructive characteristics of the gods inhabiting Mount Olympus and become an Olympian in an Orwellian world. While the nomenclature can be debated, the ascription of these attributes to the Ombudsman is beyond equivocation.

Only the Ombudsman who has the following majestic attributes will have the opportunity to instill confidence in the parties at a variance for whom he or she mediates a fair settlement:

**O-L-Y-M-P-I-A-N,**

where

**O = Objective**

**L = Lucid**

**Y = Yeomanly**

**M = Mediating**

**P = Persevering**

**I = Impartial**

**A = Accommodating**

**N = Naturalistic**

The Ombudsman’s ultimate goal is to become like Zeus, king of the Olympian gods of the pantheon, “...the protector of laws and the dispenser of justice.”

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