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5 Years Before The Ombudsmast

Accepting A New Challenge

"I know that people have problems out there I never even get to hear about. What I want you to do is to find them and help the people take care of them." That's how it all started. Up to that time I was doing my technical supervisor's job in a several thousand person strong, nationally prominent, R&D organization. The offer was made by the head of the organization, and I probably was offered the challenge because I often unofficially stepped beyond my regular role to help others. After a week's deliberation, I accepted the job under the conditions, that I report only to the head of the organization, have a free hand to solve problems my way, and can promise strict confidentiality to people who come to me for help. In return for acceptance of my conditions, I promised to make available aggregate statistics about problems I work on to any unit of the organization, as long as confidentiality is not compromised. My new assignment started immediately.

Getting Started

My idea on how to do the job was to maintain as low a profile as possible while still becoming known to the people of the organization. I needed a title, an out of the limelight office with some support to insure a live telephone coverage, an indication of support from upper management, and a quick way to get people initially familiar with what I wanted to offer. The office was easy, as out of the way space is always available, sharing secretarial service took care of the telephone, and I helped compose a letter from the head of the organization which explained and supported the confidential, non-threatening help I was prepared to offer. I combined getting a title and publicity with some fun by running a contest wherein prizes were offered to the best three choices of a title for my function, and three best twenty five word essays describing what people expected from me. I received 500 responses which were judged by a voluntary panel representative of the organization. I happily accepted the title of "Alternative Communication Channel", and I still treasure those 500 responses.

The Opposition Shows Up

Since the organization I was selected to serve was strictly a line organization within a much larger unit, an immediate response of staff functions from the larger unit questioned the effectiveness of the Alternative Communication Channel. A particular claim was that it would be redundant and be in competition with the existing staff functions which were there to help people. I countered this opposition by personally meeting with the managers who voiced their opposition and explained that I was an ally,

not an enemy, and intended to complement and supplement their services, and indeed refer people to them when they were the most skilled resources available. Thus started what probably was my first win-win solution to a conflict.

Becoming Effective

Cases started coming in almost immediately, but not enough to occupy me full time. In working through the first few cases, it became apparent how much the full cooperation of all the management levels of my clientele organization was needed to solve most of the problems. Therefore I undertook a campaign to personally visit as many managers as possible, and to arrange a few minutes in their respective units' meetings to introduce myself and explain my function and how I intended to carry it out. During this period I developed my mission which is "To find the people's problems and fix them", and my vision, which is "To work myself out of a Job". The time for this campaign was well invested for it brought the support I needed from all levels of management to solve the increasing number of cases coming to me.

Spreading My Wings

During the first full year approximately 200 individuals came in with problems to solve. The problems ran from very simple needs for information which mainly required steering people to the proper staff experts to a case involving a number of people over the whole year working on an EEO-Affirmative Action related problem. On average, 85% of the cases came to satisfactory win-win solutions, and 3.6 people were involved in each case. The most frequent problems involved people trying to transfer to new jobs within the organization, and less frequent were serious health problems involving alcoholism and emotional difficulties. In all, the case experience pointed to several generic issues requiring broader solutions that I could either support or propose. For example, I was able to support a drive for open job posting which solved the job transfer problem, and to propose and help implement participative management which helped solve a management employee communications problem. I became increasingly invited by local organizations to share my experiences with them or to help implement unit needs. About this time I felt a need to expand my information collection methods to better carry out my expanding function.

Feeling the Vibes

Also about this time my organization was experiencing an increased rate of people exiting to other jobs. I decided to do one-on-one exit interviews to understand that problem and expand my information collection. Coincidentally, I was asked to conduct surveys of Affirmative Action groups within the organization. I initiated participative teams composed of members of the particular groups to do one-on-one personal interviews. From the exit interviews I collected data revealing possible management deficiencies and helped construct a management effectiveness Task Force to pinpoint the deficiencies and to propose actions to upper management. More about this later. From the Affirmative Action survey, I was able to help the organization understand and become sensitive to the issues of minorities, women, and of majority males. Many action items were undertaken, and the AA groups learned more about themselves. These surveys were successful enough to establish an ongoing two year cycle of AA surveys.

Influencing The Organization

The information on Management deficiencies was particularly valuable since like all American companies, my organization was going through many changes while struggling to stay competitive in increasingly different economic times. It was obvious that our management needed changing from a academic science driven style to a product-market driven style. Special education programs were mandated to increase the business-management skills of managers. Also a custom tailored leadership-teamwork workshop was designed with the aid of outside consultants. Every manager attended the workshop within one years time. I was deeply involved in both of these endeavors as an inside consultant in both planning and implementing the programs. To date I consider this the highlight of my career, and feel I had some personal influence on each and every manager.

Handling Tough Times

One of the problems my organization faced in the new competitive times was to become smaller. Over the last few years my organization had developed a reputation of caring for its employees and I was determined to help our managers maintain that reputation. As the force reduction started, I initiated getting managers whose job was eliminated in the reduction to become people brokers to help place our non-management people in search of new positions. When the problem became deep enough to strain the capabilities of our solving our own problems, I enlisted the aid of my corporate staff friends to provide assistance through a employment representative for each of our misplaced employees. With the exception of a few cases which needed specific solutions, the force reduction was completed on time and on target. Still, this task turned out to be the most difficult I have encountered.

Where Do We Go From Here?

People doing a job such as mine are probably more unsure about our careers than anybody. First, we have relatively undefined jobs, depend on one or a few top managers for direct support (what happens if he/she leaves?), might tend to burnout because of the constant flow of problems we face, and have no career steps (e.g., ombudsman I, ombudsman II, etc.) to aspire to while remaining in the profession. However we do have a tremendous wealth of items bringing satisfaction to the job. Clients are taken care of, people find jobs, managers learn how to handle difficult situations, sometime dollars are saved. There are an ever increasing number of professional colleagues to share with (e.g., the Corporate Ombuds Association). Most of all, since we seem to be doing a good job, cooperation comes from all corners to help us do our job successfully. In every instance in this writing where the word I appears, you could assume that there was help and cooperation of all types to enable success to occur. I wouldn't want it any other way. It makes me want to stay in the job.

And by the way, I don't think I'll ever work myself out of a job.

Anonymous

An Additional Two Years Before The Ombudsmast

Make no bones about it. The most debilitating experience that an organization can go through is an extended downsizing. The ramifications remain far beyond the date that the last people leave. The changes effect everyone, including the ombudsperson, who have to adjust to a new boss, new organizational forms, leaders, culture, low morale and cynicism among the work force. Change is the order of the day, and the ombudsperson must rebuild alliances, regain trusts, and work to turn the organization around from being reactive to being proactive. In many instances you have to lash yourself to the ombudsmast to make sure you are not swept overboard yourself. At such times you must renew your motivation as coming from simply helping someone through tough times! The rewards for being this way must come from your own soul, for the organization will be ill prepared to offer any other. Hold on for the seas will become calm once more.

Still Anonymous

THE ROLE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON IN ENHANCING TECHNICAL CAREERS

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ABSTRACT

Ombudspersons are internal trouble shooters to line organizations who help resolve individual and organizational problems. Their methods are based on confidentiality and trust and their resolutions are targeted to be win-win. Forty to sixty percent of their activities are connected in some way to the career maintenance and development of the people in the organizations they serve.

THE BASIC OMBUDS FUNCTION

Ombudspersons are designated third party neutrals within an organization (company) whose primary function is to resolve work connected problems of individuals in the organization. The ombuds function is normally carried out from within a line organization, and is set up to provide an alternative, but complementary and supplementary, problem solving agency to normal staff functions, like human resources and personnel. An ombudsperson strives for non-threatening win-win resolutions to problems while involving the least number of people at the lowest level possible. Confidentiality is paramount to the ombudsperson's methods, and is held sacred to the individual except for cases where danger to life or property is possible.

The secondary (but often most time consuming) function of the ombudsperson is to help their organization by recognizing, understanding, and resolving generic problems; spotting trends that require proactive actions to prevent future problems; assisting in developing organizational practices that optimize effectiveness; and acting as a teacher and confidant to members of the organization. Ombudspersons normally report to the head of their organization, and many of them once were technical managers unofficially acting as part time ombudspersons in the organization they now serve. Once they are officially designated as ombudspersons, they usually increase their skill sets to include negotiation, counseling, conflict resolution, organizational development, and change agent skills. These factors position them uniquely for understanding and helping their organization and its people from the inside out.

An ombudsperson serving an organization of two to three thousand people typically handles two to three hundred cases per year. Managers, especially first line supervisors, tend to seek an ombudsperson's help proportionately more than non-managers. The trust an ombudsperson earns from members of an organization by doing his/her job well, and the inside knowledge gained from working on all kinds of individual and organizational problems makes him/her a valuable resource to people needing career help. Typically 40 to 60 percent of an ombudsperson's individual cases are career related. These may include performance issues; conflicts with subordinates, peers, or supervision; job transfers; downsizing; restructuring; promotion; and career development and growth.

CAREER HELP DURING DOWNSIZING

During downsizing or restructuring many technical people find their jobs "at risk", and individual technical managers are unsure about how to manage the difficult situations. When the downsizing begins, the ombudsperson is often the first person people "at risk" approach for individualized help in understanding and accepting their situation, and getting their careers back under control. Ombudspersons help with resume preparation, job searches both inside and outside the company, making connections to other help agencies, counseling on possible career changes, and understanding policy and procedural matters. If additional consulting help is called in for large downsizings (50 or more people) the ombudsperson helps the consultant get involved as quickly as possible.

As an example, consider a downsizing division of a large company that placed some employees "at risk" and allowed them sixty days to find a job within the company before their present employment status is ended. One "at risk" employee was a female just thirty days from beginning a maternity leave. The major concerns of the female employee were:

1. Not being able to utilize the full sixty days to find a new job within the company,
2. Worry that her present condition will impair her ability to find a new job, and
3. Loss of company benefits associated with maternity.

The downsizing division's main concerns were to:

1. Have all the employees off their rolls in a reasonable time,
2. Treat all "at risk" employees equitably within established company policies and the downsizing procedures, and
3. Safeguard themselves from any possible discriminatory actions however "innocently" they may come about.

The employee and the downsizing division were helped by an ombudsperson who negotiated the interests of the parties towards a win-win solution. In this case the sixty day job search period was divided into two thirty day periods - one before and one after the maternity leave, an understanding that the employee would be off the downsizing division's rolls no later than thirty days after the maternity leave ended was obtained, and strong sponsorship in job searches prior to and after the leave was established. The employee proceeded through the sixty day job search and maternity leave periods knowing she was being treated fairly with respect to other "at risk" employees and the established policies of the company. The continued contact and support of an ombudsperson (while the line supervision became re-engaged with the continued running of the division) was essential to the well being of the employee, the morale of the remaining employees (survivors) and the ability of the supervisor to focus on other business issues.

Survivors also need attention since they tend to be unsure of the future, question the integrity of the organization, are worried about their colleagues who are "at risk", and are often saddled with the work of those who are leaving. Ombudspersons who have gained the trust and respect of the organization's members can provide a valuable communication link between management and survivors to clarify what's going on and to help them regain their morale and motivation. Many times this involves encouraging the organization's managers to become more open to listening to the anxieties of the survivors. Managers also need to be encouraged to take the leadership role of explaining to the survivors the reasoning behind the downsizing actions and to give them honest assessments about the health of the organization and the strategies for its future success. This will allow survivors to make important decisions about their careers in the downsizing organization based on a better understanding of what the future may hold.

During downsizing, managers are usually under the stress of doing a difficult, unfamiliar management task of downsizing while trying to maintain work standards and output. They seek an ombudspersons help in uncovering sensitive and effective ways to accomplish the former while looking for better people involvement ways to accomplish the latter. Often they also need personal counseling to help them understand their own insecurity and new roles in a changing organization.

CAREER HELP FOR ORGANIZATIONS

A strong component of an organization's success in today's world of competitiveness and changes is their ability to utilize their human resources to maximum capacity. Consider an organization of engineers that was losing much of its best talent to other parts of the company or to outside companies. The talent was being continually replaced, but in a less selective manner because of the pressing need for replacements and an ever increasing thruput rate. The gap between the tasks needed to accomplish and the skills and educational levels appropriate for the tasks was continually increasing. An ombudsperson working within such an organization usually has a feel for the problem as it is developing because some of the people leaving will seek individual and confidential counseling pertaining to their problems with the particular organization. The ombudsperson warns the organization about the problem once it becomes generic. In this case the problem finally became acute enough so that the organization's managers sought help from the ombudsperson. The ombudsperson became an internal consultant to the organization to define the problem, diagnose its causes, and help plan, implement and refine a solution. The ombudsperson conducted confidential interviews with people who left the organization but remained within the larger company. Interviews of this sort are usually successful in uncovering real causes when conducted by an ombudsperson because of the record of confidentiality and trust in how an ombudsperson uses such information. The ombudsperson allows the person being interviewed to control how much of the confidential information is made available to managers of the organization. Since not all the information will be included, the ombudsperson usually knows more than what is shared with the managers, but makes sure that everyone concerned knows that is the case. The credibility the ombudsperson has with the managers then allows suggestions based upon confidential information to be made without divulging the information or its source.

In the case being discussed, it was discovered that the people were leaving the organization because:

1. They were not utilized to their skill level, and
2. They had no say in how the jobs were being run.

These are both important career issues for engineers. The ombudsperson helped the entire organization to understand and get involved in participative management which allowed everyone to have a say in how they ran their jobs. The managers and people of the organization then redefined the job assignments so that people got challenging work according to their skill level. The new people being brought into the organization were also chosen at the proper skill level. The problem of talent leaving the organization immediately ended. The ombudsperson stayed involved with the organization's participative management to help it drive the organization to hold career fairs, make career discussions with management a continuous process, upgrade their performance review process, and generally provide many productivity items such as answering systems and increased authority for its non-managers. The process of transforming this organization involved not only instilling a sense of empowerment and involvement in its non-managers, but also getting the managers to rethink their roles and to understand that acting as a coach, teacher, consultant and counselor to their subordinates is more appropriate to today's world than the old boss-employee relationship of the past.

CONCLUSION

Technical careers in today's world are much more difficult to manage than in the past. No longer can one simply do the job one is asked to do, mainly because no one can assure when or to what the job may change. It pays to be prepared for any eventuality, i.e., to be maximally employable. To do this, along with increasing and broadening technical and other skills, one must also become much more aware of what's going on in an organization and how to influence it. An ombudsperson is a valuable resource towards helping people and organizations gain these valuable insights.



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