

Notes for Remarks

by Fiona Crean
Ombudsman of the City of Toronto

***Ombudsmanship:
A New Term in Toronto's City Government***

Thank you for your introduction and for the invitation to meet with all of you today. This is a valuable and much - welcomed opportunity. My hope is that this will be the beginning of a productive relationship – I look forward to sharing with you and learning from you. For our relationship to work productively, that balance is important. I welcome the opportunity to make sure that the concept of Ombudsman is firmly entrenched in your approach to equitable public service for all residents.

First I want to acknowledge something. I don't know your job but I think that I understand the context in which you work. In human organizations as in physics, stress shows its greatest effects at the points where two opposing forces meet. We should not be surprised, then, that the public service finds itself experiencing great stress when we look at the current inventory of challenges:

- eleven years on from amalgamation – there is still much to integrate and harmonize – many silos to break down
- we continue to navigate a difficult global economic crisis
- the Toronto Public Service's financial challenges are acute
- we are entering a year of political turmoil where pressures on civil servants are likely more acute; and through all this, profound and often unanticipated change prevails.

Against this backdrop, we are told, on the one hand, there is too much government. On the other hand, there is a vocal public expressing its dissatisfaction with the limits of Toronto's Public Service. Individuals complaining about unfair treatment are under greater stress. Jobs are being lost, a delay in a benefit payment could spell ruin, people are being more careful with every dollar they have.

At the same time, my Office is discussing complaints with some public servants who are frustrated, and I am sure at times feel unappreciated. I believe the public has a right to quality service in a timely and accessible way. The public service for its part carries that obligation and it is you as the leaders and senior executives of this government who are accountable to deliver.

The question for you is whether you have the kind of resources to do the job well or is it a matter of reshaping the resources you currently have? I don't necessarily mean more resources. I do mean well trained, knowledge professionals with a commitment to the principles on which the Toronto Public Service is based.

One might assume that an ombudsman investigating complaints would be at odds with the public service. But I can tell you, though its early days yet, we find public servants who are committed to doing a good job, doing a great job! We have had directors walk over to our office following a telephone request; clerks staying after hours to gather documentation.

By the same token, I'm sorry to say, we have also had employees leave inappropriate voice mails, or – more commonly - not return calls. So like any organization, the Toronto Public Service has shown the best of itself to us –within a very short time – and perhaps a level of customer service that you as senior managers would not be terribly proud of.

My own experience to date suggests that the more staff understand what we do and who we are, the better the service. Which is why I'm here today. I can't and shouldn't be the one telling your direct reports, and their direct reports, the mission, purpose and relevance of my office. I can help you with that job. We have run information sessions and we are running more. This week we are distributing postcards for staff at all levels of the Toronto Public Service (they cost 8 cents a piece if you're interested) to support you in your communications with staff. I firmly believe that the more that staff know about what we do, the better the partnership and the better the service in the long run. We are here to support and help you in this regard.

Now, I want to talk a bit about our approach to the work we do. The Ombudsman concept involves the public, on the one hand, who calls upon us for assistance, and government on the other which rightly submits to public scrutiny. So we are squarely in the middle.

The process used by the Ombudsman means both parties must deal with the same set of facts. If, early-on, the public service agrees it may have acted improperly, a lengthy investigation may not be necessary – the parties can then agree on a resolution which is acceptable to them. We will help the parties to see that compromise is a sign of strength, not of weakness. I have learned that time spent at the outset in ensuring an issue is clearly identified and stated, reaps great benefits in each succeeding step.

Perhaps you can recall situations where the positions the parties set out initially do not touch the real issue which lies at the heart of a complaint or which is the source of their resistance to resolving it. We will be alert to detecting invisible deterrents to resolution -- cultural attitudes, for example. This means the Ombudsman must be a willing listener, able to hear both what is said and what is not said.

We will take responsibility to determine which issues are quick, simple and capable of prompt resolution, and which are more appropriately dealt with by thorough investigation and formal processes. The informal approach is likely to be productive only if we can answer positively to these questions: Is there flexibility? Is there a feeling of urgency? Is there willingness to compromise?

The Ombudsman can be really useful if you make it that way. Whether it is useful or not depends on each of you. I am seeking your cooperation. Without that, we will be in battle. Why go there? Let's work together.

If there is a call to action in my remarks, it is this. You can start by telling your people:

When the Ombudsman's office calls - cooperate. Be straight forward, don't duck, don't try to defend. Just set out the facts, the policies, be helpful.

We are not in the business of "gotcha". We are in the business of helping you deliver the fairest possible service to all the residents in this city. Create a culture in your organization that values the work of the ombudsman. Designate an ombudsman go-to person in your organization and let us know who it is. A point of contact. Someone we can call who has the authority to get things straightened out, to educate staff.

Last but not least, make sure your internal complaint system is robust, accessible and clear to the public. This last point I don't want to dwell on, but I can tell you right now that this is a big deal. The litmus test for individuals about the value of a service – private or public sector – is how well things work when a problem arises.

That's why retail companies spend so much time telling you how great their "returns" policy is even before you buy the product. Because things do go wrong. Plain and simple. People understand that...what they don't understand is why it seems difficult to fix them. This is a big issue for my office, and one I plan to cover more in depth starting next year.