

**ON THE JOURNEY TOWARD WHOLENESS**  
**A vision for the future of the Ombuds profession**

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**Abstract:** Organizations are microcosms of the ever-increasing complexity in the world. As Ombuds, we navigate this difficult terrain in the midst of conflict and uncertainty while shepherding others in their own journey. Depending on context, we might serve as agents of social control, the status quo, social change, or something else entirely. Stage development theory helps us to better understand how it is we have such different roles, and also why our roles will continue to diversify in the future, even as we strive to integrate our profession toward wholeness.

*“We are not permitted to choose the frame of our destiny,  
 but what we put into it is ours.”<sup>1</sup>*

Dag Hammarskjöld

It is no secret that dramatic changes are affecting the landscapes in which organizations operate. The major problems of our times – energy, poverty, security, the environment - have only underscored the challenges of ever-increasing complexity.<sup>2</sup> Organizations of the future, and to a large extent those of today, are microcosms of this complexity given how they contain many distinct functions, cultures, mindsets, limitations, and possibilities.<sup>3</sup> As Ombuds, we must navigate a difficult terrain in the midst of conflict and uncertainty while shepherding others in their own journey – truly, a formidable task that demands our courage and humility.

I believe our future roles will only diversify because we mirror the organizations we serve. Similarly, the interventions we make, and the outcomes we aspire to, will also vary. But this is not incoherent. Rather, it speaks to the very essence of complexity and how we, as humans, construct meaning from our experience and, in turn, take action. Depending on the context, future Ombuds might be agents of social control, the status quo, social change, or something entirely new.

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<sup>1</sup> “Dag Hammarskjöld,” *Wikiquote*, Accessed February 28, 2015, [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Dag\\_Hammarskjöld](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Dag_Hammarskjöld).

<sup>2</sup> Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 362. Kindle ed.

<sup>3</sup> Otto Scharmer, “The future of change management: 13 propositions” (draft 1.0, paper submitted to *Zeitschrift für Organisationsentwicklung*, 2011), 5.

Social science research has shown that adults grow in identifiable and measurable stages, <sup>4</sup> common to all cultures. <sup>5</sup> Distinguished from personality types or traits, <sup>6</sup> these stages represent differences in the level of meaning making capacity, <sup>7</sup> each having its own unique values, needs, motivations, morals, worldviews, ego structures, cultures, societies, and other essential characteristics. <sup>8</sup> This quality of human development is described as “vertical” because our interpretations of experience and our views of reality shift to a radically new paradigm. <sup>9</sup> We come to see the world with fresh eyes. <sup>10</sup> In contrast, most schooling, coaching, and life-long learning is described as “horizontal” since we acquire new skills and behaviors within constructs we already know. <sup>11</sup> We might think of these stages <sup>12</sup> as “an ever widening spiral.” <sup>13</sup> When we reach a new stage, <sup>14</sup> we become more capable of effectively addressing complexity because it represents an expansion in what we can pay attention to, influence, integrate, and change. <sup>15</sup> As we evolve, we also develop “a new way to collaborate, a new organizational model.” <sup>16</sup> Organizational growth parallels personal growth <sup>17</sup> and, in fact, tracks the same stages. <sup>18</sup> It is important to emphasize, however, that there is no “better” or “worse” stage, merely different ways of seeing, making sense of, and engaging the world. <sup>19</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Susanne R. Cook-Greuter, “Making the case for a developmental perspective,” *Industrial and Commercial Training* 36 no. 7 (2004): 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Torbert and Associates, *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transformative Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004), 66.

<sup>6</sup> Cook-Greuter, 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Frederic Laloux, *Reinventing Organizations* (Brussels: Nelson Parker, 2014), Loc. 94 of 7382. Kindle ed.

<sup>9</sup> Cook-Greuter, “Making a case for a developmental perspective,” 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Our different intelligences (e.g. cognitive, emotional, relational) actually evolve at their own pace. Laloux, loc. 245 of 7382.

<sup>13</sup> Cook-Greuter, 4. Also, our developmental “center of gravity” varies under conditions of stress or security. *Ibid.* The path we traverse consists of steps forward and backwards along with pauses, if there’s any movement at all.

<sup>14</sup> We can arrive at later stages only by weaving our way through earlier stages. While earlier perspectives remain accessible at later stages, early stages will not understand what lies beyond its current stage. Further, learning about development theory does not lead to vertical growth. Only through specific long-term practices such as self-reflection, action inquiry, dialogue, and living in the presence of others further along in their development can this occur. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Laloux, loc. 384 of 7382.

<sup>17</sup> Torbert, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Laloux, loc. 245 of 7382.

<sup>19</sup> Tina Monberg, “Organizational culture and conflict handling,” (presentation, European Ombuds and Mediators Meeting, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, Switzerland, October 16-17, 2014).

Through the developmental lens we can better understand how people and organizations make sense of conflict,<sup>20</sup> how they might act in response, and how we can align our interactions to the needs, interests, and capacities of those we serve.<sup>21</sup> In his recent book, *Reinventing Organizations*, Belgian organizational consultant Frederic Laloux offers insights from his empirical research into the distinct structures, practices, processes, and structures of organizations at different stages. His findings help to explain our various roles as Ombuds, and also illustrate why they will continue to diversify in the future.

Today, Ombuds tend to serve one of three types of organization.<sup>22</sup> The first, “Conformist-Amber,” seeks order, stability, and predictability.<sup>23</sup> Highly stratified with rigid silos, such organizations<sup>24</sup> value normative behavior and operate by rules, regulations and processes. Employees are rewarded if they follow authority and remain faithful to established ways of thinking and doing.<sup>25</sup> Change is thought to be disruptive and not welcome. Conflict is seen as “episodic”<sup>26</sup> with parties “at fault” or otherwise to blame. Dispute resolution processes are viewed as “remedial”<sup>27</sup> and thus avoided or neglected. Our mandates are often narrowly scoped to assure decision-making authority remains within the nested hierarchy of the organization.<sup>28</sup> Here, our role is agent of social control.

The second type, “Achievement-Orange,” seeks efficiency, success, and prosperity.<sup>29</sup> Complex in structure, and often matrixed meritocracies,<sup>30</sup> such organizations<sup>31</sup> value functionality, accountability, and effectiveness.<sup>32</sup> Employees are rewarded for being “project driven”<sup>33</sup> and thinking “outside of the box” to achieve desired outcomes. Change is welcome as long as it benefits goals and milestones.<sup>34</sup> Conflict is seen as episodic and “epicentric”<sup>35</sup> but only

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<sup>20</sup> Laloux, loc. 384 of 7382.

<sup>21</sup> Cook-Greuter, 6-7. Ombuds at earlier stages will likely encounter meaningful challenges during interventions with people and organizations at later stages, just as Ombuds at later stages may not be able to reach understanding with people and organizations at earlier stages. This can prove strenuous for all stakeholders if conflict escalates as a result.

<sup>22</sup> These types are presented in progression from earlier/less capable of managing complexity to later/more capable of managing complexity.

<sup>23</sup> Laloux, loc. 605 of 7382.

<sup>24</sup> Examples include multilateral organizations, government agencies, universities, schools, and militaries. Laloux, loc. 605 of 7382.

<sup>25</sup> Monberg, “Organizational culture and conflict handling.”

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the term “episodic,” see John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2014), loc. 388 of 885. Kindle ed.

<sup>27</sup> The perspective is that only people who cannot handle conflict seek or need help. This can lead to feelings of guilt and shame that can saturate organizational culture.

<sup>28</sup> Examples include (i) constructing the mandate itself without conforming to best practices; (ii) permitting stakeholders to direct the Ombuds; and (iii) vesting the authority for hiring and firing of Ombuds within functional departments, not at the highest level.

<sup>29</sup> Laloux, loc. 751 of 7382.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Examples include multinational corporations. Laloux, loc. 763 of 7382.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

to the extent that structures or processes can be improved to achieve better results. Our mandates often focus upon addressing obstacles in a timely manner to restore the effectiveness of working teams in pursuit of the organization's objectives. Here, our role is agent of the status quo.

The third type, "Pluralistic-Green,"<sup>36</sup> seeks fairness, harmony, and community. Simplified in structure, and often mission-directed, such organizations<sup>37</sup> value equality, diversity, and consensus. Employees are rewarded for being leaders in service of those they lead, in recognition of the belief that there is more to life than one's career and success.<sup>38</sup> Change is values-driven and focused on breaking down old structures that no longer serve. Conflict is primarily seen as epicentric, a function of the complex web of relationships that form a community. Our mandates typically seek interventions that heal, restore, and transform. Here, our role is agent of social change.

A fourth type is also emerging, which will offer new opportunities for our profession in the future. "Evolutionary-Teal" seeks authenticity, humanity, and wisdom. Structured as living systems, both self-organizing and self-managing,<sup>39</sup> such organizations<sup>40</sup> value a clear and noble purpose, guiding principles, and wholeness with life and nature.<sup>41</sup> Employees are invited to listen and attune to what the organization wants to become, that greater need it alone can serve. Change is understood as the heart and soul of all living systems, yet now it begins as an inner process. Conflict is viewed more as contrast with seemingly different perspectives giving way to a generative impulse that heightens awareness and spawns creativity. Here, our role, like the organization, is still emerging.

In her recent book, *Serve to Profit*, Danish mediator and organizational conflict specialist, Tina Monberg, writes about organizations in Scandinavia already prototyping new structures reflecting Evolutionary-Teal principles. Her pioneering approach, Butterfly Leadership, describes internal dialogue systems in which facilitators assess whether the means of reaching organizational objectives are working effectively, and observe what is emerging along the way.<sup>42</sup> Drawing inspiration from quantum physics, she distinguishes three distinct functions within such organizations: (1) *flow*, the servant leadership responsible for establishing context; (2) *form*, the personal leadership responsible for contributing content; and (3) *flex*, the facilitator responsible for ensuring coherence between context and content.<sup>43</sup> Flex is the natural role for Ombuds in such organizations. It might even represent an opportunity to release our core purpose from the shadow of conflict and reflect more light as stewards of sustainability, creativity and innovation.

As Ombuds, we will evolve in the midst of complexity through greater differentiation of our roles and also greater integration of our profession as a whole. This future simply mirrors what we now understand through science, that everything exists within dynamic self-organizing

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the term "epicentric," see John Paul Lederach, loc. 388 of 885.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., loc. 853 of 7382.

<sup>37</sup> Examples include social benefit organizations such as non-profits. Ibid., loc. 875 of 7382.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., loc. 875 of 7382.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., loc. 1300 of 7382.

<sup>40</sup> Examples of such organizations already exist in a variety of industries including energy, consulting, health care, education, retail, media, and manufacturing. Ibid., loc. 1319 of 7382.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., loc. 1229 of 7382.

<sup>42</sup> Tina Monberg, *Serve to Profit* (Copenhagen: Tina Monberg, 2014), 132.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 162-173.

networks, at once interconnected and interrelated.<sup>44</sup> The mechanistic view of “parts” that previously dominated our thinking has given way to a systemic view of “the whole” that is awakening our knowing, our being, and our becoming.

Perhaps what unites us all is our shared quest for wholeness at each and every level - individual, team, organization, society - and even within ourselves.

“For all that has been, thank you.  
For all that is to come, Yes!”<sup>45</sup>  
Dag Hammerskjöld

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<sup>44</sup> Capra and Luisi, 114.

<sup>45</sup> Dag Hammerskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 89.

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