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MESSAGE TO THE PRESIDENT

Dear President Asakawa,

Eight years since the Office of the Ombudsperson was established, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) community continues to grow in awareness and appreciation of the ombuds role within the organization. My initial hesitation and worries when I first joined the organization have given way to a sense of comfort and confidence in my second year. I now feel connected with the ADB community, and the support shown by colleagues from various levels of the organization strengthens my belief that our office is on the right track in helping to create a more meaningful work experience for the entire community. I am pleased to conclude my second year by presenting this latest report on our activities.

We managed 497 cases in 2019, marking a 35% increase from the previous year. The issues raised by people who sought our office’s assistance and the trends and patterns of concerns we observed closely mirrored those from 2018. As in the past, more women than men approached us for help in resolving work-related issues. A striking number of new staff members continue struggling to positively integrate into ADB’s organizational culture, reflected in the rise in first-year probationary concerns.

Our analyses are based on conversations we held with those who came to our office for assistance. The issues we raise, therefore, are extrapolated from a small segment of the ADB population. However, I am confident that the trends and patterns we discuss in this report are representative of issues faced by the organization on a larger scale.
The increase in visits to our office is one factor, but certainly not the main nor ultimate measure of success over the last year. We are encouraged more by the confidence and support shown by our colleagues, ranging from people seeking confidential and impartial assistance in managing conflicts, to leadership looking for solutions to progressively complex management concerns and challenges. The reason for our higher caseload may be twofold. On one hand, it signals that more and more people are finding the office approachable, and they regard it as a safe space where people can openly communicate their concerns and “think out loud,” with utmost confidentiality, as they informally explore options to resolve their problems. On the other hand, it indicates that, as an organization, ADB still struggles with problems so ingrained in the organizational culture that they have become part of the norm.

Ours is a young department, still very much in the formative stage, yet already the office has become an integral part of the organizational culture. It has earned a reputation for fairness, integrity, and responsiveness, and for treating everyone with the same level of dignity and respect. Our ability to quickly respond to changing issues and concerns enables the office to evolve in ways that are in tune with the community’s needs and objectives. In my first year, for instance, we expanded our service to the wider ADB community by including consultants, contractors, retirees, and dependents because the broad perspective so necessary in our work requires engaging with everyone at all levels of the organization, in keeping with the “One ADB” approach. We do not turn anyone away.

We continue to be committed to collaborating with high-level administrators and others to resolve systemic issues. We will carry on working with departments to improve how teams operate while using opportunities to bring positive change to ADB’s organizational culture, where appropriate. To this end, we will work with the Budget, People, and Management Systems Department; the Office of the General Counsel; Staff Council; senior Management; and other key stakeholders in the ADB community to launch a comprehensive external review of the Office of the Ombudsperson in 2020.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve the ADB community, and for the trust and support you have placed in the office and myself. It is a privilege to serve the people of this organization and to support its valuable mission. We remain committed to the vision of a healthy, meaningful work environment that reinforces the One ADB approach, where we collegially and collaboratively share our knowledge and expertise while striving to achieve the goals set out under ADB’s Strategy 2030.

Wayne Blair
Ombudsperson
NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE OFFICE

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) established the Office of the Ombudsperson (OOMP) on 27 April 2011 through Administrative Order 2.14. In doing so, ADB joined an increasing number of organizations that find considerable benefit in providing staff with informal resources to resolve work-related concerns.

The Office of the Ombudsperson provides a neutral, independent, and safe setting, where members of the ADB community can hold discussions in the strictest confidence. As an impartial and autonomous resource, we can supplement the insider’s view with a broader outsider’s perspective as we analyze concerns and formulate recommendations for institutional changes, when appropriate. Our office also shares with the ADB community our observations on trends and patterns of concern, and conflict management practices within the organization. Moreover, the office points out problem areas that may have become normalized and embedded in the organizational culture. This process may cause discomfort, but it is necessary to facilitate honest and meaningful conversations.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

- Confidentiality
- Neutrality
- Informality
- Independence
Members of the ADB community can access our services and discuss a broad range of work-related issues. Discussions are confidential, informal, and voluntary. People who seek the office’s assistance are not precluded from availing themselves of ADB’s formal conflict resolution channels. Off-the-record meetings are held at a time and venue convenient and safe for those concerned. Appointments may be scheduled over the phone. Detailed e-mail correspondence is discouraged, especially if containing sensitive information, as the office cannot guarantee the confidentiality of information relayed electronically.

We adhere to the Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics of the International Ombudsman Association.¹

All members of the OOMP team sign individual confidentiality agreements, committing the office to maintaining the highest level of confidentiality.

OOMP Can...

- Hold confidential and impartial consultations
- Provide informal mediation and shuttle diplomacy
- Offer information and options for consideration
- Facilitate difficult conversations
- Teach conflict management, problem solving, team building, and risk awareness
- Compile and analyze anonymous aggregate data
- Share honest information and recommendations to the ADB community on trends and patterns of concern

OOMP Cannot...

- Create policies
- Conduct formal investigations and adjudicate responsibility
- Give legal advice
- Provide psychological counseling
- Participate in formal processes
- Overrule decisions of those that have the authority to make them
- Serve as an advocate

The Office of the Ombudsperson compiles anonymous aggregate data and other findings to identify and analyze trends and problem areas that may require attention. Without disclosing our sources, we share this information with senior-level administrators and other decision-makers to resolve systemic issues and recommend institutional changes.

In 2019, the office reviewed its database and case management methodology and made changes to how it gathers, interprets, and evaluates data and other findings to reflect the scope of the office’s activities more accurately. Beginning with this report, the analysis of trends and emerging patterns of concerns presents the number of cases instead of the number of visits the office received. This will help prevent instances of duplication and underreporting.
We managed 497 cases, covering meetings with approximately 830 people and discussions of over 1,650 concerns. This marked a 35% increase from the number of cases in 2018.

It is important to note that a case may involve multiple people and/or several concerns. Similar to previous years, the majority of our cases were initiated by personnel based at the ADB headquarters (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Origin of Cases, 2019

ADB = Asian Development Bank

Notes:
1. “External party” may include people who are outside the ADB community and sought help from the Office of the Ombudsperson.
2. The “unknown” category may involve people who reached out to the Office of the Ombudsperson anonymously.

Source: ADB (Office of the Ombudsperson).
The gender and employment breakdown of cases in the ADB headquarters (Figure 2) and in the field offices (Figure 3) indicates that female international staff in the headquarters were the most highly represented—consistent with past trends of an increasing number of women availing themselves of our services.

This suggests that women, who initiated 64% of our total cases, seem to be more comfortable approaching us for help.²

ADB = Asian Development Bank.

Note: The “unknown” category may involve people who reached out to the Office of the Ombudsperson anonymously.

Source: ADB (Office of the Ombudsperson).

² Women comprise approximately 60% of ADB staff. Women who sought help from the Office of the Ombudsperson include ADB staff, consultants, contractors, retirees, and others.
Furthermore, the data suggest women continue to experience more challenges in the workplace, ranging from interpersonal conflicts to the obstacles of facing almost daily microaggressions that stand in the way of significant inclusion. However, in the field offices, slightly more cases were initiated by male staff.

Figure 3: Gender and Employment of Visitors from ADB Field Offices, 2019

Furthermore, the data suggest women continue to experience more challenges in the workplace, ranging from interpersonal conflicts to the obstacles of facing almost daily microaggressions that stand in the way of significant inclusion. However, in the field offices, slightly more cases were initiated by male staff.

ADB = Asian Development Bank.
Note: The “unknown” category may involve people who reached out to the Office of the Ombudsperson anonymously.
Source: ADB (Office of the Ombudsperson).
Staff who have been with ADB for 5 years or less represent the highest percentage of cases (Figure 4). Conflicts involving staff in their first-year probationary period rose sharply, from fewer than 18 cases in 2018 to 42 cases in 2019, an increase of over a 100%.

Staff who have been with ADB for less than 3 years initiated 75 cases, indicating approximately a 50% increase from the number of cases in 2018. These figures reveal the pattern of new staff increasingly seeking our help as they struggle to acclimatize to ADB’s complex organizational culture.

ADB = Asian Development Bank.
Notes:
1. The “unknown” category may include ADB personnel whose tenure in ADB is not known to the Office of the Ombudsperson.
2. The “not applicable” category may include people outside the ADB community.
Source: ADB (Office of the Ombudsperson).
Concerns Regarding Supervision and Colleague Relationships

Figure 5 shows the top five identified issues with the most number of cases: organizational climate, problems with supervisors, workplace relationships, career growth, and administrative services concerns. Other issues not included in the figure relate to safety, health, and physical environment; legal and integrity issues; values, ethics, and standards; concerns raised by external parties; and compensation and benefits.

Organizational climate—which refers to how the work environment affects the morale, interpersonal relationships, and views of employees regarding their organization—remained the topmost issue category in 2019.

This highlights what we see as the need to shift from a transactional to a more transformational style of leadership that may provide new staff with adequate support to help them successfully acclimatize into ADB.

The development of skills associated with transformational leadership may also give more clarity about individual staff responsibilities and expectations, and encourage wider collaboration within the team, both of which are essential in order to address the top issues in ADB’s organizational climate (Figure 6).
Concerns regarding supervision (Figure 7) ranked second. These cases often involved staff members worried about the work environment fostered by their supervisors, who are perceived as being technically adept but lacking the skills necessary to effectively lead and motivate their team. Interestingly, many of these cases this year involved staff struggling with the challenges of reporting to multiple supervisors.

Notes:
1. “Departmental climate” is similar to organizational climate, but specific to departments.
2. “Others” may refer to issues that do not fall under any of the currently established categories.
Concerns regarding peer and colleague relationships, which ranked third among the workplace concerns raised, generally pertain to conflict, trust, and respect issues involving interpersonal relationships (Figure 8).

Interestingly, some demographic groups are observed to have a different third-ranked issue category. “Career progression and development” was the third-ranked workplace concern raised by the following OOMP visitors: female visitors, new staff on their first-year probationary period, and staff on their third to fifth year of employment. For field office personnel, the third-ranked issue category was “safety, health, and physical environment.” This is consistent with the rising concerns of international staff in field offices who are worried about the effects of environmental hazards such as air pollution on their health as well as on their families.

Note: “Others” may refer to issues that do not fall under any of the currently established categories. Source: Asian Development Bank (Office of the Ombudsperson).
The Triangle of Discord

The Triangle of Discord (Figure 9) broadly illustrates how issues and patterns of concerns, drawn from data and other findings from the Office of the Ombudsperson, are fundamentally interconnected. Among the topmost issues we help to address consistently relate to conflicts, supervision, and organizational climate, with communication challenges weaving through all these three concerns.

All of the key areas noted in the case studies in the following section fall under one or more of the Triangle of Discord’s three problem points.

1. **CONFLICTS**
   may arise among peers, between supervisor and supervisee, or because many processes and policies are inconsistently interpreted and implemented across the organization.

2. **SUPERVISION**
   problems may stem from a manager failing to empower and encourage subordinates, neglecting to provide staff with professional and honest appraisals of their work, or not holding others accountable for their behavior.

3. **ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE**
   may lead individuals to distrust the system or feel discouraged from voicing their concerns.
Each of these problems, if left unaddressed, would intensify disagreements, undermine collaboration and collegiality, breed disrespectful and unprofessional conduct, and lower morale. Communication issues, in all its forms—particularly, imprecise or contradictory directives, lack of guidance, or avoidance of difficult but necessary conversations—exacerbate these problem points. Other issues related to communication are lack of clarity about expectations, inconsistency of information, or lack of professionalism in work-related practices such as not responding to emails or failing to maintain a respectful tone.

Our analysis of the trends and patterns of concerns brought to our attention might suggest that ADB is a dysfunctional organization. However, we, in the Office of the Ombudsperson, do not believe so, and we are heartened by the fact that staff generally continue to be optimistic and committed to supporting ADB’s vision. Many are actually proud to be associated with this organization and its long history of leadership in Asia and the Pacific.

We are equally encouraged by the willingness of the Management, staff, and other members of the ADB community to challenge the status quo, and to embrace the principles of ADB’s mission.
The following case studies were developed from the data and other findings that the Office of the Ombudsperson collated to identify emerging trends and patterns of concerns. They are meant for illustrative purposes only and do not represent any actual person or specific department. Each case study culminates with a discussion from the ombudsperson’s perspective that deconstructs the situation to identify underlying problems.
Araya is new to ADB and is in her first-year probationary period. She was excited when she joined because ADB’s mission seemed aligned with her own experience, values, and professional goals. She had high expectations and looked forward to working with her team and contributing to its success. While Araya was understandably nervous, she initially felt welcomed and took comfort in how, during recruitment, many said that she was “perfect for the job.”

However, Araya’s transition was not without its challenges, and her integration into ADB’s work and organizational culture proved to be problematic.
Araya felt she received little meaningful support. A colleague assigned as her “mentor” seemed always “too busy” or distracted and devoted very little time to mentoring her. In fact, Araya felt the relationship was less of a mentor and more a “tormentor” for they often clashed because of differences in opinions and views. She began to surmise that ADB’s organizational culture discouraged new staff from asking questions, expressing atypical perspectives, or presenting new ideas.

Araya realized that, as a new staff member, she was often assigned the least desirable tasks. She was also made responsible for an existing assignment that no one wanted—one with a history of challenges. To some extent, this was to be expected and should not be deemed as out of the ordinary. But the complexity of the assignment—combined with Araya’s lack of understanding of ADB’s organizational culture, with its unique jargon and “unwritten rules,” aggravated by the fact that some colleagues were not always forthcoming with information—made it more difficult for her to complete some deliverables. This also became an obstacle to Araya performing effectively.

Araya felt like she was sinking deeper into a hole, with nowhere to go and no one to turn to. She gradually felt isolated as many colleagues told her not to worry about probation because almost everyone gets confirmed. “Perfunctory” was how probation had been described, informally, during orientation. Perhaps this was why her supervisors did not embark on substantial and timely professional development discussions with her, specifically to guide her during the probationary period. While she was aware that she was experiencing some difficulties, she was nevertheless surprised when her manager suggested that she resign because she was not likely to get confirmed.
Subsequent conversations with management were not constructive. Araya was labeled as incompetent. No one appreciated that she was bereft of ample support and guidance, often given conflicting directives, and helplessly struggled in a unit that is lacking some form of effective communication and has a history of internal conflicts. No one seemed to be willing to listen or address her concerns. Instead, she felt pressured to resign.

Other areas in ADB were likewise unsupportive, providing conflicting or incomplete information, and seemingly blaming her for everything without recognizing the systemic issues. All this served to erode Araya’s trust in the organization. She could not understand how her previous professional experience, training, and accomplishments left her ill-equipped for her ADB experience. With her level of stress rising, Araya began searching elsewhere for other employment opportunities.

What Araya Could Do:

- Take an immediate initiative (as time is of the essence) to develop a “road map” to confirmation. Have discussions with supervisor(s) detailing clear expectations of deliverables and time frame.
- Discuss challenges with her supervisor(s) and other team members as they arise, articulating her concerns in a professional manner, and for the record.
- Engage in honest self-reflection, taking responsibility for any lapses.
- Seek assistance from formal channels in ADB before matters reach a critical stage.
- Put everything in writing.
The year 2019 saw a striking increase in staff members who sought our assistance on issues surrounding probation and confirmation. This is a problem with long-term implications and affecting all staff—whether administrative, national, or international staff, at the headquarters or in field offices. Our analysis indicates a direct correlation between this dilemma and the fact that many new staff members are grappling with obstacles that stand in the way of integrating seamlessly into ADB’s organizational culture.

Several staff who raised these first-year probation concerns were eventually confirmed after exploring possible solutions. Some, however, were given an extension of probation, while others resigned or were terminated.

One could argue that the increased instances of non-confirmation or extension of the probationary period demonstrate a higher expectation of professionalism, knowledge, and accountability. This would be mutually beneficial for the staff and the institution. Nonetheless, the fact remains that some aspects of ADB’s organizational culture and practices can needlessly prevent a new staff member from successfully navigating the probationary process. No one (including ADB) benefits from the occasional cavalier approach toward probation taken by both the probationary staff member and the supervisor.

While those who sought assistance from our office were mostly staff on their first-year probation, they also included supervisors struggling to manage the process. Strikingly, women are the majority of the staff members who came to us for help with this concern.
Upon arrival, staff members are essentially conditioned not to take probation seriously. It is not uncommon to often hear comments like “Don’t worry, almost everyone gets confirmed,” “You will have to be an idiot or not want the job not to be confirmed,” or “ADB confirms everyone.”

These remarks often mislead others to believe that confirmation after their probationary period is perfunctory and essentially a “given.” While this may have been the practice in the past, the opposite now appears to be true. The new staff’s false sense of security is further reinforced when supervisors approach the process flippanantly, or merely as an afterthought when they fail to comply with the mandatory 6-month review, which requires appropriate work plans supported by honest professional development feedback. Many also do not realize that an extension of their probationary period is, for all practical purposes, a “prelude to termination,” particularly if not managed properly.

When new staff members are assigned essential responsibility for tasks and other projects (some with historical complications) without the appropriate training, time, and needed guidance and support, they are unintentionally (and unfortunately) being set up to fail. We noted a pattern in ADB’s organizational culture, with its inflexible fixation on “deliverables” and transactional style of leadership, that contributes to the practice whereby impatient supervisors instinctively reassign tasks and projects to more experienced staff—even if they are less senior than the staff on probation. This may inadvertently undermine the credibility of the new staff member, creating tensions in the team, and fueling the perception that the new staff member is “incompetent” and “not a good fit.” The new staff member is then unduly criticized through unconstructive feedback that later becomes a factor in the decision to confirm or not.
To be clear, ADB, as an institution, is not always to blame. New staff share some of the responsibility when they sometimes fail to take the initiative to understand the probationary process and clarify expectations. These steps are necessary to successfully navigate the probationary process.

ADB recruits and hires very talented candidates. But it would be erroneous to assume that the professional experience and academic background of these new recruits are enough to immediately immerse them in work without proper orientation and guidance. There seems to be no recognition of the paradox inherent when top candidates, with all their accomplishments and accolades, somehow turn “incompetent” after joining ADB.

Clearly, a disconnect exists between ADB’s approach to talent management, and its recruitment and retention practices. Talent management is important in enabling ADB to accomplish its commitments and achieve its goals.

Emphasis on one without the same level of importance placed on the others is problematic. At the very least, it leads to a waste of time, as well as human and financial resources. It also poses a reputational risk to ADB: when staff members leave due in part to acclimation difficulties or involuntary separation (particularly due to non-confirmation) and feel mistreated by an unfair process, they are more likely to post their experience and perspective on websites and other forms of social media that savvy job-searching candidates are increasingly reviewing before deciding to apply for positions.

Some staff members feel pressured to resign before a decision of non-confirmation is meted out, under the pretext that voluntary resignation would look better on their record, and also to prevent them from escalating their case to external avenues of appeal. On one hand, this portrays ADB as being generous for allowing an underperforming and unlikely-to-be-confirmed staff member the opportunity to not tarnish their professional record. However, this distracts from holding accountable those at fault in mismanaging ADB’s probationary process. In addition, it may create the perception that formal avenues of assistance in ADB are ineffective and unsupportive, which potentially discourages those experiencing problems in their probationary period from seeking help.
The probationary process is important to the organization. It should serve as a system to fairly evaluate the capabilities of new staff and separate from the organization those who are incapable or unwilling to perform at the level expected of a member of the ADB community. However, anything that compromises the integrity and fairness of a decision may raise doubts about the legitimacy of the whole process. One example is extending a staff’s probationary period when it may be just going through the motions, with no real commitment to confirm. This may give undeserving staff who should rightly be separated from the organization an occasion to challenge final decisions due to their perception of unfairness arising from lack of clarity, questions of impartiality, and inconsistency of implementation. This is time-consuming and may be unpleasant for everyone involved. There is also strong likelihood that problems encountered during the probationary process, including the gamut of stress and anxiety experienced by new staff, can spill over and continue into the regularization process—which normally takes another 2 years or less.

Integrating people more successfully into the organization requires proactive and collaborative work from all concerned parties.

A paradigm shift is needed where supervisors, before making such an important decision, should ask themselves: “What have I done or failed to do that I am now in the position of having to decide whether to extend the probation period or terminate?”
Informal and formal feedback and comments reinforce the manner in which new staff members take probation lightly.

The organizational culture has shifted toward higher expectations of the probationary process.

New staff members lack initiative to better understand the expectations necessary to navigate the probationary process successfully.

Supervisors and colleagues give inadequate support to ensure new staff’s seamless integration into ADB’s organizational culture.

There is, at times, a failure in the system to ensure provision of new staff with adequate time and training to help them execute complicated projects and tasks.

Reassignment of projects or tasks to more experienced staff members (who are often less senior) creates tension in the team and undermines the credibility of new staff members.

Probation that is extended for an additional 6 months may only be “going through the motions” and lack commitment.

Apprehensions and concern resulting from a problematic probation process may continue even during the regularization process, which can take about 2 years or less.

A disconnect exists between ADB’s talent management approach and its recruitment and retention practices, with little appreciation of the resulting waste of time, human and financial resources.

Talent management is critically important to ADB meeting its goals and mission.

Departing staff who felt unfairly treated by a mismanaged process may pose a potential reputational risk to ADB.


Ydala, a staff member in a field office, enjoys her work, being part of a high-performance team. She is, however, getting increasingly frustrated with one aspect of her job—specifically, having to report to more than one supervisor.

The problem is not the arrangement itself, but the nuances of the organizational culture in the field office and the unspoken agreements between staff. The reporting arrangement was only briefly mentioned during her recruitment interview and not discussed in detail when she was offered the position, much less so after she joined. In the end, Ydala was unprepared for the problematic dynamics of the situation.
Initially, the arrangement appeared to work perfectly as her supervisors seemed to get along well. But, with certain aspects of her reporting structure remaining undefined and unclear, Ydala started having difficulties when her supervisors (one of whom is more senior than the others) had differing views on who takes precedence among them. Each appeared to operate under the assumption that Ydala reported exclusively to them. To add to the confusion, she seemed to have additional “informal” supervisors who issued directives related to their projects or tasks and expected Ydala to promptly comply. Further complicating Ydala’s circumstance is the fact that she also received directives from people based in the ADB headquarters. This maze of conflicting directives and priorities—stemming from a general lack of clarity regarding assignments—had led to several instances of misunderstanding, wherein Ydala was held responsible albeit not of her doing.

The culprit is the lack of inclusive discussion and consultation between Ydala and her established team of supervisors about expectations and responsibilities. Instead, individual supervisors had separate informal discussions with Ydala about their expectations without consideration of the needs of the other supervisors and, more importantly, without taking into account Ydala’s workload. Openly discussing those expectations with everyone on Ydala’s supervisory team would have ensured that everyone was in sync.
Conflicts, disputes, and competition in the workplace, as exemplified by Ydala and her team of formal and informal supervisors, are progressively becoming a norm in the daily interactions.

Usually, one supervisor would privately contradict, maybe inadvertently, the directive or request of another. Others would often impose their needs above others. Consequently, a great deal of Ydala’s time is spent managing one underlying disagreement after another. She is left struggling to reconcile the incomprehensible, behind-the-scenes political maneuverings of staff who are mostly her senior. This awkward, untenable situation leaves Ydala more and more anxious and stressed, driving her to seriously consider leaving ADB.

What Ydala Could Do:

- Decide to address this situation before it becomes overwhelming. Avoiding difficult conversations will only make matters worse.
- Initiate an honest discussion with the direct supervisor. Prepare by compiling and sharing examples of glitches and the reason behind them. In addition, discuss the consequences of not properly addressing the issues in a collegial and collaborative manner.
- Consider approaching the most senior supervisor, in case previous discussions were unproductive.
- Meet with the formal supervisory team. Prepare to have an open, honest discussion. In addition, discuss how this clarification should be communicated to the entire team and to those in the headquarters.
- Clarify and communicate any obligations to the cadre of “informal supervisors.”
Throughout the years, this is a concern consistently brought to the attention of the Office of the Ombudsperson. Interestingly, it is not uncommon for staff not directly involved in the situation to be the ones who initially convey the problem to us. If left unresolved, this will adversely affect the entire unit. Our data indicate that this issue may be experienced by ADB personnel, whether they be administrative, national, or international staff; or based in the headquarters or in the field offices. Consultants and contractors face this issue as well.

New staff members are especially reluctant to take the initiative to confront and address this issue. Oftentimes, those relatively new to ADB choose to suffer quietly, though the situation tends to get progressively worse over time. It has been observed that most of the new staff members suffering issues with multiple supervisors only seek our assistance after they have been confirmed. Factors that contribute to this include (i) the perception that nothing can be done to resolve the issue, (ii) distrust in the available resources and processes tasked and designed to provide help, and (iii) fear of some form of retribution.

Often, when brought to our attention, the situation has devolved to the point where it is difficult to deconstruct to resolve the underlying issues. By then, other factors have become “distractions”—these include, but are not limited to, interpersonal conflicts, work performance issues, and health issues related to stress. The team is adversely affected, hence motivating a third-party staff member to be the first to bring the issue to our office. This is usually followed by that third-party staff member “strongly” encouraging the affected staff to seek our help. Staff who have been with ADB for a few years are more likely to come to the office on their own initiative after agonizing over the decision for some time.
As in almost all disputes and conflicts, ineffective communication often lies at the root of the problem. In this case, the lack of clarity with respect to expectations and reporting structure creates an information and function vacuum that others then keenly fill with their own (often inaccurate) perceptions and expectations.

**ADB’s culture of avoiding conflict and difficult conversations, particularly by leadership, often exacerbates such an existing problem.**

In this situation, if the supervisors (formal or informal) are in conflict, the affected staff member is often placed in the untenable position of having to manage their silent disagreements. In addition, there is this unspoken supposition that the staff member takes sides in disputes and disagreements between supervisors. Each supervisor expects the staff member to demonstrate their taking sides by putting their needs over those of others. Compliance is also assumed, and the staff member worries that failure to follow will be negatively reflected in their performance review, thereby affecting their career advancement.

Work performance reviews are particularly difficult in this situation. The lack of clarity, coordination, and communication between supervisors, coupled with the practice of allowing others not in the formal supervisory role (though they may act as if they are) to weigh in on the appraisal, may jeopardize the results of the performance evaluation of the affected staff member. This is especially frustrating for women who feel they are given tasks beneath their capabilities, and that they are recognized often for their diligence but less so for their technical competencies. This is demotivating at best.

The overall experience for staff members in this situation is professionally problematic and eventually seeps into their personal lives. Everyone conveys increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and other health-related issues. Almost all speak of leaving the unit or ADB at the first opportunity, if the problem is not resolved.
Key Points:

- The lack of clarity about expectations and appropriate reporting structure creates confusion and contributes to tensions in the team.

- Poor communication undermines the efficiency of individuals and the collective unit.

- Avoiding conflict and difficult conversations always makes matters worse, potentially contributing to the development of hostile work environments.

- Reporting to multiple supervisors has its unique challenges, which can lead to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and workplace fatigue.

- Leadership often lack an appreciation of the dynamics associated with this concern and the negative impact it may have on the team.
Emanon has worked in ADB for several years. For most of that time, he has quietly struggled with a mental illness. While he has had successes in the organization and his career had steadily advanced, he has kept this information a closely guarded secret. Very few people know the details of his medical condition. To Emanon’s knowledge, no one in ADB is aware of the full extent of the challenges he faces. Still, a few behavioral manifestations have caused concerns and rumors over the years.
Emanon fears that, if people found out, they would judge him, label him “crazy,” and define his actions in the context of his medical condition. His interactions with colleagues and friends in ADB for many years have led him to believe that he would be personally and professionally stigmatized and marginalized.

He sees a psychiatrist who prescribes medication to stabilize his condition. In the past, Emanon’s mental disorder did not generally affect the quality of his work nor his relationships with colleagues and constituents. This was true even when his doctor prescribed new medication or adjusted the dosage that triggered problematic side effects. However, more recently, he has increasingly experienced complications due to other personal and medical issues. Contributing to his mounting anxiety is the fact that Emanon thinks people are beginning to treat him differently.

Colleagues thought his sporadic antisocial behavior and shifts in mood were peculiar. They value his experience and work, but some quietly label him as eccentric or “bipolar” and avoid working with him. They sometimes feel he is not engaged in a productive and purposeful way. Without realizing it, people act with extreme care and caution when around him. This has caused occasional awkward encounters and, at times, creates an uncomfortable workplace environment.
Emanon feels and struggles alone in this situation. He believes that, if management knew, they would use that information to justify letting him go. In addition, he does not trust that the details of his medical condition and its challenges will remain confidential. This creates a cycle of stress and anxiety, which may exacerbate his mental health concerns.

**What Emanon Could Do:**

- Seek professional assistance and diligently follow the advice of the psychiatrist and/or other medical and clinical specialists.
The Ombudsperson’s Perspective: Mental Health, Well-Being and Inclusivity

The Office of the Ombudsperson increasingly hears concerns from staff who are struggling with mental health and well-being issues.

This is a problem that affects all ADB personnel regardless of their position in the organization, age, gender, ethnicity, and whether they work at the headquarters or in the field offices.

Staff do not initially come to us for help regarding this specific concern. Instead, they ask the office for assistance with a particular conflict or dispute. By the second or third meeting, their trust in our confidentiality makes it easier for them to disclose the details of their mental health issues. ADB’s organizational culture renders it difficult and challenging to disclose such problems. However, it should be noted that there are instances when staff have told their managers, who commendably responded with empathy and compassion. Still, what is clear is that many supervisors and managers do not know how to handle and respond to this matter appropriately.

Whenever this issue is brought to our attention in the course of confidential consultation, one truth is the same for all: the fear that peers and colleagues will find out.

Staff are afraid of the social and professional stigma associated with mental health and well-being concerns.

When working with parties in conflict, it is common for one or more to speculate that the “other” is somehow “bipolar” or “crazy.” This ill-informed “diagnosis” of someone with whom staff are in conflict is little more than a label used to delegitimize the position or concerns of the other, regardless if any behavior warranted it. Adding to the complexity of the issues is the fact that social and cultural dynamics also play an important role.
Our understanding of mental health issues is very basic. There is a general lack of awareness and deeper comprehension for mood, anxiety, eating, personality, bipolar, and social disorders, to name a few. Professionals are of the opinion that depression is wholly underreported yet easily treated. While some may regard this as a personal matter, the fact remains that mental health and well-being concerns impact the job. Workplace stress may actually mask psychological distress. How much of absences from work due to illness is actually a result of mental health and well-being issues? Supervisors with staff who have mental distress are concerned that their management style would be held accountable. The question then begs to be asked: “How do we support managers in situations such as this?”

While mental illness is not a disability, ADB should recognize that missing from its initiatives and discussions around “inclusion” is any material reference to people with disabilities. This omission speaks volumes. ADB’s organizational culture, with its focus on “deliverables” and its operational orientation, does not seem to be open to the idea of meaningful inclusion of staff with hidden disabilities.

We need to honestly ask ourselves: “Would we hire someone challenged by conditions other than the immediately visible disabilities? For instance, someone with a learning disability, or who is hearing or visually impaired?”

When we posed that question to a number of managers, they looked puzzled at first then replied: “No, how could we?” They were of the impression that people with disabilities would be incapable of doing the work. In the spirit of inclusion, would our practice allow us to support the productive work of people with disabilities—e.g., use of assistive listening devices, or printing of braille on the back of business cards? We seem not to appreciate the fact that staff with disabilities (hidden or otherwise), if given reasonable accommodations, can have a profound work experience in ADB while valuably contributing to its goals and mission. For now, this frame of thinking appears nonexistent.
ADB needs a more comprehensive support system for mental health and well-being, coupled with a more inclusive approach to people with disabilities.

This may go far in developing an organizational culture that destigmatizes and creates a more supportive environment for staff members struggling with disabilities, or with mental health and well-being concerns (and those who supervise them). Without it, the organization may be reinforcing the perception that these concerns should remain hidden, as they may lead to people being stigmatized. This is contrary to ADB’s vision of an inclusive Asia and the Pacific. A crucial step is to educate the ADB community and provide practical training for supervisors, managers, and leaders. Likewise, awareness-raising programs and trainings around suicide issues are increasingly becoming a reality and a necessity. This system and approach should also be applied to ADB’s field offices.

ADB should consider undertaking an independent evaluation of the mental health and well-being of the organization, which would include gathering data from multiple sources—in effect, a mental health and well-being assessment of ADB staff. Other international organizations have already taken this initiative. One thing is clear: failure to act will have an impact and may stand in the way of the organization effectively achieving its goals and mission.
Cases of staff members struggling with mental health and well-being issues in ADB are more prevalent than we may realize.

Mental health and well-being concerns may affect the workplace.

The fear of being stigmatized may prevent staff from disclosing their condition, effectively isolating themselves.

Managers and supervisors do not feel adequately prepared to effectively respond to these concerns.

Discussions on diversity and inclusion should be expanded to include concerns related to people with disabilities, and other associated issues and perspectives.

An independent evaluation of the mental health and well-being of the organization, using data from multiple sources, would benefit the institution.

A comprehensive mental health and well-being support system is sorely needed.

Inaction in this regard may eventually compromise the organization’s ability to realize its goals and mission.
These recommendations are drawn from our discussions with people who sought our help in 2019 and our analyses of data collected from those meetings and discussions. These also incorporate some recommendations from previous annual reports that remain relevant.
CONTINUE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES, with greater emphasis on the practical application of skills necessary for supervisors and managers to shift the paradigm from transactional to more transformational leadership.

EXPAND INITIATIVES ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION to incorporate dialogue around people with disabilities and other issues and perspectives.

EXPLORE EXPANDING THE IN-HOUSE TEAM OF MEDICAL PROVIDERS to include a psychiatrist and other mental health and well-being clinical support.

CLARIFY THE ORGANIZATION’S POLICIES AND PRACTICES to ensure consistent implementation, aligned with ADB’s values, goals, and mission.

LAUNCH AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION of the mental health and well-being of the organization, getting data from multiple sources, toward the development of a comprehensive support system.
LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The Office of the Ombudsperson engaged in various activities in 2019 to raise the community’s awareness of emerging trends and patterns of concern within ADB. It held presentations, trainings, and outreach sessions, and actively participated in conferences by providing training for other ombuds practitioners and programs, while keeping the office staff abreast of international best practices.

Asia Pacific Regional Advisory Committee Annual Conference

The Asia Pacific Regional Advisory Committee (AP-RAC) is a network of regional ombudspersons and programs that help inform the International Ombudsman Association about the needs of its members and the region. It also helps create new organizational ombuds programs and supports the enhancement of existing ones.

ADB hosts annual conference of regional ombuds. Ombuds from organizations within the Asia Pacific region came to the Asian Development Bank headquarters to participate in the 4th Annual Conference of the Asia Pacific Regional Advisory Committee (photo by Ariel Javellana).
The Office of the Ombudsperson hosted the 4th Annual Conference of the AP-RAC, held on 16–18 October 2019 at the ADB headquarters. The event gathered ombudspersons from the International Committee of the Red Cross, United Nations, World Health Organization, and other global institutions; the Government of Victoria, Australia; and private organizations based in Hong Kong, China; India; the People’s Republic of China; and the United States. The conference coincided with the celebration of International Conflict Resolution Day, and featured presentations and panel discussions designed to generate fresh ideas and enhance skills.
Let’s Talk forum

This is an interactive forum where the Office of the Ombudsperson and members of the ADB community share insights, experiences, and recommendations about specific concerns observed in the workplace. In April 2019, the office held a session entitled “Stop Blaming Culture,” with 60 participants, tackling the challenges of working in a multicultural environment like ADB. To supplement the forum, the office published an “Ombuds Corner” article in ADB Avenue, an internal website that features articles about anything ADB, in July 2019.

International conferences

The International Ombudsman Association is a member-led, professional association that supports organizational ombuds offices and practices globally. In its 14th annual conference held on 28 March–4 April 2019 in New Orleans, United States, the office gave presentations, facilitated panel discussions and a session hosted by ADB, and co-instructed the International Ombudsman Association Foundations of Organizational Ombudsman Practice course.
Session facilitators. Staff of the Office of the Ombudsperson present and facilitate discussions during the 14th Annual Conference of the International Ombudsman Association (photos by Angelica Alejandro).

The office also attended the conference of the Ombudsmen and Mediators of the United Nations and Related International Organizations (UNARIO), held in Bangkok, Thailand in August 2019. Through the UNARIO group, the Office of the Ombudsperson contributes to the enhancement of international cooperation within the ombuds profession.

In November 2019, the office participated in the 9th Asia Pacific Mediation Forum (APMF) Conference in Jeju Island, Republic of Korea. The APMF is a not-for-profit regional association that facilitates the exchange and development of knowledge, mediation skills, and other conflict transformation processes.
Outreach

The office conducted meetings to connect with various ADB groups and increase the community’s awareness of the services it provides. In 2019, the office held 57 outreach sessions involving a total of 1,664 participants. Of these, 25 sessions were held at the ADB headquarters, with 1,260 participants; while 32 sessions were conducted in the field offices, with 404 participants. Office staff provided translations in Filipino during outreach sessions designed for contractors. The ombudsperson also gave presentations at six separate Induction Program sessions for new staff.

Internal Knowledge Sharing

In meetings with the ADB Management and other stakeholders, the ombudsperson discussed the office’s observations and recommendations based on 2018 data, trends, and other findings. The office participated in internal forums, task force meetings, brown bag sessions, and working groups. It also improved and expanded its resource room.

External Knowledge Sharing

In recent years, a growing number of visitors to the office has involved external parties seeking to share information and discuss best practices. In 2019, the ombudsperson conducted one-on-one meetings with ombuds from other organizations who sought help with their own case management, or to create, develop, or improve their own ombuds programs.
Professional Development Activities

Staff of the Office of the Ombudsperson attended various external specialized training courses, including:
- Developing Influencing Skills
- Transformative Coaching: Core Training for Professional Coaching
- Values-Based Mediation (Basic Mediation Course)
- Communications: An Ombuds Immersive
- Basic Principles of Coaching Abrasive Leaders
- Intervention Education: Helping Employers Deal with Abrasive Conduct

Team Retreats

The office held a team retreat in March 2019 to plan and strategize activities for the year; and, in November 2019, to evaluate the year’s accomplishments and to identify areas for improvement.

Team retreat in Tagaytay City. In March 2019, the Office of the Ombudsperson held a retreat to plan for the year’s programs and activities (photo by Arlene Pantua).
WHAT'S NEXT?

The ADB community increasingly sees the Office of the Ombudsperson as an approachable and trusted resource for managing work-related problems and concerns. We will meet the evolving needs of the ADB community through the following:

- Conduct a comprehensive external review of the office and its relevant administrative order (AO 2.14). This process, initiated in 2019, will be completed in 2020.

- Continue the development of a new database, including a case management and tracking system, in collaboration with ADB’s Information Technology Department.

- Increase our outreach activities, particularly to the field offices.

- Develop a curriculum on a conflict management training program.
With ADB being a major knowledge institution, the Office of the Ombudsperson is well-positioned to become the premier, trend-setting office in Asia and the Pacific and beyond.

To this end, when appropriate, the office will advocate for the development of ombuds programs to support practitioners in the region. We will also explore the feasibility of, and methodology for, integrating the concept of organizational ombuds programs into public colleges and universities in ADB’s host country, the Philippines, through a technical assistance project.
Talk to us.

Our communication channels are open to all members of the ADB community.

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Office of the Ombudsperson 2019 Annual Report

In this annual report, the Office of the Ombudsperson presents findings from its case management and analysis of concerns in the 497 cases received in 2019. Conflicts, supervision, and organizational climate were identified as the topmost issues reported, with communication problems recognized as the root weaving through all these issues. Three case studies are also presented to illustrate emerging trends and patterns of concerns and highlight the need for a paradigm shift from transactional to a more transformational style of leadership. The Asian Development Bank community increasingly sees the office as a trusted resource for managing work-related problems.

About the Asian Development Bank

ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.