# Ombuds and Bystanding: Embracing Influence

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**ABSTRACT**

By virtue of their formal organizational and professional roles, Ombuds are key organizational influencers. They are empowered to comment on what they see and hear and are viewed as highly credible reporters. As a result, Ombuds are well positioned to identify specific issues that need to be addressed and to develop and explore options with others as to how to respond. Beyond these formal roles, Ombuds are also organizational members and thus, have responsibilities and influence as fellow community members. In this article, I argue for Ombuds to explore and leverage the variety of possibilities available to them for constructive engagement and influence. To open up these possibilities, I offer the metaphor of "Ombuds as bystander". Utilizing the Bystander Decision-making Model, I identify key influences on people's decision to engage and offer specific strategies and resources to build the efficacy of organizational members to be constructive and active bystanders. By more fully understanding bystanding, Ombuds expand their own effectiveness as bystanders and organizational influencers. They are also better prepared to help other organizational members embrace their own influence and power as active and constructive bystanders.

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**KEYWORDS**

bystander, bystander decision-making, influence, hostile workplace behavior, ombuds

# OMBUDS AND BYSTANDING: EMBRACING INFLUENCE

As I was thinking about what I could offer to Ombuds in this article, I read Wayne Blair's (2017) article on reimagining the organizational ombudsman's role and Shannon Burton's (2017) piece on Planned Happenstance Theory. What struck me was they were asking Ombuds to embrace not only their formal organizational role (informal, neutral, independent, and confidential) but also more broadly their place as a member of the organizational community; as someone who works there. Both articles expressed concerns that there may be times when Ombuds are so focused on being Ombuds that they forget or minimize their role and place as a member of a dynamic community where members' very presence influences what happens. Thus, while Ombuds have a specific set of responsibilities articulated in the formal structure of the organization, Ombuds also have responsibilities as fellow community members, specifically, accountability for one's behavior and duty of care for others in the organizational community.

To enhance and broaden possibilities for engagement and influence, I offer the perspective of the Ombuds as bystander. Specifically, I will talk about bystanding as influence and how Ombuds are ideally positioned as the ultimate active and constructive bystanders. I will then overview what is known about the why and how of bystanding. I will share some thoughts about how Ombuds can leverage their formal role to facilitate fellow organizational members to honor and embrace their "bystanderness" in active and constructive ways; to utilize the power of their presence for good. In the process of talking about helping others, I encourage Ombuds to place themselves as "the other" and reflect on the ways they can more fully embrace their power as bystanders and expand their ability to influence.

## EMBRACING "BEING THERE": OMBUDS AND BYSTANDING

Ombuds are bystanders by virtue of their official presence. Ombuds are uniquely positioned to "be there", to be observers and to be aware. Ombuds "see" and "hear" what is happening by being the person to whom others can bring what they see and hear. Others tell Ombuds about their experiences, often describing their own and the other's behaviors. The Ombuds has now become a bystander. Others tell Ombuds about their own bystanding; what they were aware of others doing or saying. At this moment, the Ombuds is a "bystander of bystanders" (Rowe, 2018). In addition, Ombuds review and consider policies and procedures, the written embodiment of organizational mission and values, and see the connection to, or gap with, practice. Most broadly, Ombuds are repositories for organizational happenings and uniquely positioned to make connections and see patterns in the data. Ombuds also "see" and "hear" as members of the organizational community, i.e., an employee. These experiences are also data about what is happening (or not) in the organizational environment. Thus, Ombuds are present and (very) aware of organizational life and members' experiences in ways others in the organization are not.

In terms of influence, Ombuds are empowered by their organizational and professional roles to comment on what they see and hear. Ombuds are viewed as highly credible reporters. As a result, Ombuds are well positioned to identify specific issues that need to be addressed and to develop and explore options with others as to how to respond, whether that is the individual who comes into the office or the CEO. The metaphor of the mirror captures this aspect of being an Ombuds. Mirrors reflect and provide the opportunity to correct. As Ombuds share what they have learned, they are reflecting the current status of organizational life and providing the opportunity for the organization to make "corrections". Ombuds themselves may implement some "corrections". For example, Ombuds train, educate, "look into the matter", facilitate, connect, and perform shuttle diplomacy and informal mediation. All of these activities influence people's experiences and the situation. Thus, Ombuds are already active and constructive bystanders. So

what more could I be suggesting Ombuds do? By more fully understanding bystanding, I think Ombuds may expand their own options, enhancing their own effectiveness as bystanders and organizational members. With this deepened understanding and experience, Ombuds will then be better prepared to help organizational members embrace their own influence and develop efficacy as active and constructive bystanders.

## A PRIMER ON BYSTANDING

The term "bystander" conjures up the image of the passive witness, who is present at, or becomes aware of, a situation **but does not take action**. This image is problematic for two reasons. First, it implicitly equates "no action" with "no influence". Being present in a situation where someone is behaving in a hostile or demeaning manner to another, and not taking an action, i.e., simply "being there", can be interpreted by the actor, the target, and others as supportive of what is happening and ensure the continuance of the engagement. Second, it is rare that bystanders are not doing something. Indeed, violence, aggression, incivility and myriad other undesirable behaviors are *socially constructed* and *supported* phenomena, i.e., "others" are involved in developing and sustaining them. For example, bystanders are viewed as active and involved participants in the social architecture of school violence (Twemlow et al, 2013), workplace bullying (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010) and incivility (Hershcovis et al, 2017). In organizations, coworkers and supervisors can be active or passive accomplices in the development and continuance of problematic interactions. They can also be active in disruption and resolution of problematic interactions (McMahon & Banyard, 2012; Paull et al, 2012; Scully & Rowe, 2009).

In order to facilitate people embracing and constructively utilizing their influence, Ombuds need to understand how bystanders decide to take action, and specifically what gets in their way. Grounded in extensive empirical research, social psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley (Latané & Darley, 1970) developed a five-stage model of bystander decision-making regarding intervention. The first stage is *noticing* that something has happened; the second is *assessing* whether it is a problem requiring action; the third is *acknowledging responsibility* for taking action; the fourth is *choosing* the action(s); and the last is *taking* the action(s). This framework has guided the development of bystander efficacy training for decades (e.g., Ashburn-Nardo et al, 2008; Banyard, 2015; Scully & Rowe, 2009). Understanding the turning points individuals face on this path illuminates ways Ombuds can help people make informed and thoughtful decisions about when and how to become involved constructively (Feldman et al 2016 EEO).

## BECOMING INVOLVED: MOVING FROM OBSERVATION TO ENGAGEMENT

In this section, I will utilize Latané and Darley's model to describe the decisions that bystanders face and the factors that influence people's thinking on the path to taking or not taking action. I will share examples of *strategies* focused on addressing those influences that I have found useful for myself and in helping others. I have provided additional resources at the end of this article as well. Ombuds may find these strategies useful in facilitating other organizational members "bystanderness" and in supporting the development of collective will and efficacy to address emerging issues. Ombuds can also apply these ideas to themselves as an organizational member to more fully embrace their influence. While the illustrations below will focus on addressing unacceptable or problematic behaviour, bystanders can also respond to and promote positive and constructive behaviour (Rowe, 2018).

*NOTICE THAT SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED*

If someone does not “see” or is not aware of the situation or behavior, they will not take action. There are two preconditions to noticing a situation or interaction. First, the person has to be present (physically, virtually, or through learning from others), providing the opportunity to notice. Second, the situation or interaction needs to be captivating or “out of the ordinary”. Behaviors and interactions that occur repetitively and are unchallenged become **normalized** or ordinary so that people do not “see” them anymore (Scully & Rowe, 2009).

People are more likely to “notice” when the behaviour or situation contravenes norms or expectations for behaviour. There are multiple sources of norms including personal/moral (e.g., Golden Rule, deontic justice), professional (ethics and codes of conduct), and organizational (vision, mission, values). Norms-in-practice, however, are often implicit and co-created in our interactions. Through responses to different situations at work, employees communicate what is okay and what is not (Scully & Rowe, 2009). At the organizational level, what is stated in policy and what actually happens or is enforced may be different. Ombuds are often keenly aware of the gaps.

STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE “NOTICING”

An important proactive strategy is **explicit articulation of norms**. It is important to engage organizational members in explicit discussions of guiding principles and values and the specific norms and expectations for conduct, which make these principles and values manifest. A beautiful example of this type of work is the Department Communication Protocol, developed by Larry Hoover (2003) and refined by Ombuds Tom Sebok (2014).

Another approach is **education about and identification of problematic behaviors**. In the work on bystander training for sexual assault, a critical element for mobilizing people to action is to broaden people’s definition of what is encompassed by the term “sexual assault”, including what appears to be seemingly low risk behaviour (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). I find this to be true for bystander action to prevent workplace bullying and aggression. Seemingly small acts of incivility can escalate to bolder and more direct hostile action such as bullying. A useful visual depiction of such behaviors is displayed in Cynthia Clark’s (2013) Continuum of Incivility. Sharing the empirical research on the types and prevalence of behaviors that are found in organizations can fill in the details of this continuum with specific behavioral exemplars.

Another engaging strategy to identify problematic behavior is to ask people how they know someone does or does not value them. People can articulate those “small”, seemingly “everyday” behaviors that communicate a powerful message. For example, Jane Dutton and her colleagues (Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2012) asked hospital cleaners about their experiences with others at the hospital, specifically their experience of being valued or not valued. Behaviors by others that communicated that the cleaner’s work, and by extension, the cleaner, was not important included people not acknowledging their presence in shared space, not moving out of a cleaner’s way when they were trying to work, speaking in a condescending tone to them, or making a mess of an area that had just been cleaned without apology. These are behaviors that many people have done yet have been unaware of the impact (Dutton et al, 2012). This activity can be done one-on-one or with an intact group.

Another way people can be made to “notice” behaviors is when someone brings it to their attention. Once people have been in an organization for a while they get used to things. It is usually the outsider or newbie who points out a pattern or behaviors others no longer see, e.g., “why did he do that?” Or “hey, that was mean!” Or “tell them to stop that!” I encourage Ombuds to become observers of their own workplaces and of themselves, specifically to be mindful and

curious about “what we do”. One way to do that is to take on the perspective of the “outsider” and how that person would characterize “what we do here”. For example, Ombuds can imagine themselves as someone from another country or another planet even! It is amazing how taking an “outsider” perspective makes the invisible, visible, the unnoticed, noticeable.

Ombuds can also talk to the newest person in the organization and ask about their experience and what they see. Even talking with someone from another unit about how things work in their unit can illuminate differences in experiences. For example, I developed a fresh perspective on my academic department and my colleagues after I worked on a committee with representatives from other departments. As I listened to their stories of department life, I realized that I had been assuming that other departments were as positive and constructive as mine. As a result of the external exposure, I became more sensitized to why my department was successful and thus, was more aware when my department began to head in a less constructive direction.

*ASSESS WHETHER IT IS A SITUATION REQUIRING ACTION*

Once a person has oriented to the behavior or situation, they need to discern whether what they see is a problem and thus requiring action. Bystanders are more likely to see a situation as a “problem” if they perceive negative impact or harm. This harm can occur at the individual level and/or at a group level. For example, a colleague stops talking after being interrupted or is looking fearful when the boss raises his/her voice. If the colleague shows no noticeable response or smiles, bystanders are less likely to perceive harm and thus, not see this as problem that is in need of action. In terms of group level harm or potential for harm, faculty may perceive risk to academic freedom if a colleague is fired for speaking their mind.

The challenge with incivility, aggression, and bullying is that the harmful impact is felt in the persistence and patterning of behaviors rather than a single behaviour itself. In isolation, a specific behaviour may not look like much. If the bystander is not privy to the series of behaviors, they may not perceive impact or may underestimate the significance or severity of the harm.

STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE DISCERNMENT OF PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIOUR

Sharing information about the patterned and progressive nature of problematic behaviors and their cumulative impact is valuable as it highlights how seemingly minor or covert behaviors can harm. The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute has a negative conduct and impact continuum that concisely illustrates this (http://www.workplacebullying.org/bullying-is-workplace-violence). The work on the impact of ostracism and exclusion (Williams, 2007) and on microaggressions (Sue, 2010) is a powerful illustration of the cumulative impact of “small things”.

Bystanders are also more likely to perceive harm if they believe the actor **intended** to create harm. Unfortunately, due to the seemingly minor nature of the individual behaviors, it is difficult to discern the intention behind the behavior. For example, not acknowledging someone in the hallway could be an oversight (she didn’t see them) or a deliberate slight. A strategy to help bystanders assess whether the situation requires action is to educate bystanders on how to determine intention. Research on how observers discern that something is unfair and thus in need of action provides some insight (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). People make fairness judgments based on considering what the implications would be if the actor behaved differently, i.e., counterfactual thinking. Specifically, the observer is considering three questions (what I call the “woulda, coulda, shoulda”):

1. **Would** the outcome/impact have been different if another behavior had been used?

2. **Could** the actor have behaved differently? This involves discernment of intentional action (how the actor accounts/justifies their action) as well as considerations of whether the target did something to create this situation.
3. **Should** the actor have behaved differently? Has there been a norm violation? This is tied to beliefs about normative behavior and responsibility, which I discussed above.

When a person concludes that the actor could and should have behaved differently, they are more likely to view the action as unfair and thus in need of redress (Parzefall & Salin, 2010).

A challenge is that fairness judgments happen rapidly and often below conscious awareness. It is important for people to explicitly state what they consider when making a judgment, so they can proceed thoughtfully and deliberately. A useful exercise for Ombuds is to apply these questions to the presenting situation in the case of one-on-one coaching or representative scenarios if doing in a group. In the process of doing this, people realize why they consider something unfair or problematic. For example, what behavioral options were not taken or what norms have been violated? Using this strategy, bystanders may also realize an action they initially deemed harmful was actually necessary, e.g., the constructive delivery of negative feedback in a performance review. They may also discover that they do not have the information to make a discernment about the actor's intention but can identify what they need to learn in order to do so. For example, they may choose to continue observing the people involved.

This exercise can have an interesting benefit when intact groups, such as team or unit members, work on clarifying why a particular interaction or behavior is unfair or problematic. As they explore this together, they are also in effect talking with each other at a meta-communication level about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior, which can be woven into a discussion of explicit norms (see above).

Beyond their use in the above activity, these "woulda, coulda, shoulda" questions could form a handy "fairness checklist" that people could use more proactively and systematically to assess situations in their daily work lives. The notion of a "fairness checklist" is not new to Ombuds. For example, administrative fairness checklists for decision makers have been developed by Ombuds at some Canadian universities to facilitate deliberative and inclusive administrative decision-making (see https://www.bcombudsperson.ca/complaints/fairness-checklist ; https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/ombuds/documents/Administrative%20Fairness%20checklist.pdf )

*ACKNOWLEDGE AND ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR TAKING ACTION*

This is a *key pivot point* for bystanders in embracing and directing their influence. If an individual sees it as their responsibility to intentionally influence, they are more likely to do so. Assuming responsibility concerns obligations to help.

Obligation is grounded in social bonds and associated expectations. These bonds can be personal (friendship, family, neighbors), professional (coworkers, team members, organizational members), or broader social bonds (social group membership such as race, gender, religion, being human). When an individual is in a meaningful relationship with one or both parties, then relational norms come into play. For example, the drunk driving campaign message "Friends don't let friends drive drunk" reflects the ethic of care in friendship and the obligation that friends help friends (Ad Council 2017). In the workplace, teamwork obligates team members to be there for and to help each other. In the military, "no soldier left behind" speaks to this obligation to help. The obligation to respond may be explicitly part of one's job description, as with supervisors. Organizational policy may articulate the obligation to help each other. There are also broader

moral obligations to engage reflected in religious values, such as the Christian ethic of “love thy neighbor”.

STRATEGIES FOR FACILITATING RESPONSIBILITY

There are two goals for this part of the decision-making path: 1) discuss collective norms regarding responsibility to help and 2) discuss how individual and collective responding can manage a situation, i.e., how influence works.

Regarding *collective responsibility*, I find it helpful to share a variety of statements or illustrations of collective responsibility. Here are some very visible exemplars of collective responsibility:

- "If You See Something, Say Something™" campaign, originally implemented and trademarked by the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority, is licensed to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as a nationwide campaign (https://www.dhs.gov/see-something-say-something; O’Haver, 2016). Versions of this mantra are part of university campus campaigns regarding sexual violence, alcohol abuse and other risky behaviors (e.g., Banyard, 2015; GreenDot Bystander Intervention program https://www.livethegreendot.com)
- “What would you do?” or WWYD, a long-running ABC News program anchored by John Quiñones, sets up public situations where actors engage in conflict, illegal activity or mistreatment and records what people actually do. (http://abcnews.go.com/WhatWouldYouDo/). The bystanders are then asked about why they chose to take action or not. This is a rich set of video resources that can be used with groups for discussion of both problematic behaviors and what motivated people to take responsibility for action.

Another strategy is to have people discuss when they helped and when they did not and why. The discussion that results from this sharing often reveals (assumed) normative obligations.

Storytelling regarding taking responsibility can be useful at this point as well. I share stories that show fellow coworkers influencing situations by taking responsibility. A favorite example is nurses managing the behavior of physicians who were abusive through the practice of “code pink” (Sullivan, 2011). Briefly, any nurse who sees another nurse being mistreated by a physician rallies other nurses by calling “code pink” and the location of the incident over the public address system. Any nurse who can shows up at the location and stands in silence beside the nurse being mistreated. Another example is the administrative assistant who monitors the boss’ mood. The assistant then lets others know whether it is a good time or not to approach, demonstrating a gatekeeping function.

There are also very pragmatic reasons for why people should take responsibility. First, the perspective of the bystander as observer is perceived as more credible than targets or actors. As a result, higher ups or those in a position to foster change will take the bystander more seriously and thus be more likely to respond (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). Second, the bystander is more likely to be viewed positively for taking action in a situation as opposed to “standing by” (Dickter et al, 2012). Third, research indicates that by taking action, others will mobilize and help as well (Fischer et al, 2011). Finally, bystanders are impacted by what others are doing, even if it is not directed at them, i.e., bystander stress. Witnesses experience similar harm and stress as a result of exposure (Vartia, 2001). Thus, if only for their own sake, bystanders need to take some kind of action.

*CHOOSING THE ACTION(S)*

Once a bystander has decided they have a responsibility to act, they need to figure out what they can do. The selection of action depends on knowing the actions that are possible given the specific context. Choosing from among these options is influenced by the bystander's goals and the perceived benefits and risks for those involved, including risks to the bystander (Keashly, 2019). This section is very detailed because, as with the decision of accepting responsibility, choosing the action is another key pivot point in bystander engagement.

***Identifying action possibilities***

Often, there is an assumption that whatever action is taken, it has to be bold, dramatic and thus, risky. In some cases, that might be true such as pushing someone out of the way of a speeding car. However, more often than not, small often covert actions can have a notable influence, creating the space for the problematic dynamic or interaction to shift (Scully & Rowe, 2009). For example, making eye contact with a colleague who is being reprimanded to show support, or communicating disapproval nonverbally to the actor, or keeping someone away from another person can shift the situation. Many of these actions are things people know how to do and in fact, do them (e.g., Keashly & Neuman, 2013). In essence, any action can make a difference. The challenge then for bystanders is to develop a picture of the range of possibilities for action.

***Making the choice***

Once a person is aware of the possible actions, the choices need to be narrowed down. The choice of action depends upon the bystander's goals (desired outcomes or benefits) and perceived risk.

**Goals (desired outcomes or benefits**). Table 1 includes possible goals or desired outcomes for bystander action (Keashly, 2019). Some actions are more or less likely to help achieve the desired goal. For example, if the goal is to name an inappropriate behavior so that it is not ignored, relevant actions include naming the behavior directly ("let's not call each other names"), invoking group norms ("that is not how we are here"), or confronting the actor, all of which communicate the unacceptability of the behavior and affirm the group norms. A common goal or desire is to prevent or stop harm, which can be accomplished in a number of different ways. A direct action would be confronting the actor and telling them to stop, which can be done in public or in private. A bystander responding to a putdown of another in a meeting could affirm the target in an effort to offset harm. The bystander may want to prevent the actor from engaging in harmful behavior that could risk the actor's social face. Distraction as an immediate strategy could disrupt the behavior, providing an opportunity to engage with the actor later and talk about their behavior.

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Table 1: Goals for bystander action

- Name/identify inappropriate behaviour, so it is not ignored or glossed over
- Uphold a community norm/value: making clear that this behaviour is not supported in this space
- Communicate that the behaviour is unacceptable without embarrassing the offending person; save face
- Phrase concern/give feedback in a way that the offending person is able to hear without being defensive
- Create an opening for discussion
- Protect someone from being hurt/offended or prevent further injury
- Protect someone else from causing harm—something they may regret!

- Tension between people may be due to miscommunication: an open dialogue may eliminate misunderstanding
- Surface a concern that has been festering to prevent escalation into conflict or violence
- Express personal values of the bystander
- Enable an upset person to take a rational view of the situation
- Get help from someone better placed to intervene/has the skill or capacity to handle
- Make those responsible for the unit know what is going on

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Adapted from: MIT Ombuds Office (2004); White & Malkowski (2013).

**Risk assessment.** As noted above, there are various actions that could achieve a specific goal. Choosing among those actions involves considering the risks and benefits of each action. Being visible and public such as naming the behavior or confronting the actor carries a certain amount of risk. Personal risk includes retaliation and becoming the next target, which sadly is not an unrealistic fear. Social risk includes fear of embarrassing oneself (evaluation apprehension), disrupting one's own relationship with the actor, and the potential stigma of being associated with a disliked target (Mulder et al, 2014; Nelson et al, 2011). The degree to which these risks influence a bystander's choice is affected by their relative power in the situation. Higher power bystanders assume less personal and social risk and are more likely to engage directly. For example, Ombuds are empowered by the organization to comment on what they see or hear about in more public and direct ways. Faculty in universities may feel more empowered to engage if they are tenured and at less risk for retaliation. If perceived risk is high, people may choose more low involvement action (MacCurtain et al, 2017; McDonald et al, 2016), allowing the bystander to shield themselves from drawing unwanted attention. Yet even these less visible actions carry risk as they may be viewed as "inaction". The target may experience this as getting no support; the actor as getting support (silence is consent) and other bystanders looking for cues on what to do may assume nothing needs to or can be done.

The risk of taking no action is also important to explore. Taking no action is not a no-cost alternative (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2004). The potential costs include the bystander's sense of self as a caring person (would a caring person NOT do something?), their relationship with the target (e.g., sense of betrayal), and the potential for de-sensitization to harmful actions and for contributing to the development of tolerance for such actions in the community.

## STRATEGIES FOR FACILITATING ACTION CHOICE

The number of possible actions is enormous and thus, can be overwhelming for an individual to consider. There are several action frameworks that attempt to make the options more manageable. These models provide handy action acronyms that a bystander can recall in a moment. Ombuds may find these useful in working with individuals in exploring their options or in training larger groups.

- The 4Ds of Bystander Action Model (see GreenDot Bystander Intervention Program) captures four broad action strategies: Direct (step in to stop the behavior), Distract (the target or actor), Delegate (get someone else), and Delay (check in, support the other). A $5^{th}$ D – Document (record incident as it happens) - has recently been added (https://www.ihollaback.org). This mnemonic has been used in training college students in how to intervene in the risky behavior of fellow students (Banyard, 2015; D'Enbeau, 2017).

- Berkowitz's (2009) ResponsAbility model highlights three broad action strategies: *Confront* (deal directly with the behavior and the person); *Shift focus* (through distracting,

diverting, deflecting or reframing) and *Shifting the person* (work to change their attitudes that undergird their behavior).

- Ury's (2000) The Third Side framework is inherently about bystanders. It identifies 10 roles for preventing and intervening in conflict. I find this framework useful for people to visualize the various roles they could take on as community members based on their own inclinations and skills and the status of the conflict. The Third Side website is a very rich resource of case studies and teaching materials (http://thirdside.williamury.com).

Another framework I have found useful is Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly's (2005) model that categorizes bystander actions in terms of **Immediacy** (when to act, i.e., in the moment or after the fact) and **Involvement** (visibility of the action, i.e., in or out of public view). As can be seen in Table 2, crossing these dimensions reveals an array of specific actions. I find this framework helpful in broadening people's ideas of what is "action" and giving specific examples of those actions. Many of these actions are well within people's current repertoires, i.e., "naturally occurring" (Rowe, 2018). Of particular note, is the inclusion of nonverbals and body language as action. These actions are relatively covert and thus, low risk for a bystander yet they can have a powerful impact. The "involvement" dimension is particularly instructive for bystanders as it illustrates that there are actions that can be undertaken that are less visible or "below detection", which may be important if the bystander is concerned about backlash or negative evaluation. Indeed, research shows that people prefer low involvement or less visible action initially (MacCurtain, Murphy, O'Sullivan, MacMahon, & Turner, 2018; McDonald, Charlesworth & Graham, 2016).

Table 2: Potential bystander actions

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|---|---|
| **High Immediacy-Low Involvement**<br>Redirect actor from situation<br>Remove target from situation<br>Interrupt the incident<br>Change the topic/focus<br>Ask clarifying questions<br>Affirm the target – counter image<br>Use body language to show disapproval, e.g., silent stare<br>Process observation | **High Immediacy-High Involvement**<br>Tell actor to stop conduct<br>Name or acknowledge offense or issue<br>Publicly encourage target to report conduct<br>Get others to publicly denounce conduct<br>Offer another interpretation<br>Reinforce group norms |
| **Low Immediacy-Low Involvement**<br>Talk to target about experience<br>Privately advise target to avoid actor<br>Talk privately to the actor<br>Covertly keep actor away from target<br>Advise target to report incident<br>Refuse to share gossip/rumors | **Low Immediacy-High Involvement**<br>Report actor formally – admin, supervisor<br>Accompany target when reports<br>Coach target in responding<br>Confront actor after incident<br>Work to develop/implement policies<br>Build the business case<br>Gather more information |

Adapted from: Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly (2005) and MIT Ombuds Office
http://web.mit.edu/bystanders/strategies/index.html

Using brief scenarios of problematic behaviors is a good context for identifying different actions that could be applied and what to consider in choosing among them. This helps people visualize what is possible. As an illustration, I utilize the following example from the MIT Ombuds bystander website http://web.mit.edu/bystanders/index.html.

*Example: A coworker makes a joke involving an offensive stereotype during a meeting*

In the moment (high immediacy)

- Use body language to show disapproval (low involvement)
  - Frown, clear throat, wide-eyed surprised look, get up and leave
- Ask a clarifying question (low involvement)
  - What do you mean by that?
- Name or acknowledge the offense (high involvement)
  - That was harsh/rude/offensive!

After the incident (low immediacy)

- Talk privately to the actor (low involvement)
  - I know you well enough to know you don't mean it, but someone could take offense or feel hurt
- Report the actor (High involvement)

**Choosing among the actions** means considering the goal(s) for intervening and the risks for each action that addresses that goal. Using the situation above, if the bystander's goal is to affirm norms of the community, the actions of showing disapproval nonverbally or naming and acknowledging the offense could address that goal. Choosing between these actions will depend upon the bystander's perception of risk to themselves of taking the action. For example, nonverbal disapproval may be perceived as a less risky action than publically labeling the offense, a much more visible action. Labeling the offense also calls out the actor in a way that could threaten their social face, making them more likely to be defensive. In discerning risk, the bystander needs to assess their relative power vis a vis the actor. In this situation, a supervisor may not view the public labeling of the offense as particularly risky or that they could withstand the actor's response, given it is part of their job to monitor and evaluate their subordinate's behavior.

Before leaving this section on action choices, it is important to note that sometimes multiple actions may be needed to achieve the bystander's desired goal(s). These could occur simultaneously or sequentially. For example, in the situation of the hostile comment by one colleague to another, the bystander may take action to disrupt the interaction to prevent or reduce harm (e.g., suggest that this is not the forum for these discussions) and then follow up with the actor and/or target regarding what happened and possibly exploring alternative strategies for addressing the situation.

*TAKING THE ACTION(S)*

Once potential actions have been discerned, they have to be implemented. This is another point at which people can get bogged down. The skills needed depend upon the action(s) chosen. Some actions are relatively simple to enact such as making eye contact to show support for the target or changing the topic from the problematic one. Others are more complex in terms of the skills required and the sequencing of actions. A particularly challenging one is confronting the actor as doing so involves communicating a clear message while also anticipating and mitigating possible negative impact such as defensiveness and retaliation. The actual confrontation is often not just one statement but also responding to and managing the actor's reaction.

STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE ENACTMENT OF ACTION

Effective engagement in action hinges on the individual's confidence in determining "what" is required and the "how" of enactment. Skill and confidence comes through practice. The following are tools and activities that I have found helpful for myself and in working with others.

- Core skills model of communication (Bolton, 1986). Bolton's model breaks down the key communication skills (active listening, assertion and problem-solving) involved in managing conflict generally and confrontation specifically. He then illustrates how they interweave in managing conflicts of interests/needs and conflicts of values.
- Mini-scripts or "backpocket phrases". These are very specific actions that can be memorized and drawn upon very quickly. For example, if the goal is to clarify the situation, a phrase like "what do you mean by that?" spoken with an inquiring tone is useful. As noted earlier, many behaviors are ambiguous in terms of content and intent. This phrase allows the opportunity for additional information to be shared that may influence what the bystander and others are "seeing". It also creates space for determining what subsequent actions if any, need to be taken. Some problematic situations can be anticipated due to their recurring nature, permitting the opportunity to develop a mini-script, which involves a number of different statements and responses. Bystander intervention programs like GreenDot and the MIT bystander site are rich with examples of these types of phrases and mini-scripts.
- Opportunities for practice. People need to work with skills and situations repeatedly and in different ways in order to develop a sense of confidence in their ability to work with them. There are a variety of ways to provide this practice. All involve the use of relevant scenarios and include behavioral modeling (showing how it is done), discussions with others about effective ways to enact the action, and roleplaying with feedback. These are core practices of bystander training programs. They are also tools that Ombuds can use as a bystander of the bystander.
- Action plans. To make things even more concrete, it is important to have people map out the specifics of the situation they want to address, how they plan to address it, and what specifically they will do and when; a form of visualization and practice.

**MORE THAN ONE: COLLECTIVE AND ORGANIZATIONAL ACTION**

*COLLECTIVE ACTION*

Throughout this article I have focused on action by an individual bystander. Bystander action can include collective action as when people work together to implement a policy on workplace conduct or request that management take action with respect to an actor or comment on problematic behaviors in meeting. The bystander decision-making model and strategies discussed above are relevant for talking with people about working together. Exploring the options for action(s) that involve joining with others and how to most effectively enact the action should be part of the discussion and training.

As with any discussion of engagement, it is important to highlight the principles of constructive and nonviolent action and give examples of actions that may contravene that. For example, social media has facilitated public notification of people to be held accountable for their behavior, i.e., "calling out". Making problematic behavior visible to others can be a powerful sanctioning strategy; one which the actor is motivated to avoid by refraining from the behavior. However, sometimes online mobbing develops with a focus on punishing and destroying the other (Ronson, 2016). Ombuds are positioned to a) model collective behavior b) help others think through the

risks and benefits of their options for themselves, the direct parties involved, and for the broader community and c) help others envision and practice their actions.

*ORGANIZATIONAL ACTION*

An organization's culture is the container in which rules and norms are developed and behaviors and interactions are shaped and promoted. Organizational members' decisions to take constructive action to address what they see reflects the culture. Moving people from observation to engagement, therefore, requires the organization to expect and actively support employee voice, a collective sense of responsibility and constructive action, and proactively address the conditions that support/promote problematic interactions (MacCurtain et al, 2018; Rowe, 2018). Whatever policy, education and training efforts are undertaken, it is critical they be developed with organizational members and grounded in a deep understanding of the character and profile of the organization and its members (Keashly, 2019). This process of working together in, and of itself, is a living embodiment of the values of the organization and results in more constructive conversation and engagement and a climate that is constructive and fair where mistreatment and hostility cannot thrive. Ombuds are uniquely positioned for this level of organizational work. They are knowledgeable about the current state of their organization's culture. Ombuds are also knowledgeable about ways to facilitate constructive, fair and safe culture (Rowe, 2018). Finally, Ombuds also have unique access to influence organizational leaders and thus, the organizational culture.

**IN SUM**

I will end as I started. Ombuds are in community with fellow organizational members. Ombuds have influence in building, supporting, and maintaining that community. In this context, the Ombuds is a bystander. The task as an Ombuds and as an organizational member is to recognize, embrace, and leverage one's own "bystanderness" and help others recognize, embrace, and leverage theirs.

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**SELECTED SPECIFIC RESOURCES ON BYSTANDER ACTION**

**Bystander Intervention Programs – some examples**

Sexual violence and high-risk behaviors
Bringing in the Bystander http://cola.unh.edu/prevention-innovations/bystander"

GreenDot https://www.livethegreendot.com

Hollaback is a movement to encourage people to address nonviolently, public harassment and hate violence– they use the 5 Ds approach – direct, distract, delegate, delay and document; Collaboration with GreenDot.
https://www.ihollaback.org/resources/bystander-resources/

StepUP Bystander intervention program http://stepupprogram.org

Mentors in Violence Prevention http://www.mvpnational.org

**Ally programs – some examples**

Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto, On – "Are you an Ally"? Using privilege to create change.
http://www.mountsinai.on.ca/about_us/human-rights/ally/ally-campaign-videos

Becoming an Ally; Ann Bishop - includes a toolkit of exercises and resources
http://www.becominganally.ca/Becoming_an_Ally/Educating_Allies__Ch.html

The Safe Zone Project – resources for LGBTQ awareness and ally training
http://thesafezoneproject.com

**VIDEO RESOURCES**

Alan Berkowitz – ResponseAbility - Series of videos of Berkowitz addressing different issues regarding bystander action and illustrating them with stories.
http://www.alanberkowitz.com/videos.php

Toxic Friday (edited by Libby Roderick) – focus on faculty bullying behaviors – University of Alaska Anchorage – video and manual for training and discussion
http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org/toxicfriday

Government of Saskatchewan videos on personal harassment – coworker, customer, and manager behaviors. Also, a video of responsible manager behavior as distinct from harassment. Videos are close captioned.
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnJrCcfEygax9z6Nk1BEEOvC1kpNKdXU7

Government of Ontario. “Who will you help?” Sexual Violence Ad Campaign
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opPb2E3bkoo
https://www.ontario.ca/page/lets-stop-sexual-harassment-and-violence

**OTHER RESOURCES**

Waging Nonviolence – great set of resources including discussion of active bystander work and developing a culture of solidarity.
http://wagingnonviolence.org

Giving Voice to Values – Mary Gentile
- book plus several customizable modules – “how to speak your mind when you know it is right”
http://www.givingvoicetovaluesthebook.com

HeartMob – developing an online community to help fight online harassment.
https://iheartmob.org/about

Witness.org (See it. Film it. Change it)– Tips on safely and effectively filming and reporting incidents of hate.
https://library.witness.org/product/filming-hate/

Gathering of resources for developing bystander programs for campuses.
https://home.campusclarity.com/free-online-resources-to-help-you-develop-your-bystander-program/

Focus on addressing bullying – great set of video resources.
http://bystanderrevolution.org

De-escalation strategies for a variety of challenging situations
https://watt.cashmusic.org/writing/deescalation

## AUTHOR BIO

**Loraleigh Keashly** (Ph.D., University of Saskatchewan, 1988) is a Professor in the Department of Communication at Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA. She is also Associate Dean of Curricular and Student Affairs of the College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts. Her research and consulting work focuses on quality of work relationships and conflict resolution at the interpersonal, group and inter-group levels. Her current research focus revolves around the nature, effects and amelioration of uncivil, hostile and bullying behaviors in the workplace with a particular interest in the role of organizational structure and culture in the facilitation or prevention and management of these behaviors. She has a particular interest in developing bystander efficacy to address negative work relationships and build constructive work relationships. She has focused her recent attention on the academic environment and works with universities on these issues. Dr. Keashly's work has appeared in various journals and she has been a consultant to organizations and universities and an expert witness on cases of workplace bullying and hostility.

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