

Office of the Ombudsperson

Traffic Light Guide: How Ombuds Navigate Relationships & Principles



This is an adaptation of the International Ombuds Association's (IOA) Traffic Light Guide, shared in the spirit of making more transparent how Ombuds consider potential opportunities, asks, and partnerships (per IOA, "initiatives") vis-à-vis their Standards of Practice. Put differently, when to proceed, pause with caution, or stop in order to protect the independence, confidentiality, informality, and impartiality of the office and office-holder.

The Ombuds may:

- Adapt or adjust their level of involvement to enable collaboration.
- Communicate purpose/scope of involvement for clarity and to prevent role or actions from being misinterpreted.
- Periodically assess involvement for potential risk to guiding principles, and if any, to adjust, accordingly.

GREEN LIGHT: GO – FULL ALIGNMENT WITH PRINCIPLES – PROCEED

Independence: The initiative allows autonomy without undue influence or interference from the organization or external parties. The ombuds role is clearly defined and respected in the context of the initiative.

Confidentiality: The initiative does not require disclosure of any sensitive or identifying information shared by visitors. Proper safeguards are in place to protect the confidentiality of those involved.

Informality: The initiative does not involve creating formal records, binding decisions, or participating in formal grievance processes. Engagement is voluntary and informal.

Impartiality: The initiative does not appear to position the ombuds as favoring any party or stakeholder. Involvement is neutral and unbiased, with no side/position-taking, and with no requirement to advocate for any specific outcome.

YELLOW LIGHT: CAUTION – POTENTIAL RISK TO PRINCIPLES – EVALUATE AND ADJUST

Independence: The initiative involves collaboration with other organizational units, which may risk compromising your autonomy. There is potential for perceived or actual pressure from leadership or stakeholders to align with their agendas.

Confidentiality: The initiative may require sharing aggregated or anonymized data, which could inadvertently lead to identifying individuals. There is ambiguity about how confidentiality will be maintained.

Informality: The initiative risks blurring the line between informal and formal processes. There is a possibility that your involvement may be misinterpreted as formal endorsement or authority.

Impartiality: The initiative may involve stakeholders who perceive involvement as biased or favoring one side. There is a risk of being drawn into advocacy or decision-making roles that conflict with ombuds neutrality.

RED LIGHT: STOP – MISALIGNMENT WITH PRINCIPLES – DO NOT PROCEED

Independence: The initiative requires reporting directly to or take direction from a party with a vested interest in the outcome. Autonomy is compromised and the independent resource function is undermined.

Confidentiality: The initiative requires you to disclose confidential information or breaches the trust of individuals who rely on you. There are no adequate safeguards to protect sensitive information.

Informality: The initiative involves formal processes, such as acting as a decision-maker, investigator, or arbitrator. Your participation would create formal records or obligations that conflict with your informal role.

Impartiality: The initiative positions the ombuds as an advocate for a specific party or outcome. Involvement would create a conflict of interest.