

Rob Behrens - AORC Webinar Video Transcription

Hello, thank you for inviting me to this important seminar. African Ombuds colleagues have an even tougher job than the rest of us, so I want to express my appreciation and solidarity for what you do. I would have been with you in person today but your seminar clashes with my annual scrutiny hearing in the UK parliament and for me not to show up would be a career ending decision, so I know you'll understand the difficulty.

Many of the lessons that I've learned about ethical transparent leadership have come from personal experience in Africa 25 years ago I was the only then British civil servant to speak at and then work at the constitutional assembly in Cape Town and I remember the effort that went into reaching out to the townships to try to understand what ordinary people wanted in their new constitution.

And I also remember being reprimanded by the head of the assembly for being too reticent he said to me tell us your experience Mr Behrens you British maybe reaction raised but you are not corrupt we want to know. So, I returned from Cape Town and applied the lessons I learned for the rest of my public service career, and these are some of the things I learned.

First of all, no public service can thrive without public trust and public trust requires honesty, it requires competence, and it requires treating people with respect but if there's no transparency it won't work.

Secondly, transparency and accountable leadership come in diverse forms. In all of my role since 2003 I've introduced annual open meetings for the organisations, and I've worked to bring closer the relationship between service users and those who run and operate the organisation. Sometimes these are uncomfortable but they're always very useful.

In my current job as UK Ombudsman, I have regular podcasts called Radio Ombudsman and there have been 26 so far and you can hear them online on the Internet. And I have frank, public, open discussions with former complainants and current Ombuds leaders so that we can get a balanced account of what really happens in an investigation. These are open, honest conversations, and they help people to understand what we do.

Now last year I worked with the IOI to deliver a 57 country study of ombudsman leadership under COVID, and I'm grateful to all the African contributions to this study which is now published and online as *The Art Of The Ombudsman*.

The three biggest challenges facing ombudsman colleagues during COVID and around the world were first of all, the public's lack of knowledge and understanding of what Ombudsman do.

Secondly, a lack of appropriate resources and thirdly managing the expectations of complainants and service users. Now I recognise that lack of appropriate resource is a particular problem in Africa but as we seek to move beyond COVID there's some positive simple things that we can all do.

Firstly, try to publish as many case summaries of our investigations as possible. This demystifies what we do, and it brings home the trauma and the bereavement associated with trying to get redress.

Secondly, use the free learning of international Ombud seminars like today and publications, for ideas about how to become more transparent. And finally as a member of the world board of the IOI, I urge you to support our plans for peer review of Ombuds organisations like the ones carried out in Catalonia in Spain and in the United Kingdom. Ombuds looking at Ombuds institutions. There's guidance on how to achieve this form of accountability on the IOI website it's an inexpensive but important contribution to accountability because those Ombuds who participate charge no fees and therefore we don't have the problems associated with management consultancy. This is good, there's lots of ideas.

I wish your seminar well and I look forward to reading the proceedings and to meeting you all later in 2022. All the best.