



Spoken In Confidence:

Chuck Howard on Confidentiality, Courage and the Cost of Silence

October 8 was International Ombuds Day, and one story explains why this work matters more than any policy binder ever could.

Meet Chuck Howard. For over 35 years, he has been the foremost legal authority on ombuds confidentiality in the United States. He wrote the two defining books on the profession for the American Bar Association. He served as the inaugural executive director of the International Ombuds Association. And in 1990, with almost no legal precedent to stand on, he defended ombuds confidentiality in federal court and won, a case that still protects ombuds today. But the story that stays with me is not the resume. It is the memo.

The memo in the drawer

Early in his career, a young Chuck caught a senior partner giving a client bad legal advice. He corrected it. The deal fell apart. With no confidential place to process what happened, he wrote a memo about what had happened and put it in his desk drawer. Years later, as he was leaving that law firm for another firm, he learned that the same partner had quietly worked against him ever since the malpractice episode.

That experience taught him three things he never forgot, which are that people often only need an ombuds once or twice in a career, but that moment can decide whether they stay, that organizations lose people and information when there is nowhere confidential to raise a concern, and that retaliation rarely looks the way anyone expects it to.

Why this is not your hotline

A hotline creates a paper trail and a duty to act. An organizational ombuds is structurally separate from all of that, with no managerial authority and no duty to investigate, which is exactly why people are willing to walk through the door. Chuck told me about an executive assistant who believed her boss (the only person she worked for) was falsifying expense reports. She was a single parent and certain that reporting it formally would cost her the job. Instead, with her permission the ombuds quietly suggested a routine audit review, framed as standard practice. The fraud was caught. Two more senior executives were found doing the same thing. No one ever learned who raised the flag. She kept her career, and the organization avoided the exposure that keeps general counsel awake at night. That is the whole case for this profession, told in one story.

The question every leader should be able to answer

If you cannot say with certainty how a scared employee would raise something they are afraid to report formally, that gap already exists inside your organization. Chuck's conclusion after four decades in this work is simple, which is that given enough size, every organization eventually has misconduct somewhere in it. The only real choice is whether you find out before it costs you the person, the case, or the culture.

Chuck's Impact on Ombuds

Fifteen years ago, Chuck was my sage external counsel when I was the ombudsman at AllianceBernstein. He taught me how to speak truth to power, how to protect the organization while doing it, and how to recognize the courage it takes for someone to speak their truth at work in the first place. Not many leaders have the time or energy to build cultures where people feel safe sharing different perspectives, let alone the commitment to keep building them every time a barrier shows up. It is far easier to say nothing and walk away. Chuck never chose the easy path. He led with integrity, for himself and for everyone he advised, and that takes a very special kind of person. I am indebted to him and to everyone in the ombuds community for the selfless work of making sure we had a protected platform to create that safe space for others, while also mitigating real risk for organizations at the same time.

For fifteen years, I sat with employees at every level of an organization and helped them find the words to speak their truth and navigate their internal channels. Some cases were about careers or performance appraisals. Others were harassment, interpersonal conflict, or simply someone who needed a place to voice a barrier to their employee experience. In every case, I wanted them to know they were not alone. Chuck gave me the strength to feel safe challenging the status quo, without fear of retaliation, knowing it was the right thing to do and that I was only the messenger, which fortunately, leadership was always willing to hear. He is a class act, and words cannot fully express how much he has done to help this profession grow.

Hear the full story

This conversation with Chuck is one of my favorites we have ever recorded. Hear him tell the memo story in his own words, along with the forms of retaliation he calls out by name, on this episode of Spoken in Confidence.

You can listen to the full episode here. Listen to Chuck Howard on "Confidentiality, Courage, and the Cost of Silence", and follow or subscribe so you never miss an episode.

 YouTube  https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5Ke2W_mzyRmobDvrWJ6gpw
 Apple Podcasts  <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/spoken-in-confidence/id6789180066>

 Spotify  <https://open.spotify.com/show/033MwOuZxdTRGEozVtkGZQ>

Ready to explore ombuds services and build a stronger speak-up culture in your organization? Let's talk at www.ombudsana.com

Let's talk

If you lead an organization and are not sure how someone would raise a concern they are afraid to report, that is exactly the conversation I have with HR leaders, general counsel, and executives every week. Reach out to me directly at ombudsana.com, where you will also find tools and resources to help you build conflict intelligence at work.

Every organization deserves a place where people can tell the truth without fear. Building that, one organization at a time, is the work. The trailer is live now, and new episodes drop monthly. I would love for you to follow, share and subscribe on YouTube so you never miss one.

Thank you again for being part of this journey to help build organizations where everyone can bring their best selves to work every day.

Warmly,
Sana



More about Sana

With a background in industrial psychology, employment litigation, human resources management, coaching, ombuds and mediation, I bring deep international experience building ombuds programs across six continents from small companies to Fortune 200.

From Angola to Argentina, Kazakhstan to Canada, and the UK to the US, I have successfully launched strategic conflict resolution systems in some of the world's most dynamic environments. Most recently, I served as Global Ombuds Leader at Chevron where I felt energized going to work every day with leadership that demonstrated their commitment to diversity of perspectives and speak-up cultures.

Please feel free to reach out for a consultation on how we can help your organization to harness conflict to unleash organizational potential together.



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