

National Aeronautics and Space Administration



NASA OMBUDS PROGRAM



ANNUAL REPORT 2009



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Greetings from Olga



The NASA Ombuds Program continues to provide a confidential, informal, and neutral ear to those who wanted to raise concerns in an “off the record” manner. The Ombuds at each Center serves NASA employees, onsite contractors, students, and grantees. Their role is to provide coaching for visitors on how they might resolve their issues independently, refer visitors to appropriate formal resources in the Agency, listen to and help clarify the issue, work with the visitors to consider all available options and evaluate pros and cons of each option, and escalate issues if express permission is provided by the visitors.

It is important to remember that issues are most often resolved when raised to local management. If you have an issue that you either don't know where to go with it for assistance, you have tried the standard options, and the issue still persists or if you want to keep your identity anonymous, then the Ombuds may be an option for you.

In the 5 years since the creation of the Ombuds Program, over 1,300 individuals have come for help. The Ombuds is separate from formal resources like human resources, the Equal Employment Opportunity Office (EEO), or the Inspector General (IG), yet serves to complement each in ultimately finding a fair process for issue resolution. A visitor to the Ombuds Program can be assured that the Ombuds will take no action unless the visitor gives the Ombuds permission to do so. The only exception is if the visitor reveals something that represents an imminent risk of serious harm to an individual, damage to property, or a crime.

The Ombuds also serves a critical role in helping the organization proactively address concerns. The Ombuds does collect demographic data and reports trends to the Center Director without revealing the identity of any visitor. Trends may point to concerns around adherence to a specific policy, leadership behavior, safety concerns, gaps in oversight of key practices that ensure mission success, or the potential need for review of a policy or practice.

If you need to talk to someone regarding a concern, contact your Center's Ombuds. A list of all Ombuds can be found in the back of this report. Enjoy reading the rest of this report.

Olga Dominquez
Assistant Administrator for Infrastructure



2008/2009

HIGHLIGHTS

Cases

- Met with 256 visitors across all Centers.
- There were an increased number of issues raised in some Centers related to workload stress. In most cases, visitors chose to work with human resources or their management chain.
- As in the past, there were issues raised about disrespectful treatment. Coaching was provided to visitors and, in some cases, their supervisors.
- Ombuds helped new leaders transition smoothly into roles by providing feedback when given permission by visitors.
- Ombuds worked with visitors around medical leave policy and practices. The Ombuds helped negotiate reasonable solutions for the individuals.
- Ombuds provided feedback on employee perceptions regarding the promotion process. As a result of raising the issue, additional communication took place, and training was provided for leaders.
- Ombuds heard cases relating to a perceived higher standard in performance ratings. Visitors reported being surprised by feedback. Leadership classes were provided to management to increase skills in setting expectations and providing feedback.
- With the permission of visitors, the Ombuds worked with formal resources to resolve issues of harassment, leadership effectiveness, physical safety, and implementation of new travel policy.
- There was an increased number of visitors coming from the onsite contractor population.*

Awareness Activities

- Ombuds increased their visibility and awareness of the program through brochures, articles, and enhanced Web sites.
- The Ombuds often participate in Center-wide events introducing the function of the Ombuds Program to new employees, onsite contractors, and existing employees through all-hands meetings and other department meetings.

*An Ombuds will work with onsite contractors on safety, mission success, and policy-related issues but not on typical employee-related human resource issues.

Scenarios

(The following scenarios are NOT actual cases but are representative of the types of cases brought to the Ombuds.)

Out With the Old...In With the New

Paul, a long-term employee of NASA, was becoming more and more concerned as he saw many of his colleagues either move to new positions or retire from the Agency. His concern was that a huge amount of knowledge and experience was walking out the door. Many of these employees were being replaced with contractors or inexperienced employees, and it took them a long time to get up to speed. Paul's concerns escalated after several incidents in which he had to correct mistakes being made by those newer to the group. Paul tried to raise these concerns to his boss but was simply told to keep helping where he could. Paul decided to visit the Ombuds to see if he had other options for addressing his concerns.

The Ombuds listened and helped Paul to identify that his real concerns were safety and competency of employees in the division. Together, Paul and the Ombuds generated some potential options for resolution.

- Paul could put his concerns in writing to his leader, giving the leader another chance to take the issue more seriously.
- Paul could go to his boss's boss, as his boss was unresponsive.
- Paul could raise his concerns with human resources.
- Paul could ask the Ombuds to raise the concern anonymously with HR.
- Paul or the Ombuds could go to the Office of Safety and Mission Assurance to raise specific safety concerns.



After a review of the pros and cons of these options, Paul decided to give his boss more-detailed information in writing and hope that the new facts would make the boss take action. He told the Ombuds that if he wasn't successful with this step, he would be back and they could discuss escalating to HR or to the Safety Office.

Can't Seem to Please

Maria has just come from a staff meeting and once again feels humiliated by her boss, Cara. Maria has been at NASA for 5 years. For the first 3, she felt comfortable in her work as a Program Manager. During the past 2 years, it seems as if whatever she does, she can't please Cara. Maria feels that the pace of work has escalated, and she's not sure what is expected of her. Over and over again, Maria delivers a project only to have it intensely critiqued by Cara, and she either has to redo her work or it's handed off to someone else. Today, this happened in front of her colleagues, and Maria is angry and humiliated. She decides to talk to the Ombuds, as going to Cara herself in the past has not been successful.

The Ombuds helps Maria identify her concerns. She explains that she feels disrespected, that she's unclear as to what is expected of her, and that she is having a hard time keeping up with the changes that have taken place over the past couple of years. The Ombuds and Maria discuss the following options:

- The Ombuds could coach Maria on how to have a conversation with Cara in which she asks for clear definition of expectations and support to get there.
- Maria or the Ombuds can go to human resources for help facilitating a conversation between Maria and Cara in which a plan can be developed for Maria's development.
- The Ombuds can talk to human resources regarding providing training to Cara's division on managing performance.



Maria gives the Ombuds permission to give Human Resources a heads up that Maria will be contacting them and the nature of her request. Maria meets with HR and together they meet with Cara. Maria still isn't sure she can be successful in Cara's eyes but at least the communication line is open.



Resource List

NASA strives to provide multiple options for dispute resolution. It is best if issues are resolved as close to a situation as possible. If escalation is needed, here are some of the formal “on the record” options you might consider:

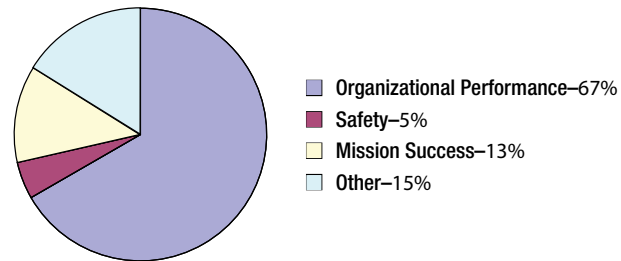
- Your immediate supervisor or others in your management chain.
- Employee Relations Office (formal investigation and consultation on work-related issues).
- Employee Assistance Program (personal issues of wellness, stress, etc.).
- Ethics Office (business ethics and integrity issues).
- Equal Employment Office and Alternative Dispute Resolution.
- Human resources (HR policy issues, performance, job status, and treatment issues).
- Office of Security and Program Protection.
- Office of Safety and Mission Assurance.
- Office of Inspector General.
- Occupational Safety Program Office (workplace safety issues).

The Ombuds Program is the only “off the record” informal option.

Statistics

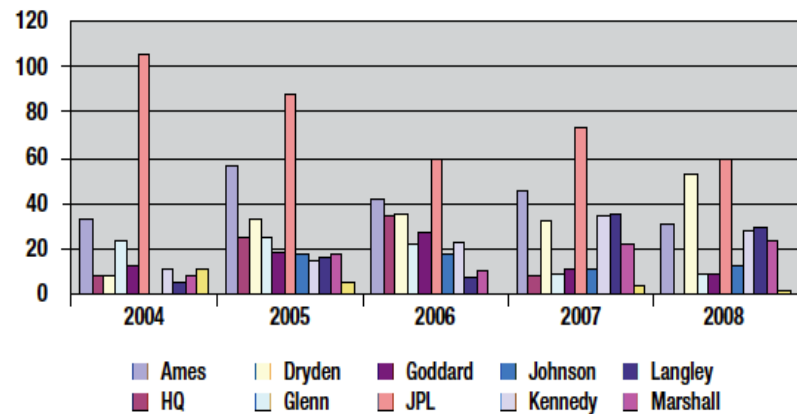
1. 2008 Cases by Category—256 cases

(from 2009 meeting)

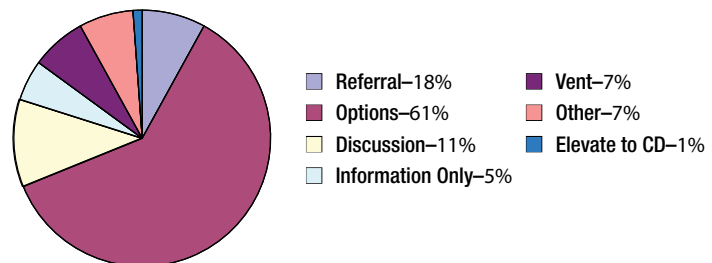


2. Center Cases Statistics by Year

(from 2009 meeting)



3. Action Taken





Richard Hyatt

Ombudsmen

Contact Information

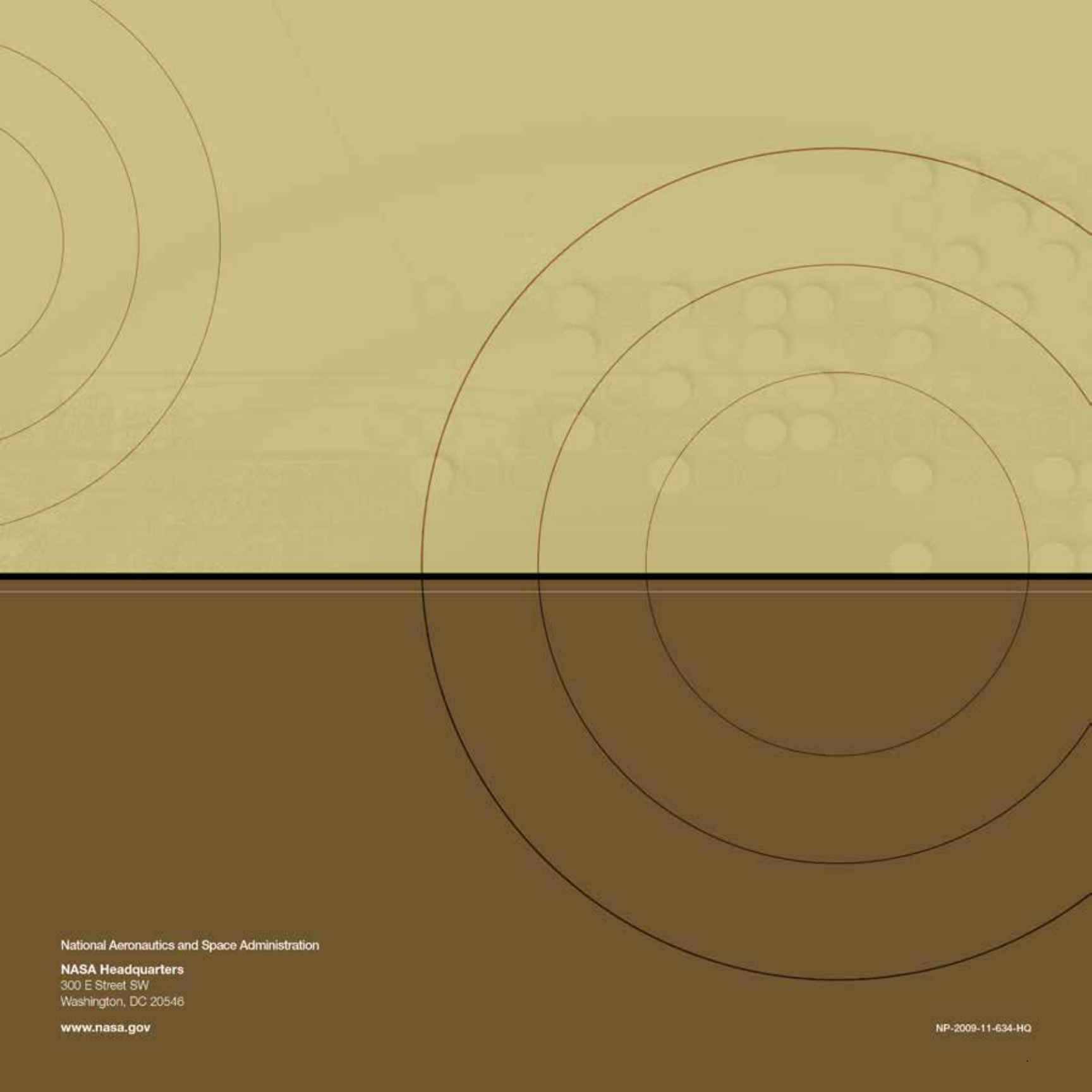
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Special Thanks To:

- Sunil Dutta (GRC)
- Carl Poleskey (HQ)
- Ralph Anderson (JSC)
- James Thompson (KSC)
- Victor DeInore (LaRC)

These individuals have completed their terms as Ombuds.

For more information on the NASA Ombudsman Program, visit:
<http://oim.hq.nasa.gov/oia/ombuds/index.html>.

The background features a light tan upper half and a dark brown lower half, separated by a horizontal line. Large, thin-lined concentric circles are positioned on both sides of the page, with the larger set on the right and a smaller set on the left. Faint, repeating circular patterns are visible in the background.

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