

Change programme National ombudsman of the Netherlands

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When Alex Brenninkmeijer took office as the new National Ombudsman in 2005 he encountered a well-functioning legal institution. His predecessors had encouraged the staff to look at complaints in a fair and formal way. A kind of flowchart was being used. Investigators asked themselves: are we competent, is it within our jurisdiction and has the citizen first filed a complaint with the administrative authorities. Communication was mostly done in writing and personal contact between staff and citizens was more the exception than the rule.

The organisation at that time, consisted of three departments covering the institutions in the public administration about which most complaints were received. Each was headed by a team leader and a deputy team leader. There also were service departments: Human Resources, finance, communication, ICT and facility services. A small group of senior advisors advised directly to the ombudsman and reported to the director. The whole organization was geared towards investigations and writing reports with a solid legal solution.

With his background as a mediator Alex Brenninkmeijer believed in a more personal and practical approach: tailor-made solutions for problems citizens ran up against. He wanted to solve problems not to judge them. He therefore asked the organization to focus on problem solving instead writing reports.

So things had to change

The organizational change was not only needed because the Ombudsman wanted a problem solving flexible organization but also because society itself had changed. Decentralization, budget cuts and recession all demanded a different approach to complaint handling. And of course citizens had changed as well. They had become more assertive and perhaps more demanding; they had become aware of what they were entitled to.

The organization had to be restructured

After the former director - who had been working for the Ombudsman for more than 20 years- had left, a reorganization was initiated by an interim director. As an interim he could not complete the restructuring and so he had to leave the completion to his successor who would have to implement the vision of Alex Brenninkmeijer in the institute. This was the situation I entered into in January 2007 when I became the secretary general of the institute. It did not take long to realize that the vision the Ombudsman had and the changes needed would have a great impact on the organization.

After my first 100 days in office, I wrote a letter to the organization in which I described what I found and what had surprised me during this period. The letter bore the title: " From village community to urban renewal". I will explain why. The organization as I found it, was a closed and cosy community. There was no culture of accountability and efficiency, and to put it very black and white: the staff determined their own deadlines and priorities. In other words, these professionals were used to be left alone. They had strict instructions on how to conduct an investigation and write a report but for the rest

they were free to act as they saw fit. Most of the staff had their own office or had to share it with just one colleague. People loved their work. They were proud of it.

So why should you change it? What was it that Alex Brenninkmeijer wanted? Why criticize something so decent and with such proven quality? This proved to be one of the most tenacious notions within the organization. It took a tremendous effort to convince the staff that change was necessary and would result in an improvement.

New Mission and Vision

The beginning was relatively simple. We first rewrote the mission of the Ombudsman. The mission of the Ombudsman now reads: to protect individual citizens against improper government actions.

Together with the middle management we wrote down our ambitions, our goals and our perspectives for the future. This vision was discussed in team meetings. In the end five key concepts were chosen that embodied the vision of the organization:

- A. *The National Ombudsman is service orientated.* The National Ombudsman Office is open and accessible to all citizens, including vulnerable and hard to reach groups. We act fairly.
- B. *The National Ombudsman has effective influence.* We want to prevent wrongful acts of the government and find smart ways to achieve this. We want to increase our influence and effectiveness, broaden and deepen it.
- C. *The National Ombudsman is about professionalism.* The staff of the National Ombudsman are involved and they are assertive professionals who see and hear what's happening in society.
- D. *The National Ombudsman acts transparently.* We offer citizens, government and politics a clear insight in our work and results achieved. We are accountable for our actions and use of resources.
- E. *The National Ombudsman is for sharing knowledge.* We share knowledge by offering knowledge and assembling it for own our organization and for others. By sharing knowledge, the quality of our work is guaranteed, we create unity in policy and implementation and work efficiently.

Then we described 34 actions needed to attain the fulfilment of the vision. These actions were not only the result of the new mission and vision but also included the conclusions that came out of an employee satisfaction survey.

We connected each of the 34 actions to one or more of the key concepts and asked ourselves the following questions:

1. Why are we doing this, what is the problem we want to solve?
2. What is the relation with the vision?
3. Which actions and results do we achieve?

4. Who is responsible?
5. Timetable?
6. Finance and means?

We then presented the result to the complete staff in a very special meeting. It may not come as a surprise that it did not receive a very warm welcome.

We decided to talk to the staff again. This time together and in a structural way. The Ombudsman and I met with all the teams to find out what reasons they had for their doubts. It became clear that there was resistance to change and a misunderstanding of what the changes could provide in a positive way.

So the culture had to change as well

On the basis of this we decided that a change of the organizational culture was also needed. This meant that any restructuring of the organisation also needed to take on a change in the collective behaviour.

I then initiated *Panta Rhei*. This phrase is from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus and refers to the continuous changing of things. You can never enter the same river twice. It was also a signal that this change was not a one-time only, but that we had to change continuously. A difficult message to deliver to people who were used to work in an atmosphere that had not changed for so many years.

I will now go into the most important actions that were introduced in order to attain the key concepts.

A. Service orientated

Citizens at the centre

The structure of the present organisation is no longer based on the needs of the staff but on how best to solve the problem of the citizen. Before we had teams that were dealing solely with complaints about governmental bodies such as the police, the tax authorities, or municipalities. Reality is however, much more complex. Citizens often run up against not just one but many public authorities who have a partial responsibility in the problem at hand. As part of this chain, it is easier for public authorities to point the finger to the next in line, than to solve it themselves. We now have organized the teams in such a way that they cover the chain of public authorities citizen encounter in real life. At the same time the number of teams and team managers was reduced from seven to four teams. We now have a team:

- Work, Income and Education
- Housing, Environment and mobility
- Youth and health care.
- Security, justice and refugees.

Direct approach

In the old situation someone called the National Ombudsman and got directly in touch with a staff member of the front office. The front office then checked if the complaint was within the jurisdiction of the ombudsman and if so, asked the person to send the complaint in writing to us. This could be done



either via mail, letter or fax. After receiving the written complaint, it was investigated and dealt with by an investigator. In most cases the complaint was first read and then the complainant was approached on the basis of the information he or she provided. It could happen that only after further inquiries, often in a telephone conversation, the investigator discovered that the problem lay elsewhere and was not what the initial complaint was about.

The direct approach means that we keep a front office, but that instead of asking the person to send us their complaint in writing, he or she is quickly put through to an investigator. Without any knowledge of the problem the investigator now explores together with the complainant what the problem is. This allows for a very open and inquisitive approach that leads to a more problem solving outcome. If the case is solved in this way, no files have to be made nor have there any letters to be written. This approach fulfils all the requirements of our vision.

Public Centre

Another action that we are working on right now is a Public Centre. In this centre our front office, people that take care of the direct approach (the investigators on duty that day) and a special group dealing with direct communications, will be united. The result aimed for is a department where:

- the phone is answered within 20 seconds
- An up to date Ombudsman site with complaint form and examples of letters is maintained
- a prompt action on your complaint is given (we will practice what we preach)
- the work is demand driven (do not focus on the complaint but on the need of the complainant)

The Public Centre plays an important role in establishing a connection between the outer and inner world: the world of the citizens and the world of our office. By identifying trends, noteworthy affairs and developments, we aim to establish this link. We make use of incoming questions, requests and signals, information from media and other external sources. The Public Center ensures that information that is important for both the public and staff of the National Ombudsman is directly accessible through the website (think e.g. of information about what to do with a common complaint) and on the intranet of the office. The Public Centre is therefore more than a conduit for information. It is our ears and eyes.

The Public Centre is also responsible for handling the extra-legal requests. It ensures that citizens are quickly and professionally helped by referring them to the relevant public authority/ Legal calls which concern the competence of the Ombudsman are put through to the teams by the Public Centre. The Public Centre also distributes the written complaints to the teams.

Everybody is welcome in the Public Centre: citizens with a general question or request, and anyone who has an appointment with the staff of the National Ombudsman. The centre will also be the place where brochures, information leaflets and other communication products can be ordered or picked up. This means that the public centre also has a reception function. The front office, the reception, the library and the communication (brochures, leaflets) for the public are brought together.

B. Effective influence

Newsroom

We started a weekly newsroom. It is meant as a creative and energizing way of gathering information and looking in new ways at recent developments in society and the world. About ten people participate each time: the Ombudsman and all the Deputy Ombudsmen, the director, some team leaders, a project manager from the large scale investigations department, head of the communication department, an investigator who noticed something special and so on. Standing around bar tables in the corridor of the institute we make an inventory of noteworthy cases, signals from the front office, striking complaints, intriguing newspaper articles, memorable statements are some examples of subject that can be brought up. The results are not written down in an (official) document, but put on a flip chart and then photographed and sent via e-mail to those in the organization it concerns.

The topics discussed can lead to an investigation on our own initiative, a phone call by the Ombudsman to a minister, a twitter message, a quick survey of the subject, an article written by the

ombudsman or even a public hearing. Everything that contributes to a solution is possible. This dynamic and interactive way of working has proven very fruitful.

Evaluations

We do not accept the products of our organization off hand as adequate. We evaluate all the time. Especially our reports and recommendations. We are constantly looking into ways in which to make them more effective and so have more influence on the public administration.

Clear language

The organization used to write rather formal legal letters. Even letters that were supposed to be clear in language were quite intelligible for a regular citizen. To get your message across you need accessible language which conveys a clear message. It was therefore decided that a clear language training was needed for the whole organization. But still we would like to go further and next year the staff will be trained in journalistic writing.

Ombudsman lecture

We introduced the annual Ombudsman lecture. This offers the ombudsman a floor to enlighten his observations and reflections. Every year there is a another theme, for 2011 it was trust and confidence, before that citizenship and chain problems. And on top of that all we started in 2012 with the annual letters. The best and the worse performing institutions (approx. 25) in 2011 received a letter from the ombudsman with his observations, questions and recommendations of their organization. This letter is then subject of a meeting between the Ombudsman and the head of the public authority. This can be a director but also a minister. There has been much appreciation for this method of working from both sides.

C. Professionalism

Professional

Professionalism is a container word. It holds each person's idea about that word but what does it actually mean and how does a professional act if he or she works for the Ombudsman? We described this extensively . The short version is that you are a professional if you are a good lawyer, aware of the effectiveness of your work, if you spot trends , if you are externally focused and if communication is a logical part of your work. So this was the standard to be met by people who wanted to be acknowledged as professionals of the office of the Ombudsman.

Growth path

We wrote a growth path for the investigators of our organization. The more you know and do, the more responsibilities you get. In two years' time you can reach the status of full investigator which means you can do a lot of cases on your own, without having to consult the senior lawyer of your team about cases.

D. Transparency

External

As mentioned above we had already introduced clear language in our organization. Language is the content of our work. But what about being transparent on the formal side: show where in the complaint handling process someone's case is? In the future we therefore want to have a tracking system with which the citizens can follow the progress of their complaint on the internet. We will start in 2012 with the digitalization of our workflow. The icing on the cake will be this tracking system.

And of course all our publications are available on our website.

Internal

On our intranet we publish information on the bonuses that are awarded to people, all the agendas of the staff are accessible including those of the ombudsman and the management. We even publish the agenda of the ombudsman on the intranet. Our facts and figures we discuss quarterly on team level and during a general meeting in our canteen.

E. Knowledge sharing

Internal

Knowledge sharing is not like professionalism a container concept but more or less a vague one. You can't catch it. The more you talk about it the less clear it becomes. It is all about behaviour. Are you prepared to invest in your colleagues? Will you make time to write down your experience with certain cases? Are you willing to share your knowledge?

Our focus was not only on the outside world, but also concerned the organisation itself. That is another story. To share the knowledge and experiences that exist within our office we thought that a Manual would be a good idea. But how to draft such a document and how could we stimulate the staff to contribute to this? A solution seemed to have been found in the creation of a Wiki setting. In this way, everyone could join in. We started with a table of contents and invited staff to add to this. After an initial slow start, the amount of submissions grew. Especially after we set up an editorial, things started to flow.

External

To share our knowledge with the outside world we make use of modern social media For instance the Ombudsman often twitters about his work. A more conventional form is the publication of speeches and the opportunity to spread knowledge via conferences throughout the year. This gives him lots of opportunities to make people aware of proper conduct and mediation. It must be noted here, that it is only the Ombudsman who can speak in public about the work of the institution. He is the sole spokesperson. The staff gives courses to civil servants regularly. They are aimed at improving the service mindedness of the civil servants .

Further actions

These actions created a great change within the organization, but of course more was needed. A wide range of other actions was set up. I will not describe the all but I will mention some findings that I find interesting.

Management style

Managers are expected to endorse the mission and vision in an enthusiastic manner and transfer this to their own staff. Again, practice what you preach is an important creed in this respect. Therefore, a diverse and comprehensive program was developed for and offered to all managers. The central theme was the development of consistency between the mission and vision of the institute and the qualities of the managers.

Feedback

The rollout of a feedback training for all employees started in 2011. A shared vision of leadership and what this actually means for your role and your own work as executives was central. During this training all staff members were taught how to give feedback on the behaviour of the people around them. Of course feedback is not only a negative instrument, but is also very useful when giving a positive signal.

Mediation techniques

We also provided training of mediation techniques for team leaders and senior investigators. The aim was to promote the ombudsmethod and in particular the mediation approach. Objectives were: To provide the managers and seniors with skills to assist investigators to develop , conflict resolution actions.

Coaching

One way to guide individual development is coaching. It is important to have a clear picture about the coaching / development needed. The manager and his or her team member draft these together and put these in writing. They form part of the personal development plan for the staff members.

Staff survey

Education and development is important but the right man at the right place is also important. That's why we organize a yearly survey of the complete staff. In a meeting in which all the managers are present we discuss every single member of our staff. We ask ourselves: is the person still on the right spot, or does he have talent and does he need to move on? Or is it someone who "deserves" another job in another organization? With this instrument we try to mobilize our staff horizontally, vertically or externally.

Did we succeed?

Yes, but we still have a long way to go. The new teams have been formed. The direct approach is starting to work. The structural approach is implemented in the organization. Mediation techniques are now part of our routines. We realise that we have to think of the effect of our solutions and no longer focus on the question if the rules are being followed. And finally the Public Centre is under construction.

It was a bumpy road to get there

Why was the road so bumpy?

1. The need for change was not directly apparent as things went quite well as they did.
2. Change can be experienced as criticism on performances
3. Staff was required to do a very different job than they were initially hired for. For a more academic person, complaint handling via the telephone is quite a different task to writing reports.
4. The changes in the organisation had taken too much time. Changes that seem endless, can give rise to uncertainty of what is expected.
5. It is important that you get your message across. Do the staff hear what you say and do they really understand it?

Where there is a will, there is a way

We are on the road. The direct approach is starting to work. There is even enthusiasm. A Public Centre is being developed. The structural approach becomes a more systematic way of working.

How to make such a journey smooth and easier?

- a. The role of the middle manager is crucial!
- b. Also you have to realize that you really intervene in the everyday life of your staff. The way they work, think and live.
- c. Ask yourself who's problem or which problem you are solving?
- d. And last but not least the ombudsman and the director (management) have to speak with one voice. The way you see the future has to match. Only as a tandem you will succeed. You have to agree completely about the goals you want to achieve, the way to reach these goals, the preferred method and the process.