2023

ANNUAL REPORT

Office of the Employee Ombud

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since opening in 2019, our office has seen a growth in cases each year. 2023 was no exception, going from 302 to 327 cases. What our case numbers do not capture is the complexity and impact of each case. A case, as we define it, is a single conflict. We ask each visitor what respectful resolution means to them and do our utmost to achieve that resolution. For 77% of our 2023 cases, there was a full or partial resolution. 6% did not achieve resolution, generally because informal methods couldn't achieve the requested outcome. In 17% of cases, we were asked only to provide background coaching or to receive information but not intervene in any way.

City of Seattle employees leave their concerns with OEO, we compile this information to present trends. In 2023, we saw emerging trends in four areas:

1. **Leadership culture**: Cases related to leadership culture include perceived lack of leadership capacity, a culture of fear or competition, and perceptions that leadership is not accountable. In contrast, we also observed leadership styles that were seen by employees as capable and accountable and where healthy dialogue and positive competition was fostered.
2. **Understanding formal processes**: Concerns about understanding formal processes, particularly investigations, centered on a perceived lack of consistency which has led in some cases to a breakdown in trust between staff and HR. Processes are inconsistent across departments, but some HR colleagues are doing tremendous work to share and publicize processes, and we could see the difference this made in building trust.
3. **Staff culture**: consistently reported cases related to lack of performance management, timely feedback, and perceived insubordination. We observed that intentional delivery and documentation of feedback, and strong collaboration between HR and management leads to staff performance improvements or a distinct performance management path, that can prevent conflict.
4. **Mental and emotional well-being**: reports related to mental and emotional well-being continued, particularly around how to manage staff behavior where there might be a mental health decline or how to work with and talk to staff about mental health crisis.

OEO's capacity-building efforts have continued to expand with new trainings, better outreach, and greater accessibility. 2023 saw the expansion of in-person training sessions, with 59 sessions reaching 1150 participants. Partnerships with SFD and SPU in particular allowed us to deepen departmental relationships while delivering large-scale training efforts to meet the unique needs of those departments. Our focus in capacity building in 2024 will be on expanding group facilitation offerings and on an intentional focus to infuse principles of restorative justice into our work.

NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

There is such intense turmoil in the world. 2024 has dawned with large scale global and local issues that directly impact the wellbeing of our workforce. The Ombuds office at the City of Seattle provides the safe space needed for employees to address all issues that impact their ability to foster a healthy workplace. Trust building, information sharing, and holding difficult conversations has been our focus over the past years.

As our office approaches its fifth anniversary in Spring 2024, our commitment to sustainable, trauma informed, conflict mitigation has redoubled. One of the most important lessons from 2023 for OEO has been the continued need for role clarity and explaining what services an Ombuds does or doesn't offer. We have developed more outreach materials and are seeking regular engagements with stakeholders to continue to provide that clearness of roles. Informality, impartiality and independence are essential principles for all ombuds offices.

Reviewing trends is a big part of OEO's work, a consistent trend over the years is the fact that employees need and appreciate having multiple options available to them. At any given time during the course of their employment at the City of Seattle, employees can turn to their department HR, the Civil Rights Office, HRIU, the Ethics Commission, Civil Service Commission or the Ombuds Office. That indicates a healthy work environment where people avail themselves of the support offered by various entities—all committed to a respectful workplace. Concerns that do get reported to OEO are evaluated for suitability to a discursive process. We routinely refer matters back and forth between formal processes and our own very informal way of addressing issues. OEO is one resource among a network of care at the City of Seattle, where employees can feel safe and heard. The most distinguishing aspect of our work is the informality with which employees can state what is important to them without making an official statement or leaving a record of their engagement with us. We take immense pride in bringing 77% of cases to employee requested resolution. Sometimes, it requires intense amount of coaching and trust building to realign expectations—not with the outcome desired but an outcome that is fair. Every conflict teaches us something about ourselves and our workforce. We are proud to share that learning with our City family in an objective, constructive and inclusive manner.

Best Regards,

Dr. Amarah Khan

CASE OUTCOMES & STATISTICS

Given the complexity of cases, our case management process including the intake and resolution phases varies based on the needs and goals of the City employee who engages our office. What remains a constant is that employees sharing concerns are empowered to decide what path to resolution they wish to take.

2023 At A Glance

Total Cases: 327	Backlog Cases: 0	Avg. Open Days: 45	Closed: 90%

Case Interventions

Our work is highly customized to meet the needs of the visitors to our office therefore our intervention strategies vary:

Back Channel Diplomacy	• Without identifying the employee(s), raising their concern to leadership with the goal of addressing and resolving it within their unit.
Coaching	• Working directly with employee(s) on their own communication and conflict management strategies to help them resolve issues without OEO's direct involvement.
Facilitated Conversation	• Convening a large group dialogue or listening session to help resolve issues or to raise collective concerns to leadership.
Mediation	• Facilitating a small group dialogue (2-3 people) designed to help each party address harms they have caused each other.
Training	• Collaborate with leadership to identify areas of growth within their unit and offer training developed and facilitated by OEO.

Training was included in our first two Annual Reports but has since become standard practice. The full list of training topics offered can be found in our Training Catalog.
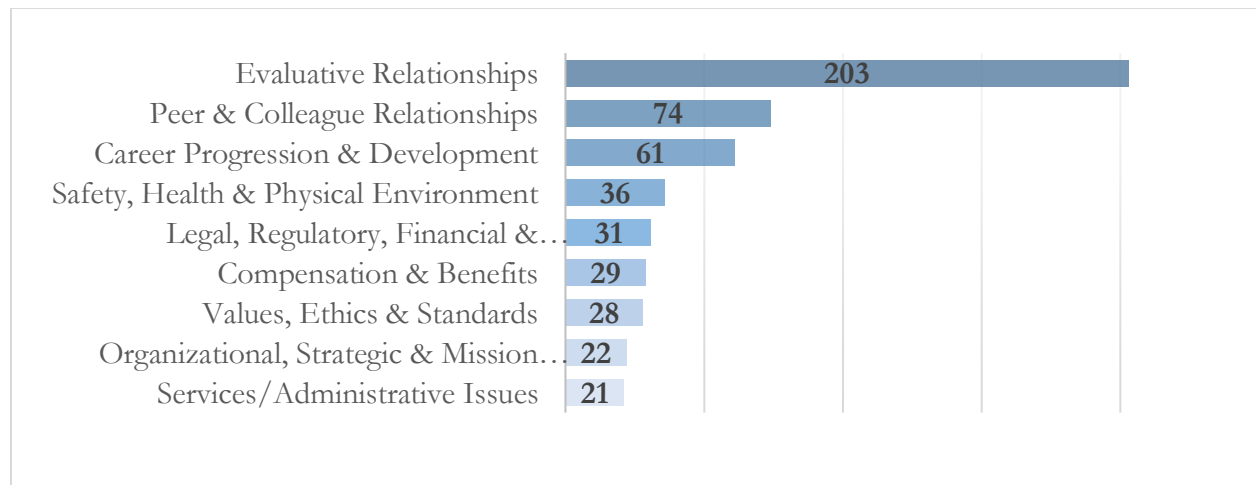
In 2023, our office engaged in the following intervention strategies:
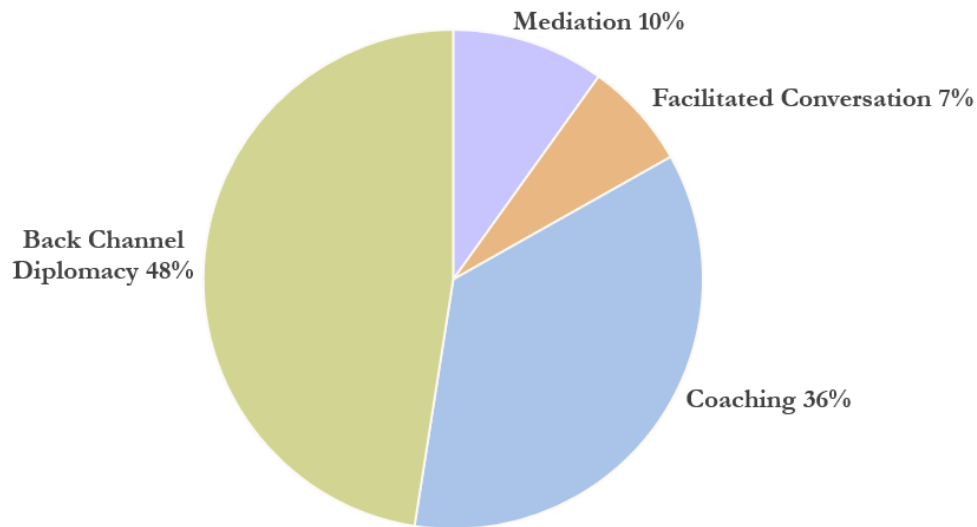
Reporting Categories

The OEO follows the International Ombud Association's (IOA) Standards of Practice which includes using OIA's Uniform Reporting Categories to identify and track our cases. Each of our cases may be designated one or more than one category. For example, an individual who is upset with their manager as well as their performance evaluation may be categorized as "Evaluative Relationship. If their evaluation could hinder future career prospects, it may be also considered an issue of "Career Progression & Development." The graph below provides a breakdown of the categories for our cases.

Case Outcomes by OEO Intervention

**Unable to achieve resolution through informal means and no formal means were available. 4%**

Helped individual without intervening directly or visibly. 22%

Worked directly with all parties involved to achieve resolution. 62%

Unable to achieve resolution through informal means, did not intervene, advised on formal options. 5%

Did not take action, but issue/concern was resolved or individual pursued other options. 7%

Case Outcomes by Requested Resolution

When an employee shares a concern, OEO first works to identify their respectful resolution. From there, we determine a path forward to achieve resolution with the employee, which may change over time. Despite the wide variety of respectful resolutions sought through our office, only a small number (6%) are not achieved. Many of those cases require a formal process or the employee opted to pursue different options. OEO halts or steps back if the employee has simultaneously engaged formal resources. Even when a resolution is "not achieved," OEO makes every attempt to work within the confines of the informal process and support employees.

Not Achieved 6%

No Action Requested 17%

Achieved & Partially Achieved 77%
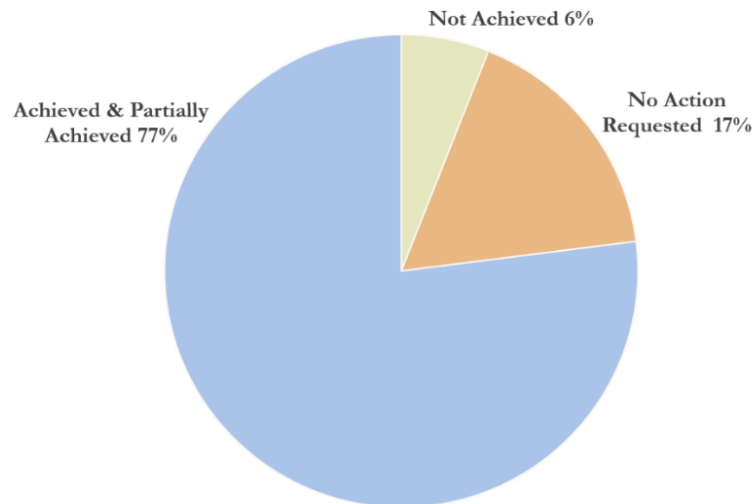
SYSTEMIC TRENDS & RECOMMENDATIONS

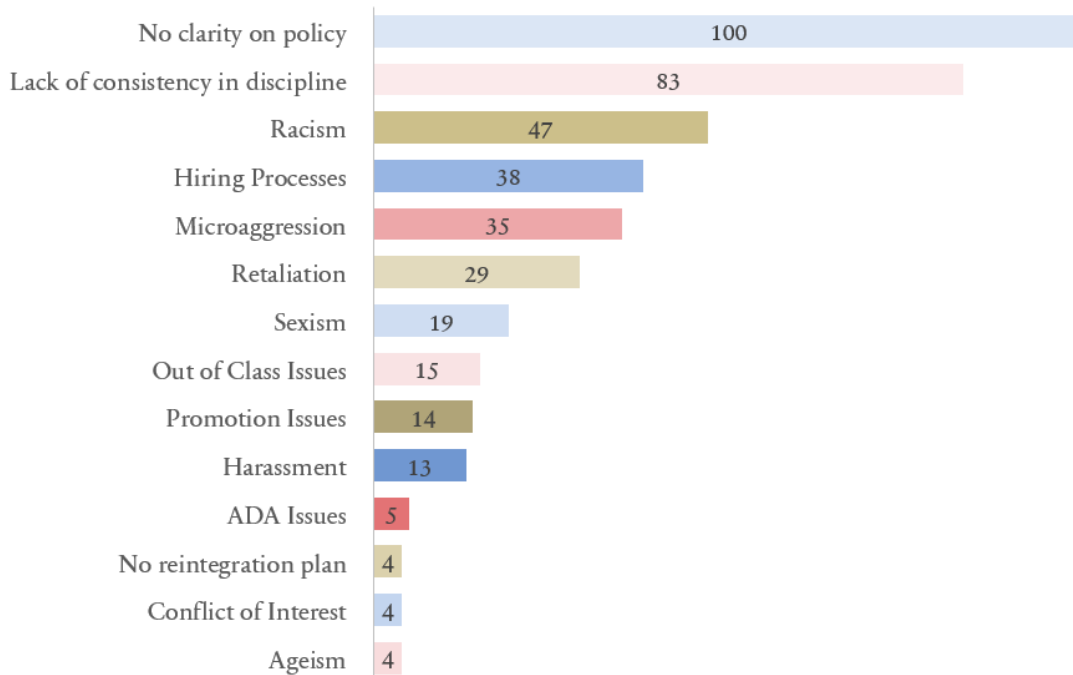## OEO's Role in Recommendations and Systemic Analysis

In addition to serving as an additional resource for staff to raise concerns, the OEO's Charter states that we also address issues that may extend beyond the individual employees and have a broader systemic impact on the City. All of our reports have tracked and provided data on trends that have remained consistent year-to-year. Data from our 327 cases in 2023 was analyzed for both those citywide trends previously reported as well as emerging trends.

We have seen consistent patterns year-to-year as we examine our cases. The observations we offer below are some of the common threads we determined between many cases from different departments s throughout the year. Our recommendations provide additional perspective and, hopefully, generate or contribute to ongoing conversations on meaningful change in these areas.

All the recommendations put forward by the OEO are informal and based on standard best practices for conflict mitigation. We'll be debriefing with our point of contacts on our observed trends to explore implementing our recommendations at the department level. Our hope in 2024 is to regularly present recommendations to Human Resources Leadership Team and to department directors.

2023 Citywide Trends

Each of our previous reports has provided data on ten trends that have remained constant since our office opened. Of our 327 cases in 2023, below are the updated numbers with some cases representing multiple trends.

Trend	Count
No clarity on policy	100
Lack of consistency in discipline	83
Racism	47
Hiring Processes	38
Microaggression	35
Retaliation	29
Sexism	19
Out of Class Issues	15
Promotion Issues	14
Harassment	13
ADA Issues	5
No reintegration plan	4
Conflict of Interest	4
Ageism	4

City of Seattle
Office of the Employee Ombud
Dr. Amarah Khan, Director

Last year, we reported on emerging trends in the following areas:

1. Department Culture
2. Leadership Capacity
3. HR Processes & Communication

Those trends continue to be salient in our 2023 Data, with department culture a continued concern for both large and small departments. As shared in our 2022 Report, we continue to believe that changes made in the areas of Leadership Capacity and HR Processes & Communication could result in positive impacts on the departmental culture. Last year, we recommended increased training for leaders, and have continued to partner with SDHR and department leadership to develop and increase the availability of leadership training throughout the City.

We also recommended that all complaint handling procedures be outlined and available for staff to review. In our 2023 cases, this continued to be a concern among City employees, who repeatedly reported varying degrees of transparency in HR processes. Over the last year, we have intentionally asked our HR colleagues from different departments about publicizing this information. What we have learned is that there is variation among City departments in what the complaint handling process looks like, and if this information is accessible. Some have the information centrally available, while others share it verbally when staff ask, and some are just beginning to consider documenting their complaint procedures.

As we have gathered this information, some of the challenges of our federated or decentralized HR model have become apparent. For example, the resources and capacities of each HR department vary as some have the resources to invest in the development of policies and procedures while others do not. We recognize the decentralized model allows for more autonomy and adaptability of HR techniques to the particular needs of every department. However, the inconsistency in practices and application of the Personnel Rules calls for better collaboration among HR teams aimed at exploring new avenues for transparency and information sharing.

Emerging Trends

IOA Standards of Practice state that "*The Ombud assists the organization by identifying procedural irregularities and systemic problems. This may include emerging trends, policy gaps and patterns of problematic behavior in ways that do not disclose confidential communications or information. The Ombuds may provide general recommendations to the organization for addressing those concerns.*" Here are some of the emerging trends our office noted in 2023.

A. Leadership Culture

Leadership Effectiveness

As touched upon in 2022's report, we see supervisors and individual contributors alike struggling with leadership capacity. Oftentimes, employees move to leadership positions based on their ability to perform technical skills or years of experience, and because there are no other avenues for career growth. This does a disservice to these individuals and their teams, as they are not given adequate support in tangible management skills. Some departments have leadership programs which greatly assist new managers, but, as the city is a federated model, this type of experience and support varies by department. There is no overarching training or knowledge base that applies to all people

managers. SDHR's new employee on-boarding programs are a great first step to familiarizing new employees to City rules and procedures. A collaborative program that offers team management baseline knowledge, designed on City's core principles would help new managers greatly. OEO is working in collaboration with SDHR to roll out fundamental training available to all managers in 2024 to assist in filling this gap.

Trust Building

Trust is in part built through transparency and meeting expectations. We often hear from or about managers struggling to build trust with their teams, and vice versa. Often there are differing understandings of decision-making processes. For example, employees believe that when their managers ask them for their viewpoints that their feedback *will be* incorporated. Sometimes managers are only asking for feedback to gather more information, or just want their employees to feel included. This lack of clear understanding and expectation setting in turn damages trust. Additionally, some employees take this type of interaction as proof that management doesn't have their best interests in mind or care about their concerns. In cases where managers are clear about how feedback on decision-making will be utilized, we have seen a more organic trust building experience, whether or not the feedback is ultimately incorporated. Employees assume much better intent from managers who are clear about the decision-making process and how their input will be utilized.

Trust is also broken when managers struggle to hold employees accountable. When employees continually come to management about harmful behaviors from their teammates and there is no visible action by management, employees are left with no understanding accountability standards. At worst, this can make employees feel singled out or targeted when they are held accountable for behaviors that have been ignored when committed by other employees. This lack of expectation-setting greatly decreases trust and leads to confusion. OEO has been working with our department contacts on creating consistent practices around acknowledging that complaints have been received, informing staff that review is underway, but any disciplinary decision cannot be shared due to privacy and personnel rules. Employees want to know that their concerns were heard, even if they don't learn the full outcome of a review process.

Culture of Fear & Competition

We have received concerns about perceived abuse of authority by decisionmakers which ties into the previous section around misalignment of expectations. When staff do not have clear expectations or understanding of their roles, they may perceive management actions, including decisions made, as an abuse of authority. Staff sometimes perceive these decisions to be inconsistent with policies or procedures and feel they have no channel to raise the concerns. They also report feeling pressure to keep things within the department, and that going outside of the department is considered a betrayal. This is often why OEO receives the concerns, as employees are worried about retaliation, sometimes to the level of termination, if they are to speak up about management actions.

Employees often report that management acts in a way that is either inconsistent, unfair, arbitrary, or unclear, meaning that they feel set up to fail. Frequently this behavior is directed at the entire staff, rather than targeting individuals on the basis of any protected category which could form the basis of a formal discrimination or harassment complaint. These actions are usually not to the level

of traditional adverse employment action, making it difficult to seek recourse through formal channels. These employees are often too afraid of retaliation to have informal conversations with management. Though these situations are challenging, OEO has utilized a variety of strategies to raise concerns or awareness about people managers to upper-level leaders and has found that our office's ability to offer anonymity opens up the potential for reporting of concerns that might otherwise go unreported.

Leadership Accountability

Many employees who bring concerns to OEO perceive leaders to be exempt from the accountability process. They report that once a leader reaches a certain level, they are "untouchable." This means that regardless of who raises the issues of borderline or clear mismanagement, the leader will not be held accountable. There is a perceived "brick wall," that allows leaders at a certain level to behave in ways that create toxic environments for staff with seemingly no way out.

When such concerns are brought to OEO, we aggregate this information and present it to the leader in the form of a coaching conversation. This is a positive conversation in which the Ombuds helps a leader see why they are perceived in a certain way, and what they can do to rebuild trust and their reputation. When leaders are open to this feedback and growth, we find that this approach can achieve incredibly positive outcomes.

Staffing & Workload issues

OEO receives concerns related to unfair distribution of workload by management. Staff explain that they have no mechanism to discuss their workloads or bandwidth, and instead are at the mercy of what their manager determines to be appropriate. An effective tool OEO has applied in situations like this is a workflow review. We equip the team managers with tools to review and document the workflow and task distribution across team members and then categorize duties as mission-critical or supportive. When managers have open, supportive conversations with staff about their workloads, staff feel more included and that their voices are heard.

B. Understanding Formal Processes and Building Trust

The structure of formal processes, particularly investigations, create inherent challenges to building trust and repairing relationships.

Without understanding what can or cannot be disclosed in a formal process, it is difficult to build trust. Investigations have confidentiality requirements which preclude sharing outcomes with those involved unless they are reporters or subjects. Those who are witnesses will know about the process without knowing the outcome. There are many constraints to what can be shared, especially during an active investigation. That said, we have observed that many HR colleagues have found ways to provide ongoing and appropriate communication throughout the process, and this has helped to deescalate tensions and allow employees some indication of what they can expect from those processes, no matter what their role. Continued communication through FAQs that are publicized could help employees understand what they can expect during an investigation, how to ask questions, and who to raise concerns with.

Staff are consistently informed that investigations are confidential, and that retaliation will not be tolerated. However, this often does not address how parties must work side-by-side while an

investigation is ongoing (especially when the Reporter and Respondent work in close proximity). Whether individuals adhere to the confidentiality provisions or not (and some staff don't), the tensions created by an investigation are tangible. Even with our HR colleagues working diligently to move through investigations, frequent complications lead to protracted timelines and delays that cause these tensions to escalate into conflicts.

Some cases allow for administrative leave or reassignment as viable means to create separation. But employees often have very little understanding about how each works or what their rights are. To date, we have not seen any readily available information about decision-making criteria or FAQs that define admin leave and reassignment, how they work, and when they are implemented. This communication would certainly answer a lot of questions we hear from employees and would be a small but impactful way to increase transparency.

When an investigation concludes, confidentiality constraints do not allow for open conversations and the ability to ease tensions among staff through dialogue or restorative practices. Investigations can damage how staff view each other and how they engage in the workplace. Our office has been involved in reintegration efforts to address this concern and to find out how staff are feeling after the conclusion of an investigation. Our initial results are very promising, and we have been able to pave the way for a more seamless rebuilding for teams across the City. For example, we have been able to gather basic questions and concerns from staff and to share that information with relevant HR and management. Staff have also appreciated these opportunities and it has provided them with a path forward to rebuild relationships and communication. Our office continues to try to find creative ways to bring teams together while adhering to protocol and we will continue that work in the coming year.

Consistency in Investigations
Similar to our 2022 trends, 2023 saw the reporting of more concerns about inconsistencies in the investigations process across departments. This is related to a lack of communication about the differences between fact-finding and formal investigations. Employees reported submitting a concern to HR that was either not appropriate or timely to investigate, but they didn't receive any follow-up. Employees often don't know which issues HR or other formal processes will address, and their perception is that their issues are not getting addressed while other people's issues are being prioritized.

Although most departments have an established practice of communicating on the opening of an investigation, many do not provide notice to parties of an investigated is declined. That said, in departments where explicit communication is provided in relation to a matter not being suitable for a formal investigation, staff better understand their options and find other ways to move forward— either through OEO or taking conciliatory initiative on their own.

Lack of Understanding of Hiring & Firing Processes
Confusion about progressive discipline and termination continue to be reported to our office. These processes, in contrast to the investigation process, are well documented, so our office has had a different experience in talking to staff about what they can expect. The grievance process, whether through a Union, the Personnel Rules, or Civil Service, provides additional options for an employee to raise concerns about or question the process if they do face termination. The process of

terminating an employment contract is easier if preceded by a well-documented progressive discipline approach. Our office continues to reflect that a Citywide database or Citywide guidelines on disciplinary action would be helpful to demonstrate consistency in discipline across departments.

Our office has also received fairness and bias concerns about the hiring process. While HR and management have done substantial work to document the process and to provide implicit bias training for staff, there continues to be a perception of unfairness in OOC appointments. Short-term OOC appointments happen without competitive hiring and do contribute in many cases to successfully landing a permanent role. The appointment process, especially for the permanent role, does have some restrictions, but the perceptions of favoritism or conflict of interest are much more likely to be a concern where someone is appointed. We know that appointments can create conflict among teams or escalate existing tensions between teams and management. In some cases, we've also seen conflicts de-escalated by following a more robust competitive hiring process, particularly when that process involves staff input.

C. Staff Culture

The organization is the people – we are the organization, and we contribute to its culture whether or not we are in positions of power. Employee reports shaped the emerging trends our office observed in 2023, as detailed below.

Performance Management & Feedback

Because our office ties systemic trends to our capacity building work, it is no coincidence that we created an *Effective Feedback* training in 2022, and that we have had continued interest in that training over the last few years.

Effectively delivering feedback, particularly informally, is one observation that our office has continued to identify as a challenge throughout the City. Managers often receive no formal training in how to deliver or receive effective feedback even though it is a crucial part of both the performance management process and, in some cases, the discipline process. Whether the outcome is improvement in performance or a performance management path, how feedback is delivered can make the difference to whether a conflict escalates. One of the most challenging situations we encounter is when feedback has not been effectively delivered to an employee over time. When their new manager attempts to offer critical observations, it can be met with resistance, denial, and sometimes outright hostility and insubordination because the employee has no idea that their performance has been an ongoing issue.

Documentation is also part of the challenge. Performance evaluations can be a great way to document feedback, but they are ineffective if they are the only tool a manager utilizes to provide feedback. We have found that some managers are hesitant to provide feedback because they are worried about the repercussions from staff. In these cases, staff may sense that their manager may not trust or respect their work, but don't understand why. Managers' concerns about repercussions are not unreasonable - we have seen many cases over the last year where staff grieve, rebut, or file discrimination or retaliation complaints once they receive anything other than the rating they are expecting. This can come before there is a chance to discuss the feedback, or even where the rating is "fully performing".

Additionally, when managers have been unable to effectively deliver feedback over time, staff may escalate their behaviors leading to situations where the necessary discipline seems much harsher and disproportionate because of never having faced any type of prior discipline. This can also lead to complications in rendering discipline, as HR in their compliance function may be hesitant in disciplining a staff member for the first time for behaviors that have never been documented or led to disciplinary action in the past. We have seen in our casework how collaboration between HR and management to effectively give and document feedback can lead to better staff understanding of the performance issues, and to improvements in those areas. Even where there are not improvements, effective feedback and documentation creates a more straightforward path to performance management and eventual discipline.

Perceptions of Insubordination

Insubordination, compared to other more subtle performance concerns, may seem easier to performance manage. However, accurately capturing that there is a clear refusal from an employee to follow a directive tends to be more complicated in practice. In addition, the directive and refusal must both be clearly documented in order for performance management to occur. In our observations, as staff have become increasingly aware of their rights and more willing to access formal channels to assert them, managers may be increasingly wary of issuing clear directives and documenting them. This wariness from managers is also apparent in our casework, and in some cases have heard from managers who believe that any directive they issue will be challenged by staff. In those cases, the manager now perceives that there is no possible way to offer feedback to a staff member. Again, this speaks to the need for effective collaboration between management and HR – when they effectively collaborate, they are able to ensure that the manager sets clear expectations and issues directives so the staff member can either improve their behavior or at a minimum have a clear understanding of the performance management path they are on.

Staffing & Workload Issues

There are no widely available means of conducting a workload audit at the City. While the reclass system examines whether work is at a certain classification level, it does not examine the volume of work. Staff frequently communicate that they have too much work, and it can be difficult for managers to push back on this assertion when they don't have a neutral means to assess work volume. Performance issues and perceptions of insubordination can be compounded by assertions of inadequate staffing or too high a workload.

D. Mental & Emotional Wellbeing & Safety

Safety Concerns

OEO has received concerns from onsite and frontline staff that their work locations are at times unsafe. Staff that work in the downtown core or other areas with high probability of crime raised ongoing concerns about being able to safely conduct their work. This can be tough to address, as each worksite is different and requires different safety protocols. We have seen that clear and timely mechanisms for reporting and rectifying safety concerns give employees an added sense of safety.

Staff also report concerns about safely traveling to and from work. Addressing this concern presents challenges, as the City does not have control over the routes people take to and from work. We have found that some teams have tried to address this from a grassroots level, by working to sync

schedules, allowing people to have groups to walk with to and from public transit stops and stations. These reports are particularly significant in times when race based bias incidents are on the rise in urban hubs across the US. OEO has consistently worked with public facing departments in offering employees the safe space to share safety concerns and brainstorm creative solutions for personal and team safety.

Aside from safety concerns with the public or worksites, staff also report safety concerns about the mental wellbeing of their coworkers. For example, someone may report that something seems "off" about their coworker because they are acting out of character by making inappropriate or dangerous comments. There are no city-wide resources or threat assessment tools for situations like this, leaving staff feeling helpless, and sometimes concerned for their own safety in the event this person escalates their behavior. We have seen a push in at least one department to bring on a threat assessment consultant, which we hope will help set a precedent for other departments.

We have also seen safety become somewhat of a buzzword and sometimes distorted. We have had conversations with employees who have reported feeling "unsafe" in various situations that would not look unsafe to an outsider. For example, meeting with a supervisor or coworker, often conflating discomfort with not feeling safe. Though this is a multidimensional issue with identity factors and positional power as contributors, we do see an overall resistance to facing uncomfortable situations and characterizing them as concerns of "safety".

How we communicate and discuss issues of safety is critical to providing an inclusive and healthy work environment. There are no City-wide resources around safety conversations, and no threat assessment tools to help staff (and their management) assess safety risks particularly around suicidal ideation or mental health crisis, with more intention and support. Both could help staff feel more supported and ready to engage in issues of safety.

Emotional Wellbeing
City employees want their emotional wellbeing to be prioritized. They report the "customer is always right" culture harms employees who are interacting with the public. These employees are not always provided with de-escalation training or formal protocols for dealing with challenging customers. In some departments, abusive customer policies have been introduced that help, but do not completely solve, this issue. Policies like this, as well as easily understandable and accessible reporting channels, help employees feel that their wellbeing is of significance.

As touched upon in the previous section, there is no protocol of how to approach emotional wellbeing concerns internally or externally. Staff are wondering how to help employees and the public get support without implying or diagnosing them with a mental health condition. Sometimes employees or members of the public have inappropriate emotional outbursts, and staff are underprepared to deal with them. Departmental care teams are helpful in these situations internally and serve as an informal "wellness check" for employees. Expanding these teams to a city-wide scope might also help staff feel more emotionally supported.

CAPACITY BUILDING

When reviewing our cases, we see patterns of common challenges employees face in the workplace. After analyzing this data, we are able to identify areas for capacity building efforts through education and outreach. The diagram below illustrates how those trends translate into our training topics. While these topics are informed by data, *Trauma Informed Care* is infused in and aligns with all trends.

TRAINING TOPICS

TRENDS

CASE

Leadership Skills
- Effective Feedback for Managers & Supervisors
- Conflict Management for Managers & Supervisors

Communicating in Conflict
- Conflict Management
- Divided We Fall: Preventing Polarization in the Workplace
- Bystander Intervention
- Effective Feedback

Inclusion, Race, and Social Justice
- Preventing Racism in the Workplace
- Preventing Harassment & Discrimination in the Workplace
- Appreciating Cultural Differences in the Workplace

- Trauma-Informed Care

Training

As work conditions are ever-changing, we have made extensive revisions of our entire catalog this year, mindful to include the most recent research in our trainings to make them more applicable to current City staff. 2023 brought a dramatic shift from largely virtual to almost entirely in-person trainings. We delivered 59 trainings to over 1150 participants. Our most popular classes this year were *Trauma-Informed Care* (11 sessions) and our newest course, *Divided We Fall- Preventing Polarization in the Workplace* (14 sessions).

Data from our training surveys revealed 88% of participants rated the quality of the training they received as good or very good. Additionally, 92% of respondents rated their experience with the trainers specifically as good or very good. As an adaptive, learning organization, we greatly appreciate participants taking time to evaluate our trainings. As a result of this essential feedback, we continuously adapt and revise our trainings. Some examples include presenters using microphones presenters to reach a large audience, hosting trainings in-person, adding more time for scenarios and small group discussions, and more time for questions.

Partnerships

Many of our trainings are delivered as a result of the partnerships developed with different departments. These relationships lead to the identification of needs or gaps in knowledge among their staff and, together with OEO, capacity building efforts that meet those needs are co-created. We had two major partnerships with Seattle Fire Department (SFD) and Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) this year that led to large-scale training efforts within their departments.

The SFD-OEO partnership led to the delivery of several *Divided We Fall* sessions (most of them virtual) to all administrative staff, Chiefs, and Captains. Looking ahead to 2024, the OEO will continue delivering *Divided We Fall* to new Lieutenants in SFD's Lieutenant Academy. The response to this has been noteworthy on two fronts: 1) relationships with leadership have been strengthened, and OEO is better poised to provide ongoing crucial content and 2) participant engagement is excellent when the session is done in-person.

The SPU-OEO partnership resulted in offering *Conflict Management* as well as the creation of a hybrid *Addressing Harassment and Discrimination in the Workplace/Bystander Intervention* training delivered to their Supervisor Training Cohorts in 2023 and 2024. This department-wide approach provides coherence in the information received across their supervisory teams. We will be monitoring the impact of those trainings on leadership development in the department as a whole.

In the coming year, OEO will be collaborating with SDHR to combine our knowledge in co-creating leadership-focused baseline training.

Outreach & Process Changes

A barrier to departments accessing OEO trainings is the lack of knowledge and awareness that those trainings exist. Knowing this, we increased outreach activity to include sending flyers advertising our trainings to all department contacts. Additionally, while streamlining our outreach process, we implemented an intake process for all requests, allowing us to better discern the specific needs of each department or group requesting training. As a result of that intake process, we often discovered that the issue was more about an individual or a current conflict, which allowed us to use alternate strategies including group facilitation, mediation, and/or individual coaching before offering capacity building support to the entire team.

Group Facilitation & Restorative Practices

The 2023 emerging trends identified a need for more group facilitation and restorative practices.

OEO's Capacity Building team is focusing on increasing our group facilitation offerings in 2024. We have been piloting the use of many group facilitation techniques for a variety of purposes including trust-building, problem-solving and mediation. OEO uses radically participative Liberating Structures as one technique to transform teams and conflict situations. Our new case management system will also allow us to more accurately track the number of group processes offered as well as the conclusion of those processes.

Additionally, OEO is extending our practice to include restorative efforts, which focus on strengthening relationships between individuals as well as social connectors within communities. Restorative practices are needed particularly around the conclusion of formal processes, and also in cases of organizational transition. Two of our staff have completed a three-day training through the National Center for Restorative Justice. With this growing knowledge of restorative practices, we hope to bring accountability and community building circles to teams looking to build trust, move through conflict, or adjust to staffing changes.

2024 PRIORITIES

Priority 1: Engage in frequent information sharing with City leaders.

- Focus on sharing trend analysis and observations with department leaders and MO leadership, brainstorm strategies to address issues. Increase efforts to provide role clarity and situational awareness of the OEO.

Priority 2: Prioritize restorative practices in all of our services.

- A lot of our work is focused on 1:1 conflict resolution, but we have become involved in more group work as the need arises. As a resource for City departments, we want to offer more team-building, reintegration, and relationship repair efforts.

Priority 3: Continue promoting OEO services to City staff.

- Ongoing. Visit City workforce outside the downtown area. We continue to maintain zero backlog and are able to work quickly to help visitors find resolution with an average of 45 business days from case open to case closure.

Priority 4: Continue collaborating with SDHR and other partners on training and capacity building efforts.

- OEO meets regularly with collaborators who develop training content for employees. Working closely ensures that trainings offered to City staff are consistent and timely.

Priority 5: Case IQ, OEO's new case management system and secure portal to submit concerns, went live on 01/02/24. We will monitor it for efficiency and ease of use.

- The new system comes at considerable cost savings. We intend to do outreach to each City department to make sure access to OEO services is still easy and hassle-free.

CONCLUSION

As the City of Seattle grows and embraces new challenges, our workforce is growing with it. OEO has made it easier for employees to share with decision makers how they experience life as a City employee. Every report submitted to the Office of the Ombuds is one dimension of a complex story. The beauty of an informal process lies in our ability to bring stakeholders to the conversation table as equals. We are honored that employees trust us with their lived experiences and decision makers trust us with informing them of these issues so they can design the most feasible response. There are a lot of organizations that choose to oppress and ignore employee voices. Let's celebrate working at a city that cares to know how our employees describe their workplace.