



2025 Annual Report

Seattle Office of the Employee Ombud

Contents

PAGE 3	Director's Note
PAGE 4	2025 OEO Service Statistics
PAGE 7	Systemic Trends
PAGE 9	Recommendations for Improved Workplace Culture
PAGE 11	Conclusion

Director's Note

Marking the seven-year anniversary of the creation of the Office of the Employee Ombud, we reflect on our continued evolution. Across these years, we have witnessed patterns of transformation—in our relationships with the city family, in the depth and breadth of our work, and within ourselves as practitioners.

As with any large workplace, there are recurring pain points and shared challenges across departments, often intensified by systems and structures that can feel impersonal, complex, and difficult to navigate. Within this reality, our role is to gently disrupt silos—not through enforcement, but through invitation. We create space for conversation where it has been missing, and in doing so, open pathways to collaboration and collective problem-solving. As we accompany employees through moments of conflict, uncertainty, and vulnerability, trust begins to take root. Relationships strengthen, and new possibilities emerge.

An important lesson learned here is that meaningful transformation does not arise from quick fixes or one-time interventions. It unfolds over time, through sustained attention and care. Increasingly, we are walking alongside teams as they build the skills and capacities needed to meet their own challenges—whether through facilitation, training, coaching, change management, or restorative practices. This deeper engagement is reflected in our highest annual case volume to date. While budget constraints continue to shape the scope of what we can offer, they have not diminished our commitment. We remain steadfast in our support of City employees and the health of the organization as a whole.

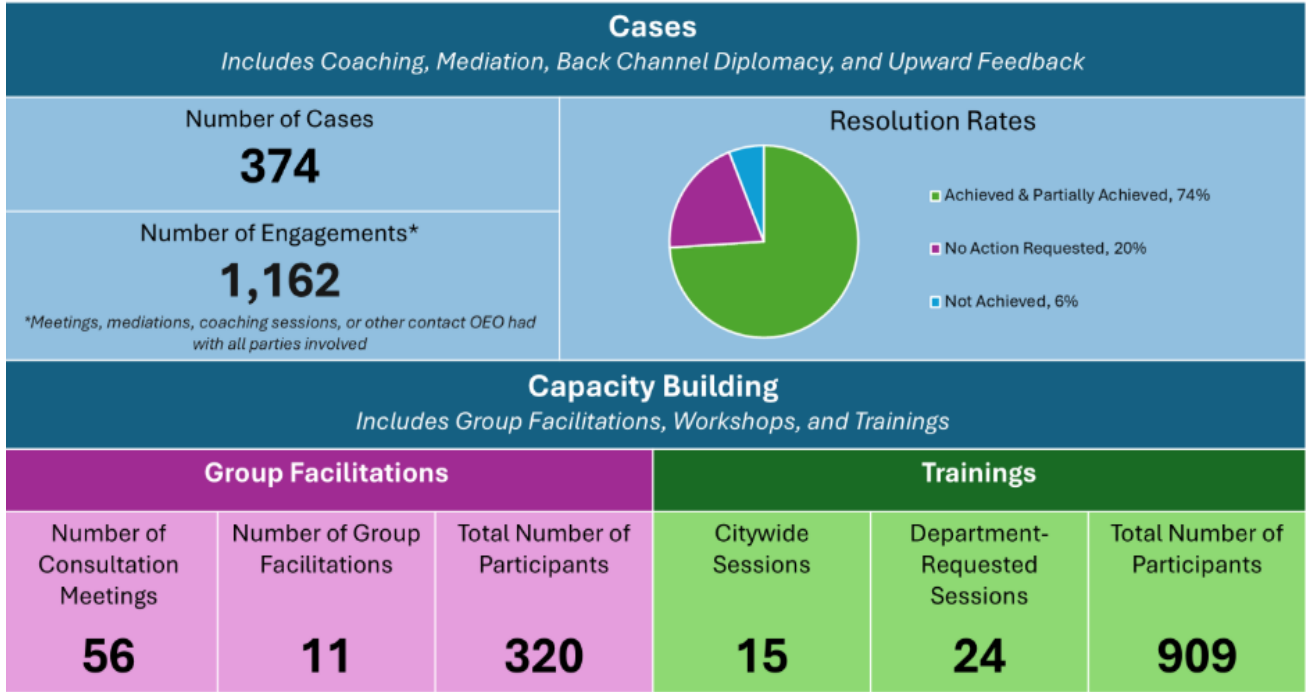
We are learning that transition is a time for growing pains and new beginnings. OEO is uniquely positioned to offer safety as employees navigate new leadership, new visions and sometimes, a re-set. One of the most rewarding outcomes of the past seven years of conflict management services to City of Seattle employees, is the increased trust placed in our ability to help address conflict before it corrodes relationships. For everyone who has put their faith in dialogue and respectful engagement, we are grateful for your investment in the City community. It is absolutely essential, that our workforce is afforded multiple avenues for navigating the complexities of a dynamic workplace. The small team at OEO is privileged to be one such resource.

We believe that healthier organizations are built through intentional relationships—and that transformation, at every level, begins with how we show up for one another. In the years ahead, we remain committed to this work, trusting that small, human-centered shifts can ripple outward to create lasting change across the City.



Dr. Amarah Khan, Director
Office of the Employee Ombud

2025 OEO Service Statistics



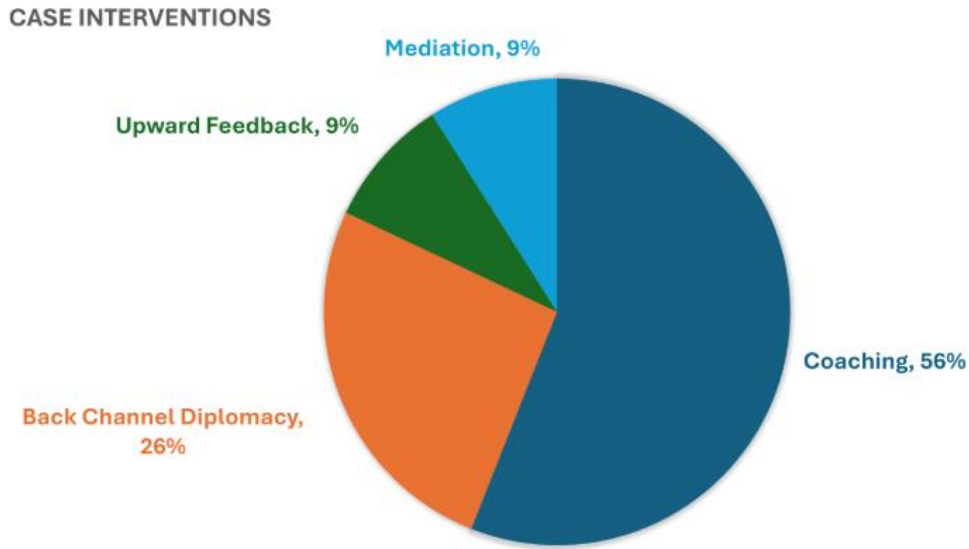
OEO Cases Year-Over-Year, 2019-2025



*These case numbers do not include capacity building efforts such as group facilitation or training

Case Intervention Strategies

A detailed description of the intervention types can be found in our previous reports. In 2025, our office engaged in the following intervention strategies:



Reporting Categories

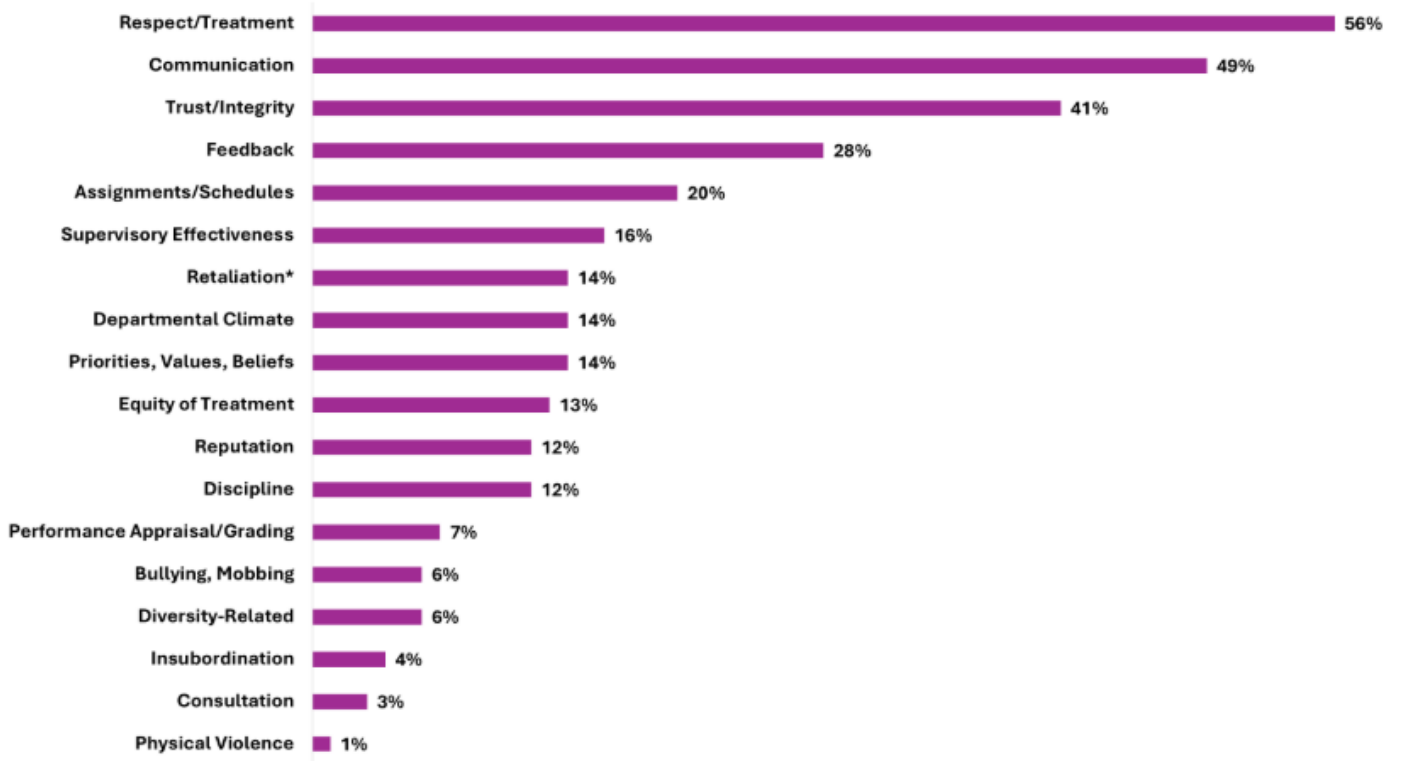
The OEO follows the International Ombud Association’s (IOA) Standards of Practice and tracks concerns using the IOA’s [Uniform Reporting Categories](#) and sub-categories. Each case may include more than one category. The graph below provides the frequency of the IOA categories in our 2025 cases:



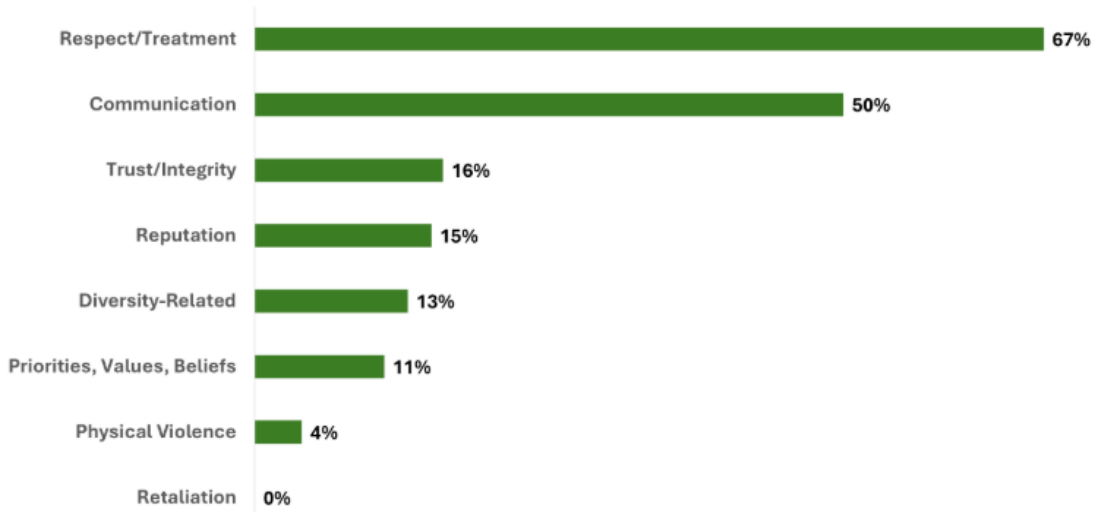
Strained Relationships

The top two categories of concerns, Evaluative Relationships and Peer & Colleague Relationships, had the same highest sub-categories of Respect/Treatment and Communication.

Evaluative Relationships Sub Categories



Peer and Colleague Relationships Sub Categories



Systemic Trends

OEO case data reveal issues that repeat themselves as trends across the City. Four primary trends are described in the tables below in a narrative form. Each example shows how these issues typically show up vs. how they should be addressed in a healthy work environment. The four trends are found in the boxes below:

Trend: Lack of Respect and Equitable Treatment	
<p>A woman whose first language is not English is regularly interrupted in meetings and her ideas are often dismissed or overlooked. Comments like “I have a hard time understanding her” are made that are not raised with others. The pattern is subtle, but consistent. The woman is unsure whether to raise it fearing the consequences for questioning current practices.</p>	
<p>What Typically Occurs</p> <p>These exclusionary behaviors and comments are minimized or reframed as differences in personality or communication style. It is not directly addressed by anyone in the moment.</p> <p>Over time, the employee feels disrespected and singled out, and so becomes disengaged from meetings or collaboration with colleagues. Others notice but do not intervene, so she believes it is widely accepted behavior.</p>	<p>What Should Occur</p> <p>Clear expectations are set for how team members engage with one another, including equitable space to contribute. Comments or behaviors that don’t meet these expectations are addressed in the moment with compassion, care, and a culture of learning. Everyone takes responsibility for a respectful culture by using deviations as learning opportunities. As a result, the team develops resiliency and changes the culture by enhancing their awareness and correcting their behaviors.</p>

Trend: Avoiding Direct Communication & Difficult Conversations	
<p>A white employee experiences dismissive comments from and is often left out of key decisions by their black coworker. The white employee shares this concern with their supervisor who is also white. The supervisor feels uncomfortable and hesitant to directly address this with the black employee because they don’t want the callout to be perceived as racist.</p>	
<p>What Typically Occurs</p> <p>Supervisors often hesitate to address issues, particularly where there is a racial component, because they don’t know how and/or don’t feel empowered. This results in avoiding the issue and hoping it will resolve on its own.</p> <p>Conversations don’t happen, are delayed, or softened to the point of being unclear. The focus shifts to maintaining short-term harmony rather than addressing the problem. Frustration builds between both employees and positions harden as the behavior continues, so the issue escalates beyond the point where a simple conversation could have resolved it. The unaddressed behavior gets normalized and becomes part of a subculture that is toxic.</p>	<p>What Should Occur</p> <p>Difficult conversations focusing on clear expectations for respectful and inclusive conduct happen earlier, before positions harden and harm happens. There must be an acknowledgement that race is indeed a factor in workplace conflict, but workplace issues still must be addressed with intention and maturity.</p> <p>Supervisors use critical skills to name behavior, describe impact, and invite mutual problem-solving and accountability. The conversation with both employees is direct, specific, and grounded in shared standards – not personalities, as follow-up occurs to ensure change. The result is timely resolution, de-escalation, and a team that sees difficult conversations as an essential part of effective leadership, not something to avoid.</p>

Trend: Impacts of Investigative Processes

A complaint about workplace misconduct is reported to HR which results in a formal investigation. While confidential interviews are conducted, employees begin to speculate and rumors fill the gaps of procedural silence. These assumptions become beliefs and the fracturing of the team intensifies. With the ongoing investigation, employees struggle to work together, either avoiding each other or engaging in open conflict. Several months later, there are no findings from the investigation and it's formally concluded.

What Typically Occurs

Management avoids intervening due to lack of clarity of what they have the right or authority to do while the investigation is ongoing.

After it concludes, impacted employees continue to work together with no dialogue about the rift within. In the absence of visible accountability, people draw their own conclusions that certain behavior is tolerated or unevenly addressed.

Although the investigation is formally closed, harmed relationships remain and the damage from the conflict continues with no outlet to address the harm.

Repeated concerns like misconduct, workplace bullying, and microaggressions are not flushed out and defined with clarity—or at times not prioritized compared to claims of harassment and discrimination.

What Should Occur

When employees file a formal complaint, the process is streamlined with clear and timely communication. The definitions for prohibited behaviors in the personnel rules are clearly defined.

Throughout the investigation, status updates occur between HR, leadership, and those impacted. When an investigation concludes, relationship repair is prioritized with restorative practices by engaging in dialogue about what occurred, the impact, holding space for accountability, and reinforcing expectations to ensure harmful situations are avoided. Decision makers remain present, monitor the environment, and take action as needed.

Accountability is visible, even when protected details are not.

Trend: Lack of Accountability

A supervisor demonstrates ongoing performance concerns including inequitable allocation of assignments and privileges, inconsistent decisions, and dismissive interactions with some staff. The impact is uneven but widely felt. Concerns are raised and leadership is aware.

What Typically Occurs

Leadership states that the issue will be looked into, yet the process is opaque and follow-up is largely absent. Meanwhile, the concerning behavior continues.

Over time, some employees are given more opportunity and flexibility, while others face greater scrutiny or are excluded from opportunities altogether. Work is redistributed inequitably, often to those already carrying more.

The perception of unfairness and uneven accountability grows, trust declines, and some people even fear losing their jobs.

What Should Occur

Leadership addresses the impact early and clearly, documenting feedback, defining expectations for equitable treatment, and offering real support. Progress is monitored, in part, by checking in with those most impacted.

Accountability is applied consistently, regardless of hierarchy or connections with leadership. Work assignments, access to opportunities, and performance expectations are reviewed to ensure fairness. Leaders are attentive to broader impacts of decisions and shares the criteria for their decision making wherever feasible.

The result is clearer standards, more transparent and equitable practices, and increased trust concerning accountability.

Recommendations for Improved Workplace Culture

The Seattle Office of the Employee Ombuds is an impartial and informal entity. We are an internal facing office, so our logical partners are department level HR professionals and the central Seattle Department of Human Resources. The following recommendations are legally nonbinding, but offer a roadmap towards a more responsive, equitable, and relational organizational culture.

Build a Leadership Academy

Develop an integrated approach to leadership development and conflict engagement for all people-managers.

Provide resources to develop learning tools focused on relational leadership, emotional intelligence, inclusive culture building, and conflict engagement skills.

Such an academy could serve as a unified Leadership and Conflict-Competency System whereby all people managers learn from the same curriculum—the idea is to help standardize expectations for how leaders navigate difficult conversations and support equitable environments.

Action Items

1. Convene a team of diverse subject matter experts from across the city to build a leadership academy. The team will develop curriculum aimed at leadership capabilities at the individual, team and organizational levels.
2. Provide SDHR time, personnel and resources to collaborate and generate content to develop a prototype to be launched by Spring 2028.
3. Integrate conflict competency, restorative practices, and equity-centered leadership into all training modules.
4. Develop a set of core leadership expectations tied to the City's values and incorporate them into mandatory performance evaluations for people managers.
5. Create a long-term learning model (e.g., refreshers, coaching, peer-learning cohorts) to reinforce skills in practice.

Create an Integrated Conflict Management System

Establish a coherent and simplified system for handling concerns at all levels—from early, informal issues, to formal processes—so employees and leaders understand their options.

Diverse pathways for reporting concerns already exist in the City of Seattle. What employees need now is more clarity and transparency in terms of what response they can expect.

Streamlining the process is especially necessary if employees are reporting issues to more than one entity.

Action Items

Build shared understanding of conflict management protocols. Empower OEO and SDHR to host a series of meetings with diverse stakeholders in 2026-27 to improve response protocols to employee concerns.

Formal: For all concerns that meet the threshold of a personnel rule violation meriting an investigation either by department HR or HRIU, offer clarity on timelines, next steps, what to expect during formal interviews, who is interviewed and why, how findings are published and who is notified.

- Notice of investigation launch
- Notice of investigation pause
- Notice of investigation report being compiled
- Notice of investigation closing
- Notice of corrective action (without disclosing the nature of correction)

Informal: For all concerns that do not meet the threshold of a personnel rule violation, develop a published set of pathways outlining options such as coaching, facilitated dialogue, and restorative processes.

2. Triage Decision-Making Tool

Assess the nature, severity, and context of each concern using a simplified tool. OEO can develop the tool, SDHR can implement its application across departments. This decision-making tool would guide leaders, line managers and HR in finding the optimum path given the particular context of a situation, whether it be a formal or informal pathway.

- Create shared definitions and expectations for conflict engagement to reduce variation and increase transparency.
- Departments should share data yearly on how many investigations were launched, how many were concluded, how many are pending and the average time it has taken.

Triage Training. Intended for integration into the Leadership Academy curriculum, experts will train HR teams and managers across City departments to triage a wide range of situations using the decision-making tool.

Appeals: Develop an appeals/recourse mechanism if formal processes don't lead to resolution.

Communication: Incorporate periodic feedback loop with reporters. Develop notification mechanisms into both formal (HR) and informal resolution (OEO) methods so employees receive clear acknowledgment that their concerns are being addressed no matter how long the process takes.

Align Citywide Systems, Values & Practices

The City should ensure that employee support structures, personnel rules, and stated values function as a coherent system.

Prioritize alignment of values, expectations, and personnel policies in such a way that all employees can easily refer to them in one location/platform.

The application of these values and enforcement of the personnel rules should be consistent across all departments.

Mandate cross-department learning, data-sharing and coordination to ensure that violation of rules in one department is handled in a standardized manner similar to another department.

Action Items

1. Add a new workstream to the 'Good Governance' sub-cabinet focused on Employee Well-being.
 2. Empower SDHR to involve HRLT in conducting a Citywide review to identify misalignments between values, behavioral expectations, and personnel rules.
- Use this review process to update policies or guidance where needed to ensure consistent interpretation and application across departments.
 - Publish a Citywide framework/guidebook providing expert guidance on how decisions should be made related to discipline. Some examples are:
 - Under what conditions can someone be placed on Admin leave
 - What are the criteria for suspension
 - Are all employees required to fill out a conflict-of-interest disclosure
 - Under what conditions do we hire outside investigators
 - Is a letter of expectation step 1 of progressive discipline?

Conclusion

As we reflect over the tenure of our office, we recognize the need to address systemic sources of conflict. The recommendations above reflect a shift from reactive to proactive systems—where the City not only responds to challenges, but actively builds the conditions for trust, accountability, and healthy working relationships to thrive. Trust is a hard-earned value in any ecosystem. Over the years, employees from across the City have used OEO as a platform to share emerging and at times, pervasive issues related to culture, conduct, and lack of accountability.

Our promise and practice have been consistent; we will always keep decision makers informed and partner with them on solutions that are clearly aimed at a fair process for all involved. Neutral and impartial, we don't have enforcement capacity, but we use intentional relationship building as a tool to influence better processes and outcomes.

Responding to the growing need for our services, both as conflict management support and capacity building to mitigate conflict, we are working with the Mayor's Office to carve creative solutions on greater bandwidth and staffing for OEO. In 2026, we aim to streamline our internal structure and provide more dedicated assistance to larger City departments in the hope that our collective efforts would lead to proactive instead of reactive response to workplace concerns