

Ombuds Insights

Monthly resources to communicate clearly, disagree productively, and connect authentically.



1, January 16, 2026

Contents:

[Welcome Message](#) | [Skills to Address Polarized Dynamics](#) |

[How to Schedule an Appointment](#)

Welcome Message

Welcome to the monthly newsletter from the Office of the Ombuds, where we'll share articles and resources for addressing challenging workplace and learning dynamics at UCSF Health and campus.

Our first issue elaborates on an article from the Chronicle of Higher Education, "[How to Defuse a Classroom Conflict: Make It More Complex: Five practices to help students break through all the binary thinking](#)" by Caroline Mehl and Jonathan Haidt (Nov. 30, 2022).

While the article focuses on the classroom, its insights apply to all settings where polarization creates fractures within teams, divisions, departments, and the institution. While right/wrong, yes/no, good/bad thinking or arguments can be strongly held, they don't tend to be convincing or engage people in the harder work of understanding, collaborating, and learning. Acknowledging complexity, however, encourages nuanced thinking and deeper dialogues, often with more effective results.

The Office of the Ombuds can support voluntary and confidential dialogue to support complex conversations.

- Ellen Goldstein, MA

Director, Office of the Ombuds



Pictured here are the four members of the Office of the Ombuds (clockwise, starting top left): Ellen Goldstein, Kate Flynn, Jonah Pedersen, and Paula Trejo-Phillips. To learn more about the Office of the Ombuds team, visit the [Ombuds website](#).

Skills to address polarized dynamics on your team: lessons from Mehl and Haidt.

(Article summarized with additional UCSF resources. The original article is [available here](#).)

No. 1: Set norms to guide discussions. Commit to PRIDE Principles in difficult conversations, with professionalism and respect as foundational guidelines. The adage “be curious, not furious” can help colleagues and learners explore the complexities of a stance, making conversations potentially more productive. Slurs and insults are never appropriate.

Similarly, there are options for addressing problematic behavior, with the practice of “calling in” instead of “calling out.” While calling out is done publicly and often shames the speaker, calling in happens in private conversation, with compassion and patience. Dr. Loretta Ross adds the concept of “calling on” as another alternative in her [TED Talk](#).

No. 2: Establish trust and rapport before diving into divisive topics. Wade into a challenging topic by establishing a trusting environment, based on the [UCSF Principles of Community](#). We recognize the critical step of “connection before correction” and the extensive literature on the role that trust has in productive workplace dynamics. Amy Edmondson, the author who coined the term “psychological safety,” discusses its importance to effective teams. Watch Edmondson’s [two-minute video summary of the topic](#) or read her book, Edmondson, Amy C. [The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth](#). John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

No. 3: When discussing difficult topics, try different techniques to foster complexity. Pay attention to your framing. Rather than present two sides of the issue, introduce a broad range of perspectives, goals, and quotations from each side.

Explore the motivations behind people's positions. Push beyond the basic stances and ask them to explain why they hold their position. Help your team develop a habit of searching for and appreciating the complexity on all sides.

No. 4: Model the behaviors you'd like to see on your team. To demonstrate intellectual humility, highlight the value of people being willing to question their own assumptions and admit when they are wrong by doing this yourself. Actively encourage different perspectives, and respond to opposing ideas with gratitude and gusto, as long as it is offered in good faith and without hostility.

No. 5: Ground discussions in personal stories. Providing the opportunity for colleagues to share life experiences that have informed their own views can be a powerful tool in opening people up to considering opposing viewpoints.



Image: Wildflower blooms against a backdrop of the UCSF Health Sciences West building, on a typically foggy August morning in San Francisco.

How to Schedule an Appointment

To protect confidentiality, the Office of the Ombuds prefers to conduct business in person or by phone rather than email, as electronic communications are not always private.

For appointments, call: (415) 502-9600. If we are unable to take your call, we will return it within one business day.

Office hours: 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday.

The Office of the Ombuds welcomes everyone, including individuals with disabilities. Please let us know if you would like an accommodation for your meeting. If calling to schedule presents an accessibility barrier, please email our office to schedule: ombuds@ucsf.edu.



UCSF Office of the Ombuds

Office Number: 415-502-9600



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