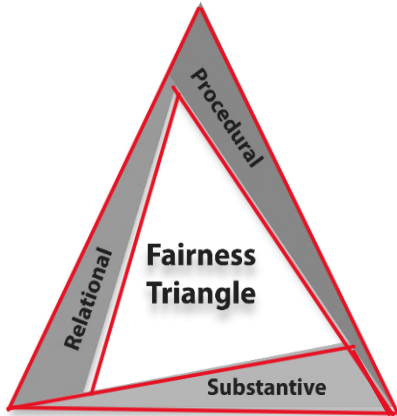


Office of the Ombudsperson



Ombuds and the Fairness Triangle

Among organizational ombuds' core values is the promotion of fairness, while support for equitably administered processes is featured in our governing association's standards of practice under the impartiality principle.¹

The Fairness Triangle offers three dimensions with which to gauge the fundamental fairness not only of decision-making and decisions but can also aid in making, operationalizing, and reviewing policy. It is a helpful construct in training individuals with administrative responsibilities attendant to policy and process, such as those holding adjudicative and compliance roles. Additionally, it is a valuable tool for those who initiate and/or participate in processes, for instance, faculty regarding academic matters and students who may be unfamiliar with the requirements of due process.

1. PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS

How was the decision and any other determination made? This dimension is all about fidelity to policy and protocols, and to the mechanics of the process. It standardly includes notice; access to relevant information; the right to respond/refute; an opportunity for impartial/unbiased review; and a requirement to communicate a decision, its rationale, and any outcomes.

- Provide timely notice and sufficient information for participants to know what is expected and what is at stake
- Provide a suitable forum for participants to present relevant information and for their perspectives to be adequately heard
- Be impartial and unbiased in hearing and in learning
- Notify of decisions within stated timelines; inform of any necessary delay; or absent specific parameters, within a reasonable period of time
- Provide clear, appropriate, and defensible reasons for decisions; communicate any existing option for appeal, review, or remedy

2. SUBSTANTIVE FAIRNESS

What was decided? This dimension provides a lens for assessing scope and authority as well as the justness of the outcome.

- Have only those with authority to do so, involved in the decision-making process
- Ensure that decisions and any outcomes are based on comprehensive review of all relevant information
- Ensure that decisions and any outcomes are factually derived
- Ensure that decisions and any outcomes are reasonable
- Ensure that decisions and any outcomes are equitable and just

3. RELATIONAL FAIRNESS

Are participants treated respectfully? This dimension speaks to the human and service aspects of the experience.

- Be curious, kind, and courteous (approachable)
- Act with integrity – be honest and forthcoming
- Listen actively, in order to understand
- Maintain confidentiality
- Make procedural and relevant resource information accessible and readily understood
- Provide options that are viable and resolution-oriented
- Be clear about what participant types can and cannot do
- Offer explanation and/or apology when due

¹ International Ombuds Association, Code of Ethics, [Link](#) and Standards of Practice, 3.3, [Link](#).

* The Fairness Triangle originated with the Ombudsman Saskatchewan for use in considering fairness in governmental processes for its citizens. It has since been adapted by ombuds in other practice settings, such as universities, for instance at the [University of Ottawa](#). The graphic used here, is a modified version of one in use at Queen's University.