

Thrivecast Episode 67: Meet the UW School of Medicine Ombud

Trish Kritek: [00:00:00] Welcome to another episode of the University of Washington's Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help School of Medicine faculty thrive. I'm Trish Kritek, and today we're joined by Diana Cooke. Diana is the new School of Medicine Ombud, and I invited her here because she is an amazing resource for our community, and I don't think that all of our faculty know what a great opportunity they have to interact with you, Diana.

So thank you for coming and joining us today.

Diana Cooke: Thank you so much, Trish, for inviting me to be here, and I'm really excited to represent the Ombud office you know, all of us, and as kind of the newly appointed person serving the School of Medicine and UW Medicine space. Really excited to share more about what our office does.

Trish Kritek: Well, that's a perfect entry because what I really want to spend most of our time talking about is, what does an ombud do? And so I'm going to start off with a kind of a broad question and say, I just said you're a [00:01:00] great resource. If you were going to explain to people, when might they think about reaching out to you or to the Ombuds office in general?

What are some of the big categories of things that might be a reason to reach out to an ombud?

Diana Cooke: Yeah. So oftentimes when people run into conflict or stressful situations, you seem unsure of where to go. And so one thing I would like to kind of encourage people to do is if you're unsure of what's coming up and you're just feeling like you're going through a challenging or stressful situation, our office is exactly the place to come.

Whether it's challenges with coworkers, whether it's, you know, I'm feeling like I'm not performing optimally. Are there ways that, you know, our department could be better? There's a lot of spaces where our Ombud office can help support people.

Trish Kritek: Let me follow up on that a little bit. So let's start with conflict because I think a lot of people think about conflict and the ombud, and I'm going to come back to what you do beyond conflict.

But let's say I am in a situation where I feel like there's [00:02:00] brewing conflict or some rising up conflict with... I'm going to go with a colleague. I'm a faculty member who has conflict with a colleague. What might I do if I wanted to come see you? What would be the results of that visit?

Diana Cooke: Yeah, so what we have people do is reach out.

We have a really easy scheduling system on our ombuds website, so we can kind of capture that at the tail end hopefully to make sure people know when and how to reach us. But we encourage people to set up a meeting. Oftentimes it's a casual conversation, opportunity for people to share a story, what's coming up, what's important to them, any concerns they would like to address, and then what are some goals they would like to accomplish in that session, and whether it's navigating the conflict with a colleague.

Wait, maybe it's trying to reframe some of their concerns or gather resources. We help them to navigate that conflict in that in- informal setting.

Trish Kritek: So it sounds like I could reach out to you just to kind of bounce ideas off you if I'm think I'm in [00:03:00] a challenging situation. So that's one form of consultation.

Is that right?

Diana Cooke: Yep. Yeah, we often refer to ourselves as thought partners, so people have a space where they can come in, bounce ideas, share what's coming up for them in a confidential space, and think through again what's coming up, what would I like to see happen, and what are steps I can take to accomplish those goals.

So it is also a future focus thing. You don't have to just sit there and feel like, you know, it's just venting. We really want it to be a productive session to help support people wherever they are, and more importantly, figure out where they want to go from that space.

Trish Kritek: So that kind of forward thinking and planning for the future, it sounds like part of what you could also do is partner with somebody to think about how to approach a difficult conversation.

Is that accurate?

Diana Cooke: Yeah, so, we think of our one-on-one sessions as kind of conflict coaching, so whether it's, you know, role play, you know, I know I have to have this difficult conversation with my supervisor, how can I best prepare for this? We would kind of walk through steps, and then even role play [00:04:00] sometimes to have them have the opportunity to try out saying what's coming up and see how it lands, and then also have the opportunity to reflect or receive feedback in a productive way.

Again, that thought partner component really being what's important to the person coming into the office, not what we as the ombuds want or think, but really how can we meet people where they are and help them accomplish their own goals.

Trish Kritek: I really appreciate the part where you actually help people find the words, because I think one of the things that, at least in my life, has been particularly challenging, especially when there's emotion associated with it- Yeah

is being able to find the words, and so the kind of testing it out and practicing a little bit I think is a great opportunity, and I'm sure that's super helpful for folks.

Diana Cooke: Yeah, absolutely. We love to help people think through that. That also kind of raises another area where we can provide support to people is through training.

So we can do workshops, you know, help people to navigate difficult conversations things like that, so really giving people tools and resources as well as [00:05:00] just a place to share it and then, you know, workshop it real time. So there's a lot of different ways we can provide that support.

Trish Kritek: Let me build on that a little bit because you mentioned resources before.

So what I've heard so far is you could do a consultation with an individual, and you alluded to the fact that there's a way to sign up for that online. We'll make sure- Mm-hmm ... we include the link to that when we send out this podcast. In addition to that, you said you can provide resources. So it sounds like you could provide resources to an individual, but you could also provide resources to a group and maybe do some education.

Maybe you could talk about both of those types of resources.

Diana Cooke: Yeah, so actually on our scheduling page, there are several ways that people can book an appointment. So they can book a one-on-one session They can book a group session, so maybe you and a colleague have a concern and you're not too sure how to raise that concern.

You don't want to necessarily escalate it without having thought through what those, you know, challenges are. And so if, again, you're not comfortable coming into the office by yourself, you can come in with a, a friend or colleague and have that [00:06:00] conversation and feel supported in that way. Again, our biggest goal is to make sure that people feel supported.

Sometimes it means speaking with both sides. Sometimes it is a larger group facilitation. We really kind of take those individual initial sessions and gather information and try to understand the circumstances, and then provide some resource information and mapping about what next steps could look like, and let them think through what that looks like.

Trish Kritek: Let me ask two clarifying questions on that, and then I want to get back to the teaching more. But two clarifying questions. One is, I think I heard you say, if you

feel like, "Hey, I want to go talk to this ombud, but I'm a little bit nervous about this, and I'm not really sure how it's going to go, I can bring a friend.

Diana Cooke: You can, yeah. You can bring a friend. You can bring a colleague. The sessions are confidential. We preface with that just so people know that it won't go elsewhere, but we do let people know that if they want to bring in somebody else or they have, again, concerns about confidentiality or anonymity, they can also kind of let us know about that as they're [00:07:00] scheduling, and we really will meet people where they are and respect concerns there.

I've had clients that didn't want to share who they were and just said, "I have this problem. How would I do this?" And you know, giving them some initial conversations to have. So again, it really, every, every person that comes in has a different goal, and sometimes several goals, and we help them think through those.

Trish Kritek: I think the part where you can bring someone with you is really helpful, and I think I also heard you say, maybe it's like you and a colleague both are noticing this challenge, and so you want to come and talk about it as a group, or maybe a larger group. I think I also heard you say, and I want to kind of get into this a little bit, you might actually bring the two folks who are having challenges, where the conflict is, the two parties of the conflict, if you will, together.

So do you serve as a mediator? Can you explain a little bit more how you might play that role?

Diana Cooke: Yeah, so our office is a voluntary, confidential, neutral space. And so those are the things that we really encourage. Every person that will come in will get the same sort of [00:08:00] introduction that every other person in our ombud office collectively shares.

We've got you know, Chuck Sloane, Marguerite Dorn, Ashley Davis, and Maggie Counihan, and our whole team is really kind of there to support people. When people come in we do that intake process, and we can offer mediations if it seems like it's appropriate based on what they've shared. This kind of goes back to that voluntary piece, because for there to be two sides, both sides have to be willing to meet with us first so we can sort of do the appropriate intake and gather perspectives from everyone and make sure that they're comfortable proceeding with a mediation process.

And so that, I think, is really important to just to emphasize. We absolutely can do mediations or facilitated conversations with a neutral there to help people feel comfortable about it especially if there are concerns about power dynamics or, you know, a space where would they have an even ground to feel heard.

We do a formal sort of intake just to make sure that everyone's comfortable coming to the mediated conversation.

Trish Kritek: I appreciate couple things [00:09:00] there. One is that you do pre-work with both parties so that you can hear both voices or multiple voices beforehand. And then I think really important for everybody who's listening to understand, both parties have to want to come to the table to have some kind of facilitated conversation or mediated conversation.

I've done it with Chuck before. It's been incredibly effective, but I understand the need for everyone to think that this is something that would be fruitful. And so I encourage folks to have those conversations with you if they think it might be something that would work.

Diana Cooke: Yeah, and giving them the space to think through the process.

Again, sometimes people come in thinking, "Oh, I want a mediation. I have conflict with this person. They, you know, said something that was really offensive." And once we kind of talk through it, there are actually other spaces where they could explore it. So we do help people figure out, you know, is this the most productive?

Is this what you would like to have happen? And if so, you know, what's the outcome you're hoping to have? And so making sure that the process is in alignment with what both sides are kind of, you know, wishing and hoping, you know, would be a [00:10:00] productive outcome for everybody.

Trish Kritek: I think just for clarity, as I was thinking through what you were saying a second ago, it seems like obviously most of the time you meet with people because they reach out to you.

But it could be that if I came to you with a conflict and I said, "I do want to see if we could have a facilitated conversation," you might reach out to other folks at times. And so- Yeah ... you do reach out occasionally to people to say, "Hey, can I have this conversation?" Or how does that work? How does the other person get into that conversation?

Diana Cooke: Yeah, that's a really good question. We oftentimes encourage the person coming into the office to reach out. The reason being if we haven't spoken or met with the other person on the other side, would it feel really neutral to have someone approach and say, "Hey, this person, you know, is not in alignment with you, and we want to have a conversation about it."

W- the goal is not to feel like it's a punitive process. Really, it's an invitation. And so, that also gives a little bit of autonomy and self-determination to the, you know, client or visitor, as we call them, [00:11:00] coming into the office to really initiate that conversation coming from them as opposed to us imposing a process on somebody else.

Trish Kritek: I think that's actually really helpful clarification. So really, if I came in and talked to you about something and I said, "Hey, I'd really like for you to help facilitate a conversation between me and my boss, Tim Dellit," it would be on me probably to say, "Hey, Tim, I met with the ombud and I was hoping for us to potentially have a facilitated conversation."

Would you be open to talking to Diana about that?"

Diana Cooke: Yeah. And again, I- there are exceptions or there are times where people say, "You know, I'm really not comfortable," or, you know, "I'm actually feeling very conflict adverse, so I'm looking for support, and that's just what I'm, you know, seeking from your office."

And again, we find ways to try to navigate it to ha- help best serve the person. And, you know, our default really is we want to encourage that self-determination because ultimately, that relationship is something they're going to have to cultivate together. So by taking that initial step, we encourage that and, you know, if there are circumstantially reasons why people might not want to, you know, [00:12:00] we try to respect that as well.

Trish Kritek: I appreciate that, and I suspect you could help give people some words to use-

Diana Cooke: Yes ...

Trish Kritek: in having that conversation.

Diana Cooke: Yeah, absolutely. We that is part of kind of the, you know, the three-step process that I mentioned with, you know, story, goals, game plan. That's kind of in the game plan space of how might you implement this conversation or prepare for this conversation.

When, how, you know, probably during a, a big group meeting is not the most appropriate place where you bring up that conversation. So kind of helping coach people through what the conversation might look like so they can feel really set up for success in initiating that is something we also do in those sessions.

Trish Kritek: Awesome, and I, just to reinforce what you just said, story, goals, game plan. I really like that. That's s- what people can expect when they come talk to you for that consultation.

Diana Cooke: Yeah, everyone in our ombud office follows that same sort of process. It's been honed in over time. The University of Washington has had an ombuds office since the 1960s, so it's really been around a long time and kind of cultivated into this really [00:13:00] unique format where people can follow this three-step process.

It makes it consistent, and it also helps people feel like it's productive even if it is only an hour and a half. I've, I find that when I have those conversations with individuals, they're like, "Wow, I didn't expect to open up this much in an hour and a half with a total stranger." And so I find that building rapport and making people feel supported, that process really helps people feel like it's a good outcome at, you know, pretty much every time.

Trish Kritek: That's great, and I really appreciate you putting it in context in the history. As you've alluded to, you're part of the ombuds office for the greater UW community, which is great. Mm-hmm. And your focus is specifically on the School of Medicine, which we're deeply grateful for. I didn't ask this before, but obviously this podcast is for faculty, but you're a resource beyond the faculty.

Do you want to just talk about for whom you're a resource?

Diana Cooke: Yeah, sure. So our office does serve faculty, staff, and students. So really if there's any sort of challenges people are experiencing, it doesn't even have to be when you're in conflict too. I actually say this [00:14:00] to people, like, if you're just having a good day, you can also come to the ombuds office.

It's not just when there's you know, things on fire. And I think that's something I do hope to encourage is building those relationships and rapport with, you know, leadership as well. How can we support you? How can we support your teams? The thing is, we have such a highly skilled and intelligent demographic of people here at the School of Medicine space.

People might say, "Well, why would I want to go someone? I would basically be saying I have a problem or I can't manage this." It's not about you being able to manage it. It's even experts need support sometime, and then to find it in a space where it's really genuinely intended to help you figure out what you want and need based on your goals, that's really intentional.

So yeah, I'd say anyone from, you know, chairs to, you know, staff members, they're all equally important to our office and serving the whole community.

Trish Kritek: Appreciate serving the whole community. And I'm going to add the word trainee because I think we always want to make sure we include our residents and fellows.

Yeah. And I know you are a resource for the residents and fellows as well. So faculty, [00:15:00] staff, and all learners, students, all types of students.

Diana Cooke: Yeah. You're all included. It's an open door policy here. So I encourage anybody that is seeking it, and again, as you had mentioned earlier, talking about

resources, sometimes our office is the space to help people navigate it, but other times we can redirect people to a more intentional space that can best serve them.

So one of the unique things about having our ombud office you know, me being designated to the School of Medicine space, and then also having our upper campus resources, we are able to kind of collectively find the best space to direct people based on their individual circumstances. So, you know, we're really intentional about making sure that people know about all the different resources, which is also being really educated about those.

Trish Kritek: I appreciate that you're a resource of resources, which is great.

Diana Cooke: Yeah.

Trish Kritek: I'm going to ask you one more question before I, I finish with my one last pearl, but earlier in our conversation we talked about the fact that you could also do education and you might be [00:16:00] somebody who's a resource for departments, divisions, other groups across the school to come in and teach.

So what are some of the things you might be a partner with in terms of bringing education to groups across the school?

Diana Cooke: Yeah. So, whether it's, you know, le- it could be leadership-type trainings, it could be having difficult conversations, it could be giving and receiving feedback, or maybe it's just navigating uncertainty, right?

This is you know, the time and space where there are so many things happening. And again, having people navigate a lot of changes can be challenging. So even if you're well-prepared and you have all the tools, we might have those moments where we're thinking, "Huh, it'd be really great to have kind of a, a Batman and Robin-type dynamic or someone to really kind of help support you and be a sidekick or a thought partner."

And so that's where we can be helpful. But in terms of helping departments, again, I would meet with whoever reaches out and figure out what are the concerns, what's unique to that department. Are there a lot of people? Are there just a small group? You know, [00:17:00] what tools or skills would that space like?

And then we can kind of craft and work together to create trainings or workshops to help empower people.

Trish Kritek: I'll just put in a little PR for this. Diana's come to the s- Department of Medicine and done some teaching on how to have difficult conversations for leadership teams, and I think it's a great resource, so I encourage folks to talk with her about what possibilities might be in terms of coming and working with your groups on whatever the topic.

And the part about navigating uncertainty obviously resonates right now because it does feel like a very uncertain time and a time with, like, continuous change. So I think, again, in the spirit of some of the happier conversations, maybe people could reach out to you to talk about what possibilities there could be for you to partner with them in bringing workshops or education or other resources to their teams.

Diana Cooke: Yeah. Collaborative communication, things like that. So it's not also just about kind of fixing problems, but also how can we build people up with resilience tools or things that can help them to navigate it [00:18:00] and feel good about it, rather than, you know, second-guessing themselves. So there's a lot of tools and resources that the School of Medicine space has, and part of it is just actually kind of getting people to work together or, you know, communicate about what those are.

So I've loved that opportunity to work with the Department of Medicine, and I hope to be able to do that with others as well.

Trish Kritek: I have many more questions I could ask you- ... and we have only so much time for our podcast, and I like to always ask every guest at the end for one last pearl, something that you want to share with the listeners that I maybe didn't ask about or you want to emphasize.

So do you have one last pearl for folks as they think about this space of the ombud and interacting with you?

Diana Cooke: Yeah, I think a lot of it just goes back to the root of what our role is as the ombuds. It really come, it comes from a Swedish word. It means sort of representative or an ear to the people.

And so our work is really meaningful supporting this institution and this medical space. And again, they are the ones that are serving and helping [00:19:00] others. So to create an opportunity to be trusted, hear people's stories, make them feel good and supported, and then sometimes factor in other people's perspectives is really beautiful work.

I oftentimes think of kind of the Maya Angelou quote, "People, they'll forget what you said, they'll forget what you do, but they'll never forget how you make them feel." And really, the Ombud office is intended to be that space where people can feel heard and appreciated and valued.

Trish Kritek: I love that you're a part of our community, and that- that's a beautiful quote from Maya Angelou.

I think it's a great way for us to end. I think we're incredibly lucky to have had you join the School of Medicine, and I have no doubt that after folks listen to this podcast, there will be more people knocking at your door- ... for consultation, for conversation, for

brainstorming. And so I'm going to say thank you in advance for all the support you're going to provide to people, and thank you so much for joining us in this conversation today.

Diana Cooke: Yeah, so grateful for you, Trish, and the opportunity to share. And I look forward to future, you know, meetings with people. And thank you again for [00:20:00] the opportunity to collaborate.

Trish Kritek: Of course. And I'll say to everybody, if you want to listen to more episodes of Thrivecast, you can find them at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts.

You can also find them at the UW School of Medicine faculty website at faculty.uwmedicine.org. Thanks for listening, and have a great day.