Issues that arise at work are often a reflection of problems occurring in the larger society and the tensions that we're seeing out there today. So today, unfortunately all around the world, we're seeing conflicts, sometimes verbal attacks, sometimes physical attacks. Maybe it's refugees from Syria or other war-torn countries trying to find a place to live in Europe. Maybe it's a tax on immigrants. Maybe in the United States, now it seems to be attacks on religious groups, Muslims. Sometimes now we're seeing racial conflicts rise again. So we thought it would be useful in this course to have a conversation about how these conflicts then affect the workplace, and what we've learned over the years about how to address them effectively.

And we're fortunate to have a world-class expert here to draw on. I'm talking today with Professor Mary Rowe, a friend and colleague here in the Sloan School. Mary has been the ombudsperson for MIT for 40 years, and she's now taking time to reflect on the lessons she learned from that experience and its implications for how we can move forward. So Mary, thank you for joining us today.

My pleasure.

So why don't we start right at the beginning. What is an ombudsman or a ombudsperson or ombuds-- whatever the appropriate term is? And what does a person in that role do?

An organizational ombud-- and there's lots of us now around the world. I'm guessing that there are probably about 1,000 of us in corporations and government agencies and academic institutions around the world. It's a neutral. Many people know what a mediator does. And if you can imagine an internal mediator who works on any kind of problem that comes to him or her, that begins the picture. We're independent of all line and staff offices. By standards of practice, we report to the chief executive officer or above him or her to a board. We're informal. We don't have any management power. We can't fix anything.

And we are confidential. That's perhaps the most important thing for your talk today. We keep no case records for our organizations. Anybody can-- we're called a zero-barrier office. We should establish an office where there are no barriers at all to being able to come to talk with us.

Well, that's a good introduction. And I know you have emphasized the need for multiple tools to fit into what you have called a conflict management system. Could you describe what some of these tools are that are needed for people in your role to be effective?

Well, people in my role need various kinds of tools. We think of a sense of humor, integrity, intelligence, caring. Especially important, especially because of what you were saying before about the origins of conflict, we think of ombudsmen as needing to have a lot of cross-cultural experience. And indeed, my profession is one of the best

integrated professions in the world by race and by gender. I'm very proud of that. But I think you're also thinking about what needs to be in an organizational system to deal with conflicts in the workplace and with students, and so on. Is that right?

That's right. Some of the tools and the options that I know you consider important.

Lots of people who think about this question think first about, do we have a formal grievance procedure? And that, of course, is a very important question for the most grievous problems and the ones that need a management decision. But most problems will yield to people thinking about their own interests and those of others at what people-- at what organizations think of as the lowest possible level. So at the lowest possible level, we want conflict settled onsite, if possible. And at the last end of the line, we would think of formal grievance procedures, and then there are lots and lots of steps in between.

And some of those steps really empower individuals to deal with conflicts more effectively. And I know you have spent a lot of time working to help individuals figure out what options are best for her or for him in addressing these. What would some of those options be?

When people think about ombudsmen or when they think about taking an ombuds job, they often think about conflict management as dispute resolution. A given dispute comes, and they step in with a magic wand and fix it. And point of fact, very good ombuds and those in place for a long time generally spend more than half their time helping people help themselves to learn how to deal with conflicts and even to prevent them. And that's true for both individuals and for groups.

So helping people help themselves, listening to people talk about their issues, getting them to articulate their concerns, having more formal consultation in organizations and forums for affinity groups, and maybe sometimes counsels of people coming together. These are all part of a larger system that I know you have emphasized.

Do we have room for me to tell a quick story?

Sure.

You know, I'm just looking back at my old papers. In the 1970s and '80s, I was young economist, and I came from the outside to MIT. I was overwhelmed by having 100 people come to me in my first week, no two of them with the same issue. And I didn't have any expertise on any one of them. But what I did do with the total backing of my boss, the president, was to get any two people who had the same issue together with each other to try to figure out what kind of systems change might help deal with that issue or even prevent it.

Now here's what I just discovered. In those 17 years, there were at least 60 women's groups alone and many

minority groups-- I haven't yet got a perfect count of them-- and many cohort groups like engineering assistance, who got themselves together to, as affinity groups, if you will, to propose solutions. So that's just one example of what you're seeing.

Well, I like the emphasis that you put on systems, that these different options need to be there, because people have different preferences for how they approach these issues. And you have been very skillful in helping people find something they're comfortable with. And I think that's really critical to making these work.

But you've also developed this concept of micro-inequities. And we've heard about microaggressions, but you've kind of turned that into ways to deal with these in positive ways. What are micro-inequities? And then we can talk about how to perhaps deal with them. But this is something that I think is particularly unique to your own work.

I was very honored before and just after I came to MIT to have as a mentor Dr. Chester Pierce. Many people nowadays remember him, a very prominent psychiatrist and a neurologist. Chet Pierce came up with the idea of microaggressions in 1970, talking about racism and talking about hostile acts. And he was simply extraordinary in helping to develop that idea.

When I came to MIT, very grateful to him for what I had learned about microaggressions. I found microaggressions, and of course we still do. But I found a great deal more besides. There are hostile acts, as all of us know, and there's a great deal of small acts of racism, and religious intolerance, and sexism, and so on. In addition, I discovered a lot of complaints and concerns that appeared to me to arise out of unconscious bias. That is to say, not available to the person who is behaving in a way that he or she might even regret. And in 1973, I found myself doing this. And in fact, my kids were simply delighted to catch me doing it.

So unconscious bias was a big deal for me, and then I began to discover these little aggressions or inequities, if you will, that seemed to arise just out of negligence. I knew better, but I just blew it. And then finally, there was a large clump of them. Again, problems that were problems for me myself that arose out of what I will call innocent ignorance. A lot of ignorance is not innocent.

But I lived in West Africa just before I came. I inadvertently served food with my left hand to Muslim colleagues. I made the mistake of showing the bottom of my foot in a meeting, and in a very polite Muslim meeting in West Africa. I learned that it's very easy to be very offensive on the basis of problems that one just didn't know exist.

So with great respect and with Chet Pierce's blessing, I extended the idea of microaggressions to include these other huge groups of problems. Sexism as well as racism, and just plain bullying, as well as either.

Yeah. So these micro-inequities often are happening even though we're not always aware of them. But you've

tried to make this a more positive approach to addressing these issues. And you call them micro-affirmations. Tell us what you mean by that. Give us some examples of how one can deal with these micro-inequities. Again, it was partly in an effort to make sure that I was myself not committing, if you will, micro-inequities right and left. And here was my problem, Tom. I thought to myself, if some of these problems come from unconscious bias, and there's no way we can be aware, without a lot of work at least, to be aware of our own unconscious bias, what hope is there for me?

So I read and I thought. Psychology gave me a clue, which is that if one always behaves in a respectful way and seeks out that which can be affirmed in everything around one in one's work group, always genuinely, of course, things that really are going well, if one's whole life is spent in genuine affirmation of other people's excellence and in respectful behavior, you can block your own unconscious bias. So my first thought about affirmations was really in an effort to do something about myself.

It turns out that micro-affirmations have a whole lot of other good aspects to them. They make people happy. The work of the negotiation project on core emotional concerns shows that approval and affirmation are two of the most important core emotional concerns that every single person has all over the world. And if I lived my life in micro-affirmations, I am by definition reaching out to the core emotional wishes of everybody I'm interacting with. And those are just two of the-- you'll have a chart-- those are just two of the ways that micro-affirmations can be helpful.

So by affirming good behavior and recognizing it and providing psychological rewards and role modeling in your own behavior, you often make it contagious for others in one's work group, it sounds like. This is the way in which you show by creating an environment of support that we aren't going to tolerate inequities. And you change attitudes by changing behavior.

Exactly so. We've known for a long time that attitudes affect behavior. More recently, we've learned that our behavior can change our own attitudes. That's a big deal.

I think that's a really important point. And it has good psychological research bases, but it also just makes good common sense that we learn from each others' experience at young ages and in our workplaces as well. So that's very helpful.

But I want to turn to another idea that you have championed and used so effectively over the years, and that's something that we call bystanders, that you call bystanders in particular. And we're all bystanders, and we see bad things happening in our workplace, in our-- wherever we are in society. And we come home, and the next morning in the shower we say, gee, I wish I would have done something. Tell us what you've learned about how to be an effective intervener when one sees them in a bystander role and sees something bad happening at the

workplace.

Bystanders have a bad name all over the world. And in fact, the term bystander effect is often used to mean somebody who stands by and lets racism or unsafe behavior or something terrible happen. When I began looking at all of this, I began looking at it from the point of view of an ombudsman because where very bad things or very good things happen in the workplace, usually there's no supervisor there, but there are peers and bystanders. So I thought, here is enormous leverage either in getting wonderful recognition for good behavior or in getting unacceptable behavior stopped. So I began to study it.

First of all, the bystander effect, the so-called bystander effect, it was studied in a very narrow context. And even in that context, it isn't always the case. But so what do bystanders actually do when they see something unacceptable or scary? It could be a safety problem. It could be a mistake. It could be an error. Or it could be really unacceptable personal behavior or group behavior.

Most bystanders funnel very quickly through a great many options. And this is really the point of where I'm coming to. Those who run organizations usually think of bystanders as either doing nothing or reporting immediately to the authorities. That meaning, responsible bystanders do nothing, or I guess they don't do anything. And if they're responsible, they only report to authorities.

In real life, bystanders do all kinds of other things, and I began to study that for my last 15 years as an ombud. I collected everything that people told me in my office that they had considered when they saw either wonderful behavior or terrible behavior. What options did they consider? And it's very rare that they considered going to authorities, and mostly they did want to act. So they came up with lots of other possible options for how to get something fixed or prevented or remediated.

What would some of those options be? Obviously, it means one has to sort of disrupt the behavior in real time in some way, or change the behavior. So can you give us an example or examples of actions that you've seen people take that have been effective?

Well, again, your question is a perfect one. Because in real life, people often don't act on the spot, in the moment. They think about it. And they might act on the spot in the moment, but they think about it, and they worry about it. This is the responsible bystander again.

Some of the options they choose would be to go home and talk with trusted family, or in the workplace with trusted friends and peers. Or if they have a boss that they really trust, they might ask about it hypothetically. Like, boss, if something like this were to happen, what would you think about it? What could the organization do with a problem like this? Other possibilities would be that they would get a generic approach to deal with it. If it's an organization

that does a lot of training, maybe a training program that can be brought in in which we just happen to mention this kind of behavior.

Sometimes a person will act, but only together with a coworker. So Tom, I'm thinking now, who do I trust in my workplace? Who would come with me to talk with a boss? I wonder if I could write a note. I wonder if there's any manager who cares about this kind of behavior. Sometimes it might be [? audit, ?] for example, or it might be the EEO office. Maybe I could write a note and have them think about this kind of problem in my section of my organization. So there are lots and lots of different options that responsible bystanders will choose.

Well, I like the way in which you describe how you talk with people to generate options like this. Maybe really skilled people or people who have a mindset can interrupt behavior on the spot, but often it's reflecting, OK, what could I do tomorrow? What could I do today in retrospect? And it's finding those different approaches that's so key.

So if I'm hearing you right, Mary, what you're saying is organizations really need to have respected, independent neutrals who are supported by a conflict management system with multiple options, because people have different approaches to dealing with workplace problems, and they need different outlets for addressing them. And then secondly, they need to have tools and training so that not only are the professionals good at addressing these issues, but so are managers, and so are frontline employees, so that they can be ready to put these tools to use, and they have to trust these tools. And then third, you have to create a culture in the organization that empowers people to take action to help themselves and help others safely. So do you have any final thoughts on how we can put all these tools to use to deal with the modern problems that we see in workplaces today?

I have two final thoughts. One is if you who are listening to this is just an individual by yourself, and maybe even young and you think you have no power, you always have options, just one person, to make things better wherever you are. If you who are listening to this are a manager, think about a systems approach within your organization to help other people to help you with a strategic plan to build an affirming workplace.

Well, Mary, thank you very much. Thank you for all that you do and all that you have done, not only here in our organization, but around the world to help others build these kinds of systems and capacity. And so there's lots of issues to address, and we just have to stick with it. So thank you very much.

Thank you, Tom.