Input from the ICANN Ombuds Office (Ombuds Office) to the ICANN Nominating Committee's (NomCom) Invitation for Feedback

The Ombuds Office thanks the NomCom for this opportunity to share insights and input for the 2027 selection cycle.

Under Article 5 of the ICANN Bylaws, the Ombuds Office makes an annual report that includes a "description of any trends and common elements" from the complaints and cases it handles and makes "recommendations for steps that could be taken to minimize future complaints."[1] In the Ombuds Office Annual Report for Financial Year 25 (FY25), and with the preparation of the Ombuds Office Annual Report for Financial Year 26 (FY26), the Ombuds Office has observed common themes from cases related to the selection and expertise of leaders within the ICANN community. These observations, which arise from Ombuds Office cases, relate to different ICANN constituent groups and do not relate to the NomCom processes or positions.

The cases and complaints which reach the Ombuds Office provide a unique data set and a lens through which to view the dynamics and challenges of the ICANN multistakeholder model. It is hoped that the observations outlined in this submission, which draw on Ombuds Office cases, provide the NomCom with useful input with regard to the

> feedback on the guidance and candidate job descriptions provided for the recently concluded 2026 selection cycle….as well as on additional qualities, skills, or considerations that should be prioritized in candidate selection.[2]

The Ombuds Office input relates to the overarching community leadership job descriptions, qualities, skills and considerations for community leadership positions; its input does not relate to a specific leadership position.

Ideas to Spark Insight, Not Complete Solutions

In this submission, the Ombuds Office provides a broad discussion related to leadership selection and competencies, even if not all of the suggestions will fall within the remit of the NomCom. Further, the Ombuds Office wishes to clarify that the suggestions below do not presume gaps (or indeed even a full understanding) of the NomCom's processes. As the Ombuds Office states in its FY25 Annual Report, its ideas and suggestions are intended as starting points for discussion – to spark reflection, insight, and action among those closest to the issues across the ICANN ecosystem, in this case the NomCom. They are not meant to represent complete solutions to complex challenges.

Themes from Ombuds Office Cases

Individual Ombuds Office cases may be about different issues, such as unfairness or incivility, however when the Ombuds Office analyzes all of its cases in aggregate, patterns

[1] https://www.icann.org/en/governance/bylaws#article5, Section 5.5.
[2] https://www.icann.org/en/announcements/details/invitation-to-provide-input-for-the-2027-icann-nominating-committee-cycle-04-09-2026-en

emerge. These patterns, presented as themes, provide an indispensable opportunity to learn about ICANN and to strengthen and improve the ICANN ecosystem.

In FY25 and FY26, the Ombuds Office identified three themes which have a relationship to community leadership selection and these include concerns about the robustness and consistency of community leadership selection processes, gaps in performance and development of community leaders and the cost of uncivil and inappropriate behavior in the ICANN community on participation and engagement.

While the performance and development of volunteer leaders and the reported uncivil and inappropriate behavior are out of the NomCom's scope (and outside the scope of this invitation for input), the Ombuds Office wishes to highlight these issues to emphasize the importance of consistently selecting leaders with the necessary competencies to perform as a volunteer leader in ICANN. Community leaders' performance in their roles and the ICANN culture and climate are downstream consequences of upstream leadership selection processes.

Behavioral Competency Strengths and Gaps Highlighted by Ombuds Office Case Themes

Based on the issues described in Ombuds Office cases relating to both leadership and leadership selection in FY25 and FY26, the Ombuds Office encourages all who select community leaders to strengthen selection criteria and screening processes. This will help to ensure that community leadership positions have suitably high standards for all behavioral competencies relevant to the role, including interpersonal conduct.

Ombuds Office analysis of its cases in FY25 and FY26 demonstrate the importance of community leaders having sufficient knowledge, skills and experience of working with and engaging others. In some Ombuds Office cases, community members provided examples where community leaders created positive and collaborative working environments, engaging constructively with debate and disagreement and addressing instances of uncivil or inappropriate behavior in their community groups, using skills such as feedback and communication. These community leaders also were able to adapt their approach to the context and situation (such as culture or individual needs or differences). The timely and effective application of these important skills resulted in the deescalation of conflict and the creation of a more collaborative working environment. Where community leaders were able to respond effectively, they demonstrated in practice both an understanding of and respect for ICANN's community standards of behavior set out in the Expected Standards of Behavior and the Community Anti-Harassment Policy, for example through the consideration of differing perspectives and the treatment of all community members with dignity, decency and respect.

In other cases, community members raised issues with the Ombuds Office that indicated leadership behavioral competency gaps, such as a community leader's reported lack of engagement with or response to examples of uncivil, unfair or inappropriate behavior in their community group or cases where community leadership behavior fell below a standard expected of ICANN leaders with examples of disrespect, rudeness, incivility (and the accompanying negative impacts on community group working environment and participation).

Working With and Engaging Others: Behavioral Competencies for ICANN Community Leaders

Based on the above, the Ombuds Office believes, from the cases it has handled, that behavioral competencies related to working with and engaging others are vital for successful leadership in ICANN's multistakeholder model.

The Ombuds Office would like to refer to a suggestion offered in the FY25 Ombuds Office Annual Report, where the Ombuds Office encouraged strengthening inclusive leadership capabilities, as below:

> Incentivize and equip those in informal and formal leadership roles to create space for community members to express different points of view and enable equitable participation in community groups. Build skills for intercultural work, giving and receiving feedback and managing conflict.

Building more specifically on the role of leadership in supporting an inclusive and open culture within the constituency groups, the Ombuds Office suggests consideration of the following behavioral competencies related to working with and engaging others. The Ombuds Office hopes this input will be useful to the NomCom for those aspects of the selection process that it has influence over, for example interviews and candidate evaluation.

- **Promote dignity and respect**: Community leaders should contribute to a constructive, collaborative and respectful working environment free from demeaning, hostile, or harassing behavior. Community leaders should provide a positive example of behavior that is aligned with ICANN's Expected Standards of Behavior and ICANN' Community Anti-Harassment Policy in all interactions (in-person, virtual, and written).
- **Communication and feedback**: Community leaders should have an ability to communicate effectively across different mediums (in-person, virtual, and written) and should be comfortable with giving, receiving and asking for feedback. Community leaders should be aware of and sensitive to the context and adapt their communication accordingly, for example, recognizing and responding to cultural or individual differences and needs.
- **Effectively work with difference and disagreement**: Community leaders should encourage and value different points of view, engage across diverse global backgrounds, cultures, perspectives and identity dimensions, bridging conflicting viewpoints, and seeking consensus. They should also be confident to respond to uncivil and inappropriate behavior so that difference and disagreement is resolved in a way that maintains the culture of inclusive dialogue.

Additionally, while the focus in the community leader job descriptions is on meetings, it is worth noting that there are other exchanges which also have impacts. The Ombuds Office has observed incivility in email communication and other informal settings. It should be made clear that, when in role, behavioral standards for community leaders need to be maintained at all times.

Issues Impacting Community Leader Talent Pool Highlighted by Ombuds Office Case Themes

Some community members expressed concern that the pool of community leader talent is not diverse enough to draw leaders with the required competencies and skills for the role. Additionally, some community members expressed concern that applicants with long-standing experience are preferred or advantaged over newer leadership applicants and this deters some would-be applicants from applying, further reducing the talent pool.

The Ombuds Office wishes to highlight another case theme that may have an impact on the size of the talent pool and the diversity of candidates, including the attraction and retention of candidates who are newer to ICANN. As the Ombuds Office reported in FY25, the demands of community leadership roles may deter some candidates from applying for these roles, consequently favoring established candidates with the existing knowledge base, personal connections, and time to navigate ICANN. The Ombuds Office has also heard from community members that the demands of being a volunteer leader, for example meeting volume, working multilingually, meetings at unsociable hours and/or hours that overlap with the volunteer leader's working day (which strains the capacity of volunteers in full-time employment unrelated to ICANN), impedes a more diverse volunteer participation, including those new to ICANN for whom there is already the burden of understanding a complex system and lacking the relational networks and institutional knowledge to navigate ICANN effectively.

Summary of Suggestions for the NomCom

- **Enhance behavioral competencies for working with and engaging others:** Consider if there are opportunities, throughout each stage of the selection process, to ensure consistent selection of specific and measurable behavioral competencies related to working with and engaging others so that the resultant community leader has the expertise to manage participation and contributions from community members in a positive, constructive and supportive way.
- **Balance demands and support in framing of community leadership position responsibilities:** Consider how the responsibilities and terms for community leader positions are framed in a way that attracts candidates representing a broad range of occupations, skills and experiences and that the framing, where possible, includes references to support for leaders to both perform in their roles as leaders and also to navigate the complexity of ICANN successfully.

Again, the Ombuds Office is grateful for the opportunity to share its observations and suggestions from case data with the NomCom and wishes the NomCom a successful 2027 cycle.

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