

ACM Ethics

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Computing Machinery's Committee on
Professional Ethics*

Case: Abusive Workplace Behavior**Using the Code: Abusive Workplace Behavior**

Diane recently started a new industry research job, joining the interactive technologies team. In graduate school, her advisor had collaborated with several members of the team on a number of research projects, involving and highlighting Diane's contributions whenever possible. The team had been impressed by Diane's work and recruited her as she was approaching graduation.

Max, the team's technical leader had built a reputation as a brilliant yet mercurial expert in augmented reality. His team's contributions were highly cited within the field, with Max typically claiming primary authorship as the team leader. Their work was also highlighted frequently in popular press, always with quotes only from Max. Despite the team's repeated successes, Max would erupt with verbal and personal attacks for even minor mistakes. He would yell at the person and berate them in internal chat forums. On multiple occasions, women team members have found their names removed from journal manuscript submissions as punishment.

Diane soon found herself the target of one of Max's tirades when she committed a code update that introduced a timing glitch in the prototype shortly before a live demo. Infuriated, Max refused to allow Diane to join the team on stage. Feeling Max's reaction was unprofessional and abusive, Diane approached the team's manager, Jean. Jean agreed that the experience was unpleasant, but that was the price to pay for working in an intense, industry-leading team. Jean's advice to Diane was to "Grow up and get over it."

Analysis

Max's abusive behavior clearly violates several principles in the Code. His verbal abuse caused harm and failed to maintain a safe social environment (Principle 1.1) and failed to adhere to high standards of professional communication (Principle 2.2). By removing names from journal submissions and blocking Diane from appearing on stage, Max dishonestly violated these team members' rights to credit for their work, violating Principle 1.5.

Max's retaliation also demonstrates a violation of Principle 1.4. His punitive actions of removing names and blocking participation show a history of targeting only women team members. This behavior is a clear abuse of power that limits these team members' fair access to the work environment.

Jean's behavior also demonstrates a failure to live up to the principles in the Code. By allowing Max's behavior to continue unchecked and suggesting the problem was with Diane's maturity, Jean failed to provide for the psychological well-being and human dignity of the team (Principle 3.3). Furthermore, Jean's inaction illustrates a failure to support policies that reflect the principles of the Code (Principle 3.4).

These cases studies are designed for educational purposes to illustrate how to apply the Code to analyze complex situations. All names, businesses, places, events, and incidents are fictitious and are not intended to refer to actual entities.

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