

## ON THE EDGE

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This critical incident <sup>occurred</sup> describes a conflict between Lisa, a fourth-year doctoral student, and her highly published but somewhat overbearing major adviser, Dr. Littlewood. The decision point of the incident occurs when Lisa was called into Dr. Littlewood's office, reprimanded for what Dr. Littlewood perceived to be shoddy work on a research project, and told that Dr. Littlewood was contemplating letting her go and attempting to have her removed from the graduate program. With her career in serious jeopardy, Lisa had to decide how to respond on the spot.

### Introduction

I had climbed these stairs countless times during my four years of graduate school, usually two at a time with little effort. But this time the journey up the stairs seemed to take forever. My heart was beating out of my chest, I was short of breath, and I knew that it had nothing to do with physical exertion. It had everything to do with an ominous message from my adviser and a looming sense of dread.

For as long as I could remember, I wanted to be a college professor. Given this goal, after completing my undergraduate education, I began applying to graduate school and was initially accepted by a highly ranked university which was far from home. I accepted their offer without even visiting the campus or meeting my adviser. That was a big mistake. The first time I knocked on the door of the individual assigned as my adviser, he yelled at me to only come back after I had made an appointment. When I finally met him for the first time, he told me that I was fortunate to be able to work with someone of his caliber and that my research interests were not a good fit with his program. Discouraged, I looked for another graduate program.

This time, I applied to schools where I could find an adviser that would be more supportive. I was accepted at several schools and traveled to each school to meet the faculty in person and to make sure that they supported my research interests. At one of the schools that accepted me, I met for a long time with Dr. Littlewood, who had expressed interest in serving as my adviser. He seemed friendly, open to my ideas, and easy to talk to – much different from the adviser at my previous school. I felt a sense of relief, convinced that Dr. Littlewood would be good to work with, and I settled into my classes at my new school.

My first few years in this new graduate program went well. After passing my comprehensive exams, I started working on my dissertation. It seemed like I was on the right track to earn my doctorate and start looking for a job. However, right about that time my relationship with Dr. Littlewood changed. He started calling me at random times to make sure that I was in the office. Instead of smiling, asking me how things were going, and talking about his hobbies when I came to his office, he now seemed cold and distant. I used to come to his office all the time to chat or to ask his advice, but as he became increasingly grumpy and short with me, I rarely went to visit him and only came to his office when he called me.

My increasingly distant working relationship with my adviser bothered me – a lot. I am not the kind of person who thrives with conflict. In my personality psychology classes, I always scored high on Agreeableness (Big 5) and, on the MBTI, I showed a strong preference for Feeling over Thinking. As the impasse with my adviser persisted, I found it harder to sleep and to concentrate on my work.

### The Conflict

The downturn in our working relationship came to a head during my fourth year in the graduate program. I had been helping Dr. Littlewood with a research project in which I would be a co-author and learn the publication process by collecting and coding the data. This research project was a massive undertaking that, we hoped, would lead to a high-level publication at a top quality, peer-reviewed academic journal. The stakes were high for both of us. I needed a high-visibility publication to be able to get a job at a university. Dr. Littlewood, meanwhile, was spending most of his research budget on my salary for the work that I was putting in on the project. And the amount of time that I had spent on the project was daunting: 300 hours over nine months just collecting the data. I had finally completed the data collection, but the responses from the participants still had to be coded into categories based on a pre-established rubric developed by Dr. Littlewood. The coding was tedious, labor-intensive work that took many weeks, but I finally finished the coding and emailed the results to Dr. Littlewood.

The next day, I was working on a paper in my office when I received a telephone call. He didn't identify himself, but I recognized Dr. Littlewood's voice immediately. In an angry and accusatory tone, he said, "Lisa, come to my office right now."

I swallowed hard. It was clear from the tone of Dr. Littlewood's voice that he was not happy. As I climbed the two flights of stairs to his office, I wracked my brain, trying to figure out what I might have done wrong that could make him upset. I stood outside his door, trying to catch my breath and summoning the courage to walk in. He heard my footsteps and barked, "Lisa, don't just stand in the hall."

I walked in, smiling nervously, and sat down in the chair across from his desk. His face was flushed and his chin was quivering. He stood up, walked out from behind his desk, and handed me a sheet of paper.

"Lisa," he snarled, "did you do this coding?"

I looked at the paper. Sure enough, it was mine. "Yes," I replied.

Dr. Littlewood then snatched the paper from me and thrust a second sheet of paper in my face. "Here is the data. I want you to go through each of these statements and tell me which coding category you put them in."

I swallowed hard a second time. It had been nearly six weeks since I had coded the first part of the data and it seemed ridiculous that I would be asked to remember exactly what I had done in

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that level of detail from so long ago. But I figured that I had no choice. “I think Participant 1 went into Category 7,” I guessed.

“Wrong,” Dr. Littlewood replied, with no emotion in his voice. “Participant 2?”

I panicked. It could have been Category 1, but it also could have been Category 9. I looked up at my adviser-turned-tormentor, who was staring at me with his arms folded.

“Category 9,” I said, finally.

Dr. Littlewood then abruptly turned away and slowly walked back behind his desk, rubbing his forehead with his hand. He sat down and looked out his window for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he turned back toward me, his face a brighter shade of red than before.

“Lisa, this is unacceptable,” he said. “I have never had a graduate student who was so undependable and did such shoddy work. Do you realize how much money I have spent for you to collect and code this data? And what have I gotten for it? How can I publish something like this?”

His questions hung in the air as the silence became increasingly uncomfortable. My heart was in my throat, my hands were clammy, and I am pretty sure that my face was the color of chalk.

“Lisa,” my adviser said, the anger rising with his voice, “I don’t know what else to say. I am thinking seriously about dismissing you from the program.”

### **The Challenge**

I was suddenly incredibly scared and completely furious, all at the same time. On the one hand, this all seemed so unfair. I had no warning that I would be quizzed about work that I had done six weeks ago, after which I had coded data from hundreds of participants. It seemed to me that Dr. Littlewood was trying to prove a point, to embarrass me and make me feel completely incompetent. I wanted to express my anger and frustration, to tell him off.

On the other hand, I saw my entire career passing before my very eyes. I had already left one doctoral program. If I left a second doctoral program, it would be a major red flag. Schools would no doubt call Dr. Littlewood for a reference and, given the current situation, he would likely talk very negatively about me. I knew that my lifelong dream of becoming a college professor was on the edge of falling apart, my future hanging on what I said next.

My thoughts were abruptly interrupted by Dr. Littlewood’s angry voice. “So? Are you going to say anything?”

I took a deep breath and looked down at my shoes, trying to collect my thoughts. Questions raced through my head. Should I stand up for myself and tell Dr. Littlewood how I really felt? Should I try to convince him that I was really a hard worker and that his questions were unfair? Should I say anything at all?

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