

ISSUES IN THE WORKPLACE

Reading Signals

Participants: Carolyn Simmons, a graduate student in the laboratory of Dr. James Gardiner
Justin Powell, a postdoc in the Gardiner laboratory

Scene 1. Carolyn and Justin are seated at a lab bench, preparing gels for electrophoresis.

Justin: Carolyn, you've been here for 10 hours, don't you think you should knock off for a little while?

Carolyn: I'm OK. I'm just getting a little stiff ...After this next plate I'll go have some yogurt in the kitchen.

Justin: Here, let me rub your neck for a minute. In college, I was famous for my back rubs.

Carolyn: I'm really fine.

Justin: Oh, come on. It'll make you feel better. *(He gets up and starts rubbing her neck and then the tops of her shoulders.)*

Carolyn: That does feel better. *(She stands up and shrugs.)* I think I'll go have that yogurt now.

Justin: OK. But you don't get the full benefits of the back rub unless I press a little harder. I'll come with you and finish the back rub in the lounge.

Carolyn: *(A bit more serious.)* I'm really fine. You finish your gels and I'll be back to clean up in a little while.

Scene 2. A week later. ... Justin approaches Carolyn who is again working at the bench. He begins to rub her neck and she jumps in surprise.

Carolyn: Oh Justin, it's you. You startled me. I haven't seen you around for the last couple of days. How's the paper going?

Justin: *(Continues rubbing Carolyn's neck)* I'm almost finished, but I'm really going stir crazy sitting in that computer room all day. Let's go out for a beer.

Carolyn: Please stop rubbing my neck, I need to hold this pipette steady. I can't go out for a beer right now, but maybe Steve and I can go with you later.

Justin: Why Steve? Can't he go out with his own lab?

Carolyn: Justin, you know Steve and I have been dating for almost a year. I don't go out with anyone else.

Justin: You'll come to your senses. *(Carolyn looks up sharply.)* Just kidding. Check with Steve and let me know what time is good for both of you.

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Scene 3. The next day . . . Carolyn is walking through the lab with a tray of samples when Justin reaches out for her arm. She pulls away with just enough force to keep her distance, without spilling the contents of the tray.)

Justin: I noticed you didn't mind when Steve grabbed your arm last night. Never mind, I have something to show you. (He puts a stack of papers awkwardly on top of the tray she is holding.)

Carolyn: You finished the paper, that's great. (She looks again.) Justin, I thought you and Jim agreed that I would be the third author on this paper.

Justin: Jim said it was up to me. I decided to list you in the acknowledgements instead, but if you want to talk about it you can stop by my house after dinner.

Carolyn: Can't we talk about it now?

Justin: No, I have a seminar and then I promised Jim I'd help him analyze the new sequencing data.

Carolyn: Never mind. If you really think my contribution wasn't adequate, I guess I'll have to accept it.

Justin: Suit yourself.

Questions:

1. At what point does the physical contact go beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior?
2. Did Justin understand that Carolyn was uncomfortable with the physical contact? Could Carolyn have communicated more effectively that she did not want the physical contact? How?
3. If you had overheard the conversation in Scene 2, would you have felt comfortable intervening on Carolyn's behalf?
4. What is Jim's responsibility if Carolyn goes to Jim about the authorship issue?
5. What options does Carolyn have if she does not feel comfortable going to Jim? Would it be appropriate for Steve to talk to Justin on Carolyn's behalf?

Maternal Effect

Participants: Peter Thistle, a 7th year graduate student in the Krant lab.

Howard Thompson, a post-doc in the Krant lab.

Elena Sullivan, a senior post-doc in the Krant lab.

Wendy Tsung, a graduate student from the Adams lab.

Jeff Payne, a summer student in the Krant lab.

Betty Draper, a senior administrator at The Institute

Peter: Did you see the new poster Elena has up next to her bench?

Howard: Yeah, it's a bit much isn't it. I could handle her poster of the Chicago Bulls and the one of Carl Lewis, and I didn't mind her autographed Christian Lattner photo. But the pin-up of Greg Louganis in his speedo briefs on the end of the diving board is just too much. Every time I walk through the lab it makes me uncomfortable.

Peter: It's worse for me. Elena and I share a water bath. I have to look at that guy for hours at a time whenever I do a time course. I know it sounds stupid, but it makes me feel inadequate.

(Wendy joins Peter and Howard as they're finishing lunch)

Wendy: Hi guys, what's going on?

Howard: \We were just talking about Elena's new poster. Have you seen it?

Wendy: Yeah!! Louganis is a great diver and he has the perfect physique! *(Wistfully)* I haven't seen anyone around here who even comes close.

(Howard & Peter look dismayed)

Wendy: You two don't have a problem with the poster do you? Hal. You're just too sensitive. In fact, I think you're jealous.

(She laughs and leaves the table to go back to the lab. Howard & Peter shrug their shoulders and follow her.)

(Later that evening, on the way to the Biohazards fast-pitch AAA play-off game.)

Howard: I don't know what to do about the poster. I feel like I should say something to Elena, but I know she'll either laugh at me or get angry--you know how volatile she is. I thought I could say something to Krant or maybe to the personnel manager, but I'm sure they won't take me seriously. Maybe I should just rip the thing down tonight.

Peter: I've got a better idea. My roommate has the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Calendar* and the women's beach volleyball poster that was in *Playboy* last year. Why don't we put those up and see if Elena gets the message?

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(Howard and Peter are joined by Jeff)

Jeff: What's happening? I heard you mention Elena.

Peter: Yeah, we were talking about that poster by her desk. It makes us both uncomfortable.

Jeff: I don't mind the poster and I really enjoy working with Elena, but I hate it when she gets maternal with me. When things aren't going well, she always puts her arm around my shoulders. I know she's not making a pass at me--she's just tactile--but it really makes me squirm. I can't say anything to her. You know how she is.

Peter: Why don't you try talking to Betty Draper in administration? Maybe she can help.

Jeff: I did, but she said the ball is really in my court. Unless I make an official complaint, the Institute can't do anything. She suggests I try and approach Elena directly and tell her that her behavior is unacceptable to me. I almost laughed when she said that--she obviously doesn't know Elena. And besides, I can't afford to offend her since I really need a glowing recommendation for medical school. You know, I was really disappointed with Betty's response. I was hoping she would talk to Elena and I wouldn't have to get involved. I guess I'll just have to put up with the hugs and pats for the next eight weeks.

(Howard, Peter, and Jeff trudge down Vassar Street.)

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. Are Howard and Peter too sensitive about the poster?
2. If the poster really upsets them, what course of action should they take ?
3. What can the Human Resources Administrator realistically do when faced with a complaint like Jeff's?
4. How- can Jeff stop Elena from touching him without harming his chance to get into medical school?

Don't Worry About Me

Participants:

Sylvia Grant: administrative assistant in the office of Professor Jim Parker

Elaine Weinstein: post-doc in the Parker lab

Jim Parker: chairman of the department of molecular biology

Irene Chang: post-doc in the Parker lab

Rusty Cochran: chief technician in the Parker lab

(Sylvia is looking up price information for Elaine when Jim Parker walks into the room.)

Jim: Sylvia, where's the folder with the material I need for the talk. I'm giving at Duke next week? I need the article on aging.

Sylvia: I gave it to you yesterday.

Jim: I don't remember, find it for me.

Sylvia: I saw you put the whole folder in your brief case. 111 take a look. *(She gets up and walks toward his office.)*

Jim: Don't go in there. I know it's not in my briefcase. You never gave it to me. Check your files. If you can't find it, you 11 just have to go to the library and Xerox the articles again. You do have copies of the letters don't you, or did you forget to make those too?

(Sylvia starts to answer) but Jim marches into his office and slams the door before she has a chance.)

Elaine: Wow! That's the second time this week I've heard him yell at you. I don't know how you stand it.

Sylvia: I can't stand it. You know, I've worked for Jim for four years. He was always a bit difficult, but the last month he's been impossible. He criticizes everything I do and I don't know why ..

Elaine: Maybe I could talk to him.

Sylvia: I wouldn't want you to go out on a limb. So far, he's only angry with me. If you intervene he might turn against you too. If it continues much longer, I'll find another job. I know a consulting firm downtown that has great benefits.

Elaine: We'd all be lost if you left. I'll try to think of something.

(Later, In Rusty's Office)

Elaine: I saw Jim being very rude to Sylvia for no reason and I know she's thinking about leaving.

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Don't Worry

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Rusty: Do you really think she'd leave? He's always been pretty hard on her. Maybe I should have a word with him. *(After a brief pause)* You didn't mention this to Jim did you?

Elaine: No, I was going to, but ...

Rusty: Say no more, I'll see what I can do.

(A few hours later, after group meeting, Rusty approaches Jim)

Rusty: Jim, can I talk to you a minute?

Jim: Sure, what about?

(Rusty looks around as everyone else walks out.)

Rusty: It's about Sylvia. Don't you think you've been a little hard on her lately?

Jim: I don't know what you're talking about.

Rusty: Well, four or five times lately I've heard you question her judgment about something in the office. There are always other people around and I'm afraid it might be embarrassing for her. I've heard she might be looking for a new job and I would hate to see her leave.

Jim: Oh, Sylvia's used to me. I'm sure it doesn't bother her. She didn't say anything to you did she?

Rusty: No, but she looked pretty upset.

Jim: She has these little crises all the time. Don't worry. I'm sure it'll blow over.

Questions to consider.

1. What options does Sylvia have besides looking for a new job?
2. Should Elaine mind her own business?
3. Have either Elaine or Rusty broken Sylvia's trust in any way?
4. Is Jim unreasonable? . If Sylvia does leave and he learns that his behavior is the cause, would you expect him to modify his behavior or look for an administrative assistant who is comfortable with his style of interaction?