

Case Studies in Group Work

Working as part of a team can be a rewarding experience. There is an abundance of evidence in the educational literature that an open discussion and debate of ideas leads to a deeper understanding of the associated content. Working with a team also is a skill increasingly important to employers, graduate programs and health professionals. Indeed, you will spend much of your professional career working closely with others. Team work, however, is not without its problems, which we will consider (in teams) through a series of case studies involving ethical reasoning.

Ethical reasoning takes place at several discrete levels. The most specific level is the individual case, which is resolved by applying and interpreting rules and/or codes of conduct. Many professional societies explicitly endorse a code of conduct. For scientific societies, such codes always include a statement about respecting truth. The American Chemical Society's code of ethics, for example, states that chemists should

“share ideas and information, keep accurate and complete records, maintain integrity...and give due credit to the contributions of others. Conflicts of interest and scientific misconduct, such as fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, are incompatible with the Code.”

In many situations the action most consistent with the code is clear to everyone. In some situations, however, it is not clear who is acting rightly or wrongly, particularly if several values are in conflict. Ethical dilemmas can be confusing, but ethical reasoning itself can be relatively straightforward if one considers several questions:

1. Who are the stakeholders in the situation?
2. What are the possible courses of actions and the consequences of each?
3. What is each person's obligations?
4. What are the rules or standards in question?
5. What values are in conflict?

During our first lab session you will consider several case studies involving situations that sometimes occur during group laboratory work.¹ Each case includes a scenario and some questions. As you discuss these cases, remember that for many ethical dilemmas there is no single correct answer. The fact that there is no single correct answer, however, does not mean that all answers are correct. One goal of these discussions is to consider why some answers really are better than other answers. A second goal is for you and your partners to begin establishing for your group, expectations for your responsibilities to each other.

¹ The case studies and this introduction are modified from those originally prepared by Robert Lavieri '07.