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# The Rat Race

## Year

2002

## Description

This case discusses the issue of two PhD students that had conflicts during the research process leading to issues of communication and the responsibilities of instructor in an environment of internal competition.

## Body

Cindy, a new graduate student, entered an established and highly productive experimental psychology laboratory at Very Big State University (VBSU). From the beginning, Cindy exhibited high motivation and competence in psychology with a desire to publish early on in her graduate career in research journals within her area of specialization. She joined six other graduate students in the lab of her adviser, Tom. Other incoming first year graduate students in the area but outside her laboratory competed in a friendly manner; they competed in the class room and made wagers as to who would finish their master's first and who would publish first. Cindy excelled in and out of the laboratory, and subsequently developed a very good reputation with most of the faculty in her area. Further, she developed a very close relationship with Tom in the first few months after she arrived at VBSU.

However, a series of events unfolded in the laboratory soon after Cindy's arrival at VBSU. Tom asked another graduate student, Beth, to complete a research proposal for a grant. Beth knew the deadline was fast approaching; the unfinished manuscript needed to be mailed out the following day, requiring work late that

night. Tom asked Cindy to help Beth finish the manuscript since she had experience on the topic. Tom failed to mention this arrangement to Beth, who had expected to work on the project alone. That evening Beth walked in on Cindy, who was working on the manuscript; Beth immediately turned around and left. Beth ignored Cindy for some time after this meeting. The two eventually reached an understanding that Cindy did not intend to cut into Beth's territory. Rather, the misunderstanding had been a result of poor communication.

About two months later, another situation arose. Cindy required the use of a joystick for an experiment for a particular day and signed the laboratory time sheet requesting the use of the only working joystick. Beth had requested the use of the joystick for the evening prior to Cindy's request. The day Cindy started the study she noticed after running the first few subjects that the data made no sense whatsoever. After examining the equipment, she discovered that her subjects were using one of the defective joysticks, although it bore the instructions for the experiment she had put on the working joystick. Cindy believed that Beth had replaced the good joystick with a broken one and moved the stickers with instructions from the good joystick to the bad one.

Cindy confronted Beth and more or less accused Beth of sabotaging her experiment. Beth denied this accusation and stated she had merely forgotten to replace the joysticks when she had finished. Furthermore, Beth claimed she needed to take off the instructions because they were not pertinent to her experiment that she ran the evening before. Cindy brought up the matter with Tom, who took a hands off approach. The two graduate students have not talked since that time, and the laboratory, which had always been congenial, according to Beth, had become a source of friction for all.

Other events have transpired over the course of two years, and Beth and Cindy have complained to Tom about various situations. His response to the situation can be described as *laissez faire*.

Beth completed her work for the Ph.D at the end of the two years, and she will be leaving for a very good post-doc position. Cindy composed a website for the laboratory with the names and research of the graduate students at about this time. By the end of the second year Cindy managed to publish ten articles, which she listed on the website. However, she did not include any information about Beth.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the ethical considerations in the way Cindy and Beth related to each other? Could the problem have been handled better?
2. Should Tom have taken a more proactive position, especially with allegations of sabotage?
3. What practical policies could be developed for airing disagreements in this laboratory?
4. Should the more senior graduate students in the lab taken a more proactive approach in addressing the situation? With the two students? With Tom? Was it their responsibility to raise the issue in a lab meeting?

## Notes

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