

Case Studies

For each of the following case studies, draw on our discussion of various practices to reflect on (1) what is going well or what is good about the situation, (2) why some things may not be going well, and (3) how the identified issues could be addressed or even prevented in the future.

Case Study 1

Dr. Antonelli has been running her own laboratory for a few years and things are going fairly well. She has had a couple of papers in high-impact journals and is feeling good about the contributions her group is making to her current projects. She has been formulating an idea for a much larger effort that would require her to bring together a number of experts in different fields. Dr. Antonelli is hesitant to try to pull the trigger on starting this initiative because she just can't put her finger on the problem. Dr. Antonelli has noticed that people in her laboratory don't offer much during weekly laboratory meetings and, when they do, they are reluctant to give details about their experiments. Sometimes they even make disrespectful comments to each other. She has been surprised when junior scientists have come to her with requests to work on projects that are irrelevant to the lab's mission. Most concerning, Dr. Antonelli finds herself having to stamp out often bitter arguments between laboratory members over authorship and reliability of data. Why are things going wrong, and what can Dr. Antonelli do about it? And if she does do something about it, can she apply what she has learned to that bigger, bolder project that is bubbling in her mind?

Case Study 2

Two fellows from different laboratories were working, at the direction of their supervisors, on a collaborative project. While the scientific question was clear and the work was distributed based on expertise, authorship had never been discussed as an aspect of the collaboration. When it was time to write the paper, both fellows assumed they would be first author. A heated and emotional dispute erupted when it became clear that neither one would give up his position of thinking he should be first author. Accusations of discrimination, poor-quality research, lack of intellectual contributions, among others, were made. Many hours of valuable time over many days were spent trying to come to a resolution. The supervisors continued their collaborations; the fellows, however, remained bitter and frustrated.

Case Study 3

Dr. Lewis, a team leader who recently assembled a new research group to address a thorny scientific issue, announces that she wants everyone to focus their energies on research and that she does not want to be bothered with petty personal disputes that arise among participants. "I expect you to work out among yourselves whatever differences may arise," she explains in her introductory discussion with every person who joins the team. After an initial period of harmonious interaction among members of the group, two postdocs with different supervisors begin to quarrel about access to the electron microscope and other team resources. Unable to resolve their differences, the two soon begin to have disagreements about cleaning the shared equipment after use and the usage and purchase of reagents. The tension between the two begins to negatively affect the overall group dynamic and functioning until one of the postdoctoral researchers approaches Dr. Lewis to inform her that he is leaving the team.

Taken from Team Science Collaboration Field Guide (2018) NIH: National Cancer Institute