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So You Wanted to be a Co-Author

Year

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Description

This case discusses the issue of proper procedures for publishing and collaboration specifically targeted to post-doc fellows, junior faculty and supervisors.

Body

Melissa, an assistant professor, is talking with Sharon, a post-doc who works with her, in the hallway. Melissa is holding a draft of a review paper that the two of them are preparing for a book. The paper is based on work that Sharon has done, partially with the guidance of Melissa and partially with the guidance of Adam, an associate professor at another university. Melissa spoke about the work at a conference a few months ago. Sharon has written her section of the paper based on the older results that have recently been published, and without discussing a biochemical model that Sharon, Melissa and Adam are hoping to submit for publication in the near future.

Melissa: I've read over your portion of the review paper, and right now it's really reading like a student paper. It would be much stronger if we could include the biochemical model. The model really ties things together, but it's not published yet. The editors of this review book seemed really interested in our work when I gave the talk in April, and with my tenure review coming up soon, I'll be asking many of them for letters. I don't want to disappoint them by omitting these ideas. What do you think is the best way to include this work?

Sharon: I've never written a review paper before, so I guess I'm not clear on whether discussing the model here will have an impact on the other paper's acceptance. Since Adam will be second author on the biochemical paper, should I try to get in touch with him and see what he thinks?

Melissa: Adam didn't help me prepare the conference talk, so he isn't an author on this review paper. (pause). You know, people don't really read books as much as they do journals these days, and the book that contains this review paper will take a while to come out; it probably won't be in print until late this year or early next. By that time the biochemical paper should be published, don't you think?

Sharon: Well, the way the experiments have been turning out, it looks that way. Maybe for the review, we could make a cartoon summarizing our older hypothesis about the local metabolism, and suggesting the newer ideas. But Adam's insights have really been instrumental in developing the newer model. You know, I could just send him a quick email and --

Melissa: I don't want to be in a position where I have to ask Adam's permission. I'd really like to include this work. Why don't we each think about this some more and talk again Monday?

Discussion Questions

1. Should Sharon contact Adam even though Melissa doesn't want her to?
2. What other alternatives might Sharon consider? What are the consequences, implications and relative strengths of each alternative?
3. What justifications might Melissa have for not wanting to contact Adam?
4. How does Melissa's tenure situation affect the scenario?
5. If you were Adam, how would you define Sharon's responsibility to you? What about Melissa's responsibilities, both to Adam and Sharon as a collaborator, and to Sharon as her supervisor? What responsibilities does each person have to the others?
6. What are all the ethical issues involved here? for Sharon? for Melissa? for Adam?
7. Should Adam be an author on the review paper? If not, should he be acknowledged in some way? In what circumstances would you count him as an author?

8. Would you feel differently about any aspects of the situation if Sharon's proposed cartoon summarized the newer unpublished model, rather than the older published hypothesis?
9. What effects might mentioning the newer work in the review paper have on subsequent opportunities for publication? Do the consequences differ between scientific disciplines and/or between journals?
10. Should collaborators notify each other and discuss every instance in which they communicate common unpublished results or ideas to another person? Does it matter whether that communication takes the form of a paper, a presentation or an informal chat?

Notes

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