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Case #4: The Laboratory Note Book

You begin working in Dr. Ackroyd's research lab at the same time as his other postgraduate research assistant, Catherine. Because of some cutbacks in the chemistry department's research funds, Dr. Ackroyd can now only pay one assistant. Neither Catherine nor you can afford to work in the lab without pay. When you propose that each of you works part-time, Dr. Ackroyd will not agree. He believes that having two part-time assistants would be an inefficient use of his research funds. Since both of you are qualified and both need the job, he is uncomfortable deciding between the two of you. To make everything fair, Dr. Ackroyd proposes that you both work independently for the next two weeks and the student who makes the most progress will keep the job.

The lab is open all day so that students can work at their convenience. Today is Tuesday of the second week, and Catherine mentions that she cannot find her laboratory note book. Dr. Ackroyd does not know that Catherine's lab book is missing, but he would probably be angered by Catherine's lack of caution. Dr. Ackroyd has repeatedly warned the two of you to take great care of your lab books and never leave them unattended. Shortly after Catherine leaves the lab for lunch, you discover that her lab book has fallen behind a desk. Do you retrieve the lab book? Do you keep it? Do you give the lab book personally to Dr. Ackroyd or to Catherine, or do you just place it on the desk for someone to find? What is the best course of action?

Taken from Kovac, J. (2004). *The Ethical Chemist: Professionalism and Ethics in Science*.

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Commentary: The Laboratory Note Book

The question is, how serious a transgression has Catherine committed? If she is a less capable research assistant for having lost her notebook, it is important that Dr. Ackroyd know this. On the other hand, you might judge either that losing the lab notebook is really a minor problem or that values such as compassion and charity towards Catherine are more important than any responsibility you might feel to report this transgression.

The best course of action is to give the laboratory note book to Catherine and not mention her carelessness to Dr. Ackroyd. Catherine has made a mistake by misplacing her lab notebook, but hardly a mistake that she should be severely punished for. Dr. Ackroyd is quite serious about taking care of lab notes; telling him about the incident would certainly harm Catherine's chances to keep the job.

There is certainly a temptation for you either to give the lab notebook to Dr. Ackroyd and tell him where you found it, or give it to Catherine and but still let Dr. Ackroyd know about Catherine's carelessness. These actions would increase your chances of keeping the paid research position. Another option is to leave the notebook behind the desk for someone else to find. You may feel you are avoiding any involvement, but in fact you are making a moral decision, a decision not to help Catherine or Dr. Ackroyd. It is also a decision to help yourself, because leaving the lab notebook behind the desk will certainly impede Catherine's research progress and probably make sure that she does not get the permanent job. Yet another option would be to wait a few days to "find" the book and return it to Catherine. This would probably give you a time advantage, although Catherine would probably still be able to continue without her lab notebook for a while, recording her results in a new notebook. Once it was returned, she could transfer her lab notes into the permanent record and proceed as if nothing had happened.

Both of these options hurt Catherine's chances to retain the job, thus making yours better. From a purely selfish perspective they seem attractive. After all, only one person can have the job. Why not you? There is of course the issue of fairness. Dr. Ackroyd is interested in hiring the best researcher. Keeping track of lab notes is part of research, but only a minor part. The more important qualities are good laboratory technique, scientific knowledge and insight. Both Dr. Ackroyd and the scientific community will benefit most if the truly better researcher gets the position. From a utilitarian perspective, the best option is to quietly return

the lab notebook to Catherine and let Dr. Ackroyd make his decision at the end of the week. This more generous course of action also makes sense from a variety of other moral perspectives. Certainly, if you had misplaced your lab notebook, you would like Catherine to return it to you without telling Dr. Ackroyd about your carelessness.

Several other options are posed in the case. You could retrieve the lab notebook and lay it out somewhere for anyone to find, offering Catherine and Dr. Ackroyd the same opportunity to find it. If Dr. Ackroyd finds the lab notebook, carelessly lying around while Catherine is not in the lab, then Dr. Ackroyd will probably be angry and will want to hire you rather than Catherine. Although this option seems to absolve you of any responsibility if Catherine is reprimanded or punished for losing her lab notebook, it is not quite that simple. You have a variety of choices as to when and where to leave the lab notebook. Consciously or unconsciously, you can certainly set-up the situation so that Dr. Ackroyd is more likely than Catherine to find the lab notebook, or the reverse.

Finally, and the most extreme, you could discard the lab notebook. While this would almost guarantee you the job, the lab notebook certainly contains information that is important to the overall research project, so you will be doing a disservice to science, no matter who eventually keeps the research assistant position.