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Name: ()

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Case #7: The Collaboration

A postgraduate student, Paula Jones, has been working in your lab for only two months, but has already proven herself as a productive, respectable and responsible researcher. At present, she is working on a project that you initiated which, once completed, should strengthen your reputation. Dr. Marlow, a friend and colleague from the university that Paula attended, has shown much interest in the work that you and Paula have been doing. He proposes a collaboration between your lab and his. It will most likely add a new dimension to the study and will increase the funding available for the necessary experimentation. Without much hesitation, you agree to Dr. Marlow's proposal.

When you tell Paula about the good news, she is not too pleased. A close friend and supervisor of hers from her old university worked with Dr. Marlow on two occasions. Because of several things that happened, she is convinced that Dr. Marlow is the type of person who will steal good ideas and make them his own before anything can be done about it. You assure Paula that she and her supervisor must be mistaken, but she holds on to her beliefs and strongly urges you to reconsider. You are surprised by the intensity of Paula's reaction. Dr. Marlow is someone whom you know and respect, but in the short time that Paula has worked with you, she has shown good sense and mature judgment. Perhaps your assessment of Dr. Marlow was wrong. What should you do?

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

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Commentary: The Collaboration

How much attention should you pay to the comments of this post-doctoral chemist who has only been in your lab for two months? Paula made strong allegations against Dr. Marlow which seem inconsistent with what you know about him. Her comments are based on things she learned from her former supervisor. Perhaps that person is wrong or has some private quarrel with Dr. Marlow and is trying to ruin him. On the other hand, the allegations could be correct, and your good opinion of Dr. Marlow may result from not knowing him well enough.

The obvious first step is to get more information about Dr. Marlow and to do it discreetly. If Paula's allegations become widely known, they could harm Dr. Marlow's scientific reputation. But to get the information that you need to evaluate her claims, you need to talk to both Paula and her former supervisor as well as to others in the community who might know more about Dr. Marlow. You will have to ask some potentially embarrassing questions.

No matter what you find, the situation is delicate. If Paula is right, it is in your best interest to break-off the collaboration with Dr. Marlow, but you will have to give him a reason for changing your mind. Do you tell him the truth, which will probably lead to denials or excuses and perhaps an angry exchange, or do you make-up a more benign excuse to avoid any further conflict? After ending the collaboration, should you take any further steps? These are difficult questions. Although Dr. Marlow behaviour is certainly a violation of professional etiquette, if not ethics, there is only a small probability that you can have any effect on him, particularly at this stage of his career. On the other hand, it would be good to prevent others being victimised by his actions.