



Leadership Discussion Guide: Mice Lab

As a research assistant, you find out that your lab chief recently hired a Ph.D. student to administer a drug to mice and observe the effects. The student reports at meetings that he has been injecting the drug and observing the animals, but that he is finding no effects, which the lab chief found surprising. Other people in the lab have told you that they have not seen him working with the mice, nor has he reported his findings on the mouse cage card. The lab chief confronts him and he confesses that he is under a lot of pressure which has led to anxiety that prevents him from working. What do you do?

Decision Making Framework:

- 1) List the issues raised by the 2MC.
- 2) What rules or regulations apply to the situation?
- 3) What questions will help you open up the problem?
- 4) What resources could you use or consult to help you make a decision?
- 5) What are your options and how does each option affect others involved in the situation?
- 6) What would you do after considering all of these and in light of your own values?

Issues

Stealing Intellectual property
Potential problems with data keeping
What do you really know?
Wasted time and money
Whistleblowing: should you tell?

Resources

Campus and federal regulations
Research integrity officer on campus
Mentor
Colleagues
Parents
National ethics center website

Rules and Regulations

Federal research integrity regulations
University's regulations

Options

Fire the PhD student
Report the PhD student
Talk to the research integrity officer on your campus
Talk to the visiting researcher in question
Talk to adviser or other trusted mentor



Questions

Had the PhD student done anything? What? With what results?

Should you get involved in the situation in the first place?

Do you know why the PhD student was behaving that way, and if the PhD student was under a lot of stress would that change your mind or lessen the severity of your punishment?

Should you recommend that the lab chief fire the student or ruin their possible career?

If the student brought up the need to be paid during the confrontation would you handle the situation differently?

If the student, later on, received their PhD would this change how you dealt with the situation?

Did you know the PhD student before? If so are these behaviors normal for them?

What is the source of funding for this project?

Is there any possibility that you could retreat and regroup?

Takeaway Lessons:

1) Information Gathering

You have an idea of what happened and the PhD student confessed. Your decision seems to have two main options. Fire the PhD student or keep them on. Either way you need more information.

2) Seeking Resources

You may need advice before you take the next step. Are you on close enough terms with any member of your committee to seek confidential advice from one person? Does your new campus have an ombudsperson who might be able to provide confidential advice?

3) Asking Questions

Once you have gathered the facts so you have a fuller sense of the situation, you should speak with the PhD student in person. Allow them to explain themselves, and inform them of your decision. Depending on how your fact-finding goes, you may want to have someone else present when you ask these questions.

4) Follow the Rules for Having a Dispute Professionally

Before you have your conversation with the PhD student you should read and absorb the rules for having a dispute professionally.

Next Steps:

After you have spent an adequate amount of time trying to understand the situation holistically, then you will have a decision to make. If you don't get involved the data could very much be fabricated and in the end the research will be dismissed and you will have to handle the consequences. Will you recommend keeping the PhD student. If it is decided to keep the student then what will you do to ensure that the behavior will change into a more positive and beneficial behavior. If you decide to recommend fire the research assistant then what steps will you take and what checks will you put into place to ensure that this problem does not happen again.

What Really Happened:

The PhD student was fired and not given a letter of recommendation. The lab chief was even more angered by the student bringing up the need to be paid. Furthermore the lab chief feels they should have been even harsher going as far as reporting the student to ensure the student doesn't work in a lab again.

