I. Part I

Tuesday morning:

You, the RIO, receive an allegation in a voicemail with a request to talk in person.

The person on the message states:

“I am a graduate student in Dr. Lee’s lab working on an NIH grant with him, two other grad students and a postdoc. I would like to speak to you because I think that data is being altered in our study. I have tried bringing it up to one of the other lab members, but they keep pushing the idea off as paranoia. I have recently taken the RCR course you offer, and this sounds to me like something I need to discuss with someone at the institution.”

What are your next steps?
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II. Part II:

Wednesday morning:

You and your assistant meet with the graduate student and take the information that she provides.

Erin introduces herself and says that she is a graduate student and Marco is a postdoc who both work in Dr. Lee’s lab at the University of Roosevelt. They are working on an NIH-funded grant with Dr. Lee. Erin repeats her allegation to you, and brings with her some documentation to support the allegation that data was altered by Marco, the post doc. She states that she was in the lab late one night, and she came across some images that weren’t familiar to her laid out by the scanner. When she brought the papers to Marco, he grabbed them from her and looked upset. Erin shared that she regularly participated in Photoshop contests on her favorite blog and believed that the papers she saw were an attempt at replicating the original Western blots that were recently disappointing the lab. They had all been trying to get the results that Dr. Lee was asking them to find based on his theory.

When Erin went back into her raw data, she confirmed again, that these were not results that they had found, and suspected that Marco independently changed the Western blot data.

She explains that in their lab meeting at the beginning of the semester, Dr. Lee had a certain hypothesis regarding a protein that he asked the research team to investigate and had asked them to run several experiments in his absence, including the preparation of the necessary Western blots. This discovery had come about as part of his NIH-funded work, but he believed this could lead to more funding and publications.

He had mentioned that if his theory is correct, it could be potentially groundbreaking in the field, and in return for their hard work and contributions, he would be willing to offer them authorship on any papers published from their data. He emphasized that Marco had always been his favorite researcher, and he expected that since he was the “best man” in the lab, he would probably get the results quicker. Erin, who had grown used to comments like that by Dr. Lee, ignored it and reminded herself that she was in this lab because of Dr. Lee’s reputation in the field and her desire to make an impact in the field like he had one day.

He left them with instructions for performing the experiments while was away, and mentioned that they should start right away, as he had heard that there is a group in Kansas who is already working on the same theory and he wanted to beat them to the punch. Erin shares that they were both thrilled at the prospect of being published authors so soon in their careers, so they got to work on the experiments right away. However, they soon realize that the experiments were not producing the expected results.

Erin explains that she and Marco were frustrated and discussed their options. They were both positive that Dr. Lee’s theory is correct and suspected that perhaps some of their supplies were bad. However, they didn’t want to trouble Dr. Lee while he was away. They talked with the lab manager about ordering new supplies, but he told them that they were backordered and wouldn’t arrive for two months.
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She and Marco continued independently on the work, and just ahead of Dr. Lee’s return, Marco had a meeting with Dr. Lee and announced they had found the results that he was looking for. Erin says she was surprised, but grateful that she would be involved in the publication since Marco had indicated that he expected they’d be a great team.

Later that day, she came across the images that she believed had been altered, and conformed they were the ones that Marco had proudly shown her and Dr. Lee earlier that day. Erin states that she did not know what to do with her suspicions, so she confidentially shared it with Iman, another graduate student in the lab. Iman said she was being silly, and that she was probably mistaken.

She had taken an RCR course earlier in the semester and remembered that there was a person who she could bring allegations to, but first she thought maybe she’d try to address it with Dr. Lee, so she made an appointment with him.

She states that when she shared it with Dr. Lee, he was distracted and told her that she was just “jealous” that Marco had found it first. She also added that he said that women need to tough it out in the lab, and that next time she might have to work even harder to come in “first place”. Nevertheless, he said that Marco wouldn’t ever cut corners like that, and that they had to get moving because the next phase of the work would be in animals. Dr. Lee also told Erin that she should not be talking to anyone else outside of the lab about anything that goes on in the lab; explaining that they needed to be secretive because other labs were also jealous and would try to “steal” their ideas if she talked to others.

Erin tells you that she is scared that someone will find out it was her that reported this information to you, but she felt it was the right thing to do because after animals, the research may be applied to humans and she wouldn’t want to harm animals, much less humans if the research goes forward.

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