The Overly Nice Advisor

George Washington is one of two postdocs working in Dr. Big's lab. The other postdoc, Dee Nye, is older and has more years of experience than George, but although she is approaching the end of her postdoc term, she has no first-author publications nor has she received any extramural grants. Because Dee will need to leave the lab soon and find a position elsewhere, there is a keen desire on her and on Dr. Big's parts to make her marketable. Compounding her overall lack of productivity is the fact that Dee does not get along very well with her co-workers; her presentations are poorly delivered; and her experimental designs are frequently flawed.

Dr. Big likes George and tells him that he (i.e., Dr. Big) has taken it upon himself to write a manuscript with Dee as primary author and that he will create all the necessary figures, albeit using Dee's data. He also tells George that he has written a rather complimentary letter for Dee and embellished her qualifications in order to improve her job prospects.

George thinks that it is exceedingly unfair that Dee can be so unproductive and unprofessional in the lab, yet emerge from this with someone else writing her manuscripts and providing a glowing letter of recommendation. When he confesses this to Dr. Big, Dr. Big answers, "I know, I know. But someday you'll have to manage a situation like this, and you'll just want to be rid of this person. Besides, if I want to make her the first author on a paper, I have that authority, don't I?"

George is not convinced by Dr. Big's argument, but he isn't going to quarrel with Dr. Big and he certainly won't miss Dee Nye. Nevertheless, Dr. Big's behaviors seem ethically problematic. Please comment.

Expert Opinion

Dr. Big might be a fine scientist, but he's not a good mentor. First, he plans to write a recommendation letter that will frankly misrepresent Dee's abilities and interpersonal behaviors. The practical consequence is that her inadequacies might well follow her to her next job and continue to cause problems. Dr. Big might argue that he's working on Dee's behalf, thinking perhaps that she just needs more time to develop a more mature set of professional behaviors. One could alternatively argue, though, that Dr. Big is primarily motivated to be rid of Dee, and that his true motivation is self-serving (which rarely, if ever, serves as an ethical justification). Rather than undertaking the effort to improve Dee's professional conduct and skills, he takes the less effortful path of misrepresenting her conduct and accomplishments. (And we are assuming that Dee performed inadequately as described. But is her less than stellar performance in some way attributable to Dr. Big's very limited capacity to be a good supervisor? Did Dr. Big allow and support Dee's exploring her scientific interests or did he have her doing relatively unproductive work in the lab, perhaps for his own gain?)

Second, Dr. Big is going to write a paper for Dee and position her as first author. This will count as a second misrepresentation of Dee's ability, assuming Dr. Big makes the primary

intellectual contribution. Of course, it co-opts Dee into committing the same, misrepresentational offense. Dr. Big is exaggerating Dee's contributions to the paper, and his argument that he has the authority to do so certainly doesn't pass ethical muster. If authority admits moral connotations—such that the appropriate exercise of authority consists in modeling moral behavior and insisting that one's charges do the same—then Dr. Big is confusing moral authority with power. One is reminded of Socrates' famous question in the dialogue **Euthyphro**: "Is something good because the Gods approve it, or do the Gods approve of something because it is good?" If Dr. Big is one of the "Gods," he needs to exercise his authority in accordance with ethical concerns about the integrity of his lab, his institution, and all the relationships that are at stake (including the one with Dee's future employer). Just because he has "godlike" power doesn't mean his exercise of it is automatically good.

Third, Dr. Big shares all of this with George, the other postdoc in the lab. Surely, this counts as an unprofessional conversation. One might see it as a "boundary violation" in that it muddies the relationship between Dr. Big and George—i.e., George has now become Dr. Big's confidant rather than just a mentee. Also, his confiding in George suggests that Dr. Big might have some uncomfortable awareness of the wrongfulness of his conduct, so he chooses to confide in someone who, predictably, will not call him on it. By revealing this all to George, Dr. Big perhaps relieves his conscience, but he takes the less-than-responsible course by passing this information along to a predictably benign, passive, and nonthreatening individual.

Worse, however, is that just as Dr. Big has co-opted Dee into misrepresenting her authorship, his confiding all this to George makes George complicit in the misbehavior: If Dr. Big and Dee's misrepresentations are ever discovered, and George's foreknowledge of their intentions and actions becomes known, he might be harshly penalized for failing to call the organization's attention to this turpitude.

For all these reasons, it is difficult not to come down hard on Dr. Big. Quite possibly, had he intervened in ways that a committed and skilled mentor would **when the first signs of Dee's professional and relational deficits became apparent**, this unpleasant scenario could have been avoided. Did Dr. Big suffer from excessive optimism, thinking that somehow, as the years passed in his lab, Dee's behaviors would magically improve without the need for any explicit intervention? Indeed, was Dr. Big ever trained in mentoring so as to know what to do when mentees like Dee first begin presenting problems?

This invites the suspicion that Dr. Big may well be part of an institution that is aiding and abetting his failures. The institution may be failing to: 1) provide training to its scientists in mentoring skills in the same way that institutions typically provide ongoing training on grant-getting skills; 2) monitor mentoring conduct, by soliciting reports from mentors about their mentoring activities and soliciting feedback from mentees about the same; and 3) reward appropriate mentoring conduct as it rewards success in winning grants, invitations to present high-profile lectures, membership invitations to prestigious professional associations.

Dr. Big's poor mentoring speaks to the need for training programs to be designed and made available for all persons stepping into a mentoring role, lest one make the huge inferential error that because someone is a competent and productive scientist, he or she ipso facto has the pedagogical and management skills to be a decent mentor.

Ultimately, mentorship skills are considerable and complex, and should not be shrugged off. Mentees deserve very capable supervisors, especially as they progress towards being

responsible, independent scientists who might, someday, be faced with mentoring challenges of their own.