

CASE STUDY NUMBER 1(b)

Background information - Supervisor

Sam, a mid-career research supervisor, has arranged to meet with a senior colleague over coffee to discuss a number of problems he is having with a particular PhD student. Sam is an active researcher and dedicated to his work. The candidate, Sue, appeared, on application, to be very strong as she had several years of experience as a Research Assistant after completing Honours (1st) and seemed to be mature and to know where she was going.

Given her previous experience Sam had initially left Sue to get started on her project. There were other people in the lab (a Post-doc, two technicians and more senior students) who could assist her. Sam had concentrated on getting a couple of papers finally submitted and grant writing: both his salary and continued research depended on successful applications for the following year. He had also taken on new administrative duties within the department.

Sam has been acting Head and so had explained to some of his better students that he would much prefer to meet with them after 5.30pm so that he can be available to other staff and students during the day. Sam works long days. His partner is a research scientist and they are both happy to spend time at night and on weekends with their cutting edge research.

Sam's real concern is that, despite being twelve months into her research program, Sue's work seems not to be heading in the direction he had anticipated. "I know I gave her a fair amount of freedom at the beginning to develop a project that was a) of interest to her, and b) fitted generally within the work of the lab' but...well I know her technical skills are good, but that seems to be about all she is doing, there's no...creativity, no real initiative or originality."

He's started to get the feeling that there is a personal problem too. Toward the end of the recent journal club discussion that Sue had led she seemed quite distant and disengaged. Sam was tired and worried about an upcoming meeting with a staff member over a disciplinary matter so he hadn't stayed behind to talk with her, but something seemed wrong.

Sam explains, "I am worried that it seems as if she is not really putting in the hours. It took ages for her to get her Ethics Approval. I'm not sure if this is because she couldn't do it or just not working the hours needed for this sort of work. I almost never see her in on the weekends when I call in to check on something. In fact, due to the slowness of the project I was so worried that she wouldn't have enough data for a paper in her own right at the upcoming research conference in the US, I feel I have to do it for her and present something, just so I can get her work out there as quickly as possible. Otherwise we are likely to lose the edge that we have. Plus, I thought if I get something out there it might give her the boost she seems to need."

In his discussion Sam explains that in one of the courses he is doing in the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, (another reason why he works late so that he can get onto the online discussion), there has been talk of expectations, but he makes it very clear to all his students when he is available, so he doesn't think that this can be a problem.



Group Task

Imagine you are Sam's colleague and you are helping Sam think through the issues and determine some strategies.

1. What questions would you ask of Sam regarding his interactions with Sue in the first few months of candidature, for example, you might like to start with something like:
 - Who had he asked to help her while he was otherwise occupied? Had he made their role clear?
 - Has he explained why he prefers to meet late in the day? Does he know why Sue usually can't stay behind after 5.30pm and why she is not in there on weekends?
 - Have any of his other students had difficulty meeting him after hours? What are Sam's expectations of his PhD students? To be like him with their research i.e. both a job and a hobby? Has he considered another model?
 - Does he expect each student to publish a paper each year of their candidature? Is this realistic?
2. Should Sam give Sue more direction if she seems to be floundering?
3. What strategies could you suggest for Sam to adopt when talking with Sue about originality/creativity?
4. How might you raise the issue of presenting a student's work at an international conference in a way that they appreciate the issues involved, including the ethics?



Two years down the track

Group Task

How will Sam be working if he manages to follow the advice you give him?