

A TATTLE TALE?

Loo Wee Ling wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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T.J. was an undergraduate in a business school that emphasized ongoing assessment and group work in all its courses. He was in the second year when he faced a particularly difficult dilemma in the course of group work in one of his subjects. Here is what happened according to T.J.:

“In this particular subject, assessment on an individual basis accounted for 70 per cent. However, there were to be three pieces of group work with an assigned group that made up the remaining 30 per cent. All three group assignments were to be done with the same group members. The first two carried a five per cent weightage each, while the last carried 20 per cent. No mention was made by the professor about whether peer review would be conducted at the end of each assignment or even at the end of the course.

There were six members in my group and we had already done our very first group assignment. In the second group assignment, I was given the task of compiling the contributions of all the other group members into a comprehensive report for submission to the professor. We were working on a particularly tight deadline and I was expected to receive everyone’s contributions by Saturday morning, then prepare the draft report by Sunday for review by every member before working on the final report for submission the following Tuesday.

It was in the course of compiling the second assignment report that Saturday that I discovered what appeared to me to be plagiarism or, at least, shoddy work on the part of a group member, K.C. I was reading through K.C.’s contribution, which was submitted to me late on Saturday, when I came across portions that contained statistics. Yet there was no citation provided for where the statistics came from. I used some relevant keywords and conducted a search on the Internet. To my horror, I found that out of K.C.’s write-up of a page and a half, some parts were copied wholesale without identification of the source and some consisted of half-hearted attempts at paraphrasing the contents of identified as well as unidentified websites.

Many thoughts raced through my mind: What if I had not discovered the plagiarized work and had incorporated it into our final report and submitted it? What would the professor have done if he discovered the plagiarism — would all members of the group have been held accountable and punished with a fail

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grade for that assignment? Why should I be punished for the shoddy work of one member? It was a good thing I did discover the plagiarism and that I could discover it because it was lifted from sources on the Internet. What if it was lifted from some journal or textbook to which I had no access?!

I got more and more upset the more I thought about it.

That very Saturday night, I immediately tried to telephone K.C. but he did not pick up the call. I then tried sending a text message informing him of the plagiarized work and requesting that the work be redone with proper citations provided. I felt frustrated at not hearing from K.C. after a few hours and proceeded to e-mail all the group members, attaching my draft compilation of the report and telling them that all of us risked getting a fail grade if any of us made the same mistake as K.C.

Finally, about half an hour to midnight, K.C. sent an e-mail, replying to all, apologizing to me for the oversight and attaching the draft compilation with changes to his part. Unfortunately, I did not feel placated. Firstly, the changes made were merely to include the source in brackets at the end of the copied text and paraphrased text. Second, K.C. did not seem to realize the gravity of the oversight and the potential consequences it could bring to the whole group. I was so indignant that I called and spoke to the group member who compiled the first assignment report. He confirmed that K.C.'s contribution was also submitted late then and without proper citations.

Personally, I felt like bringing the matter up to the professor but realized that it could adversely affect K.C.'s record at the business school. And it could also jeopardize our last group assignment. I spoke to three other group members separately on the telephone and here are their responses in the order in which I spoke to them:

Group member A (also the compiler of the first group assignment):

"Maybe K.C. does not know how to provide proper citations or... maybe K.C. is lackadaisical by nature and puts in minimal effort for assignments. Whatever it is, we still have a 20 per cent group assignment to do together and we cannot afford to sour relations between the group members by taking K.C. to task. Making K.C. unhappy may jeopardize our last group assignment. Perhaps we should just gently remind K.C. to be more mindful of providing proper citations for the next assignment."

Group member B:

"What does group member A have to say on the matter? Oh... I see... well, I agree with A's views and think we should follow A's suggestion on how to deal with this."

Group member C:

"Did this really happen? Is it a serious issue at all? Well, I don't think we will really get an "F" grade right? I don't think we need to take any action."

I could not reach group member D on the telephone and sent D a text message asking for his views. D only replied via text message to express regret at what happened but did not offer any solutions.

I am personally not very happy with A's suggested solution but what would be the right thing to do?"

T.J. seeks your advice.