

Conflict with advisor

Working in teams is critical to the role of a McKinsey consultant, and can be challenging at times. Please think about a time when you found it a challenge to work together with another person or other people in a team.

1. Briefly describe the situation and the person/people you worked with.
2. What specific challenges did you have in working with this person/these people?
3. Describe the key things you did to overcome these challenges.
4. What was the outcome of this situation?

My PhD thesis work is a joint collaboration between my main advisor (Prof. A) from mechanical engineering, and my adjunct advisor (Prof. B) from chemistry. Our collaboration started as I entered my PhD program. During the second year of my PhD there was a conflict in deciding the authorship of a paper based on my research.

In my research I fabricated a thermal modulator (μ TM), and demonstrated the ability of this device to separate complex gas mixtures using a test gas mixture. The fabrication was done in our laboratory, but the experiments were done in Prof. B's laboratory. Since, I performed the experiments and partially analyzed the data, my colleague in Prof. B's laboratory wrote the paper, and performed the rest of the analysis. During this period, I was informed that his student had decided to be the first author of the paper, while delegating me to a second author. Intuitively, this didn't seem correct to me. While he was the senior student in this project, I had done most of the experimental work for the project. After talking to him, I realized that Prof. B had instructed him to be the lead author.

Since I was new to the PhD and not familiar with the process of determining authorship, I talked to other senior colleagues and got their opinion on this matter. Further I came to know that one of my colleagues had a similar experience while working with Prof. B, before. However, I also realized that creating a direct conflict with Prof. B would have serious consequences with my project. This is because I perform my experiments in his laboratory. Further, I don't have sufficient authority to discuss this issue directly with Prof. B, because in academia it's our professors who finally decide the authorship. Instead, I talked to Prof. A, my main advisor and explained why I think the current authorship is unfair. We discussed different solutions, including ending our collaboration with his lab, and developing another collaboration. However I also realized the value their lab provided us. Prof. B has a lot of expertise with gas chromatography and we have a few other on-going joint projects as well. As a result, we decided that we are going to continue our collaboration with Prof. B, but Prof. A is going to directly talk to Prof. B, and explain my side of the story. We also decided we are going to involve a third professor, to make sure that this situation is known outside of our labs, in case we have to get an external party involved.

Based on these discussions, we set up some guidelines how Prof. B's laboratory is going to participate in the project. While I am going to help them with fabricating and operating the μ TM, my colleague and I will be joint authors on the current paper and any future papers written based on research using the μ TM. Hence, I was able to resolve the conflict amicably and obtain the authorship that I deserved.