

When Two People See the Same Facts Entirely Differently

A Teaching Case

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About this teaching case: Every experienced organizational ombuds knows that it can be difficult to know whom to believe when two people see things differently, perhaps even 180 degrees off each other. We know that people sometimes lie, sometimes make up stories, sometimes have not known—or have misunderstood—the true facts of a situation. Thus, quite often, it can be useful to learn the true facts underlying a dispute. Sometimes a fair and competent inquiry or investigation can help in resolving the issue.

However, sometimes the facts—as a videotape and audio tape would show them—are not decisive, in knowing how to deal with interpersonal injuries. Social identities, beliefs, customs, values, and context can result in two individuals having widely different views about one set of facts. This can happen readily about issues of race, religion, nationality and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, physical appearance, and age—and it can be important to understand how very different our understanding of facts may be from the understanding of another.

This fictional teaching case was assembled from actual cases that came to several ombuds, to explore how to help management when “discovering the material facts” does not seem to suffice in managing a serious complaint. This deeply troubling case is about gender and sexual experience—but profound differences in understanding of a situation can also occur with all aspects of social identity.

As with all complicated concerns, if you were asked for help by the manager in this case, you might wish to consider the following questions:

Questions for the Ombuds in all Difficult and Complex Cases

Is this an emergency? (If not, what factors or new events would make this an emergency?)

2) Whose interests (including those of the employer) are at stake? Make a list of all those whose interests are at stake.

3) What are the interests of each stakeholder?

4) What are the sources of power and influence¹ of each stakeholder?

5) What are the unconstructive and constructive options open to each stakeholder?

6) Which rules, regulations, laws—and norms or principles—are relevant?

7) What resources are available to help with the various concerns?

8) With whom might you wish to talk, and if so, would you mention names, or speak anonymously, or about a “hypothetical situation?” And would you need permission to talk?

9) What are all the options you might offer to the Assistant Laboratory Director? (Usually there are several options—and this may be true even in an emergency.) Think about all the options for this specific case, including systemic options.)

¹ Mary Rowe, “[Sources of Power in Negotiations](https://mitsloan-phs3.amazonaws.com/wp-faculty/sites/84/2023/08/18131605/Mary-Rowe-List-of-Sources-of-Power-in-Negotiation.pdf)” (one-page list), <https://mitsloan-phs3.amazonaws.com/wp-faculty/sites/84/2023/08/18131605/Mary-Rowe-List-of-Sources-of-Power-in-Negotiation.pdf>. (Note: This list was originally compiled for MIT Sloan course 15.667.)

When Two People See the Same Facts Entirely Differently: Joe and Josephine Teaching Case

A senior lab manager has come to the ombuds for help, and asks, “May I tell you about something that has happened? I have come to you because there is no one else I can talk to right now.

“My secretary came to find me when I came in to work today. ‘Boss, we’ve gotten a call from one of the labs. They’re missing a young chemist named Josephine. They don’t think it’s just someone goofing off. They seem to think either the Director or you (Assistant Director for Administration) ought to know about it. The Group Leader is here.’

“The Group Leader, Alfred, came in; he didn’t know much either. Josephine, 24, worked closely with a brilliant young PhD, Joe. Josephine hasn’t come in for two days; Joe has been in and out, say his co-workers. The co-workers say Joe looks upset, comes in, looks around, goes out. What’s most strange is that these two appear to have made a very significant breakthrough in their work two nights ago. The lab notes are marked with an elegantly clean result and a beautifully sketched wreath of laurel leaves.

“I sent Alfred out to look for Joe. My assistant, Alice, offered to call Josephine every 15 minutes. Just before 4 p.m. Josephine finally answered her phone, and agreed to drive in. I waited at the office to see her.

“Josephine came in looking tired and very, very strained. She sat, unable to talk at first. Alice came back in to pick up something, glanced at me and went to sit with Josephine. Josephine said she’d been walking and crying outside most of a day and a half; she did not know what to do. Slowly her story emerged, whispered to Alice.

“Joe and Josephine had been exuberant yesterday, although very tired, when at 4 a.m., they had finished the last experiment in a very long series. Joe had asked, ‘Why don’t you come back with me for breakfast? You know I live two minutes away. We can rough out a report for Alfred.’

“Josephine said she was too tired to think or talk. She went silently with Joe to his apartment. They had breakfast; she was completely exhausted. She says that he then drew her onto his studio couch and hugged her. She says she completely froze; she could not move or speak. He removed her clothes and had sex with her.

“‘I didn’t say anything at all,’ she said. ‘I could not believe what was happening. I couldn’t talk at all. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe. I just froze.² It was as if I were up on the ceiling watching this terrible thing happen to someone else. It was a long time before I could get up and dress and leave. I just walked by the river and walked and hid out in a park. I couldn’t talk with anyone.’

² This response is not uncommon. See Jen Percy, “What People Misunderstand About Rape,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/22/magazine/immobility-rape-trauma-freeze.html/>.

“She never wants to see Joe again. She doesn't know what to do; she feels there is nothing she can do, nobody she can talk with. How can she tell her parents or her fiancé at Caltech? She does not want anyone else to know...ever. ‘*Please* do not tell anyone else,’ she said. She was brought up in a very conservative, religious household, and had never dated anyone but her fiancé, a man of her same faith. She hasn't been able to eat, doesn't think she can sleep. She can barely talk; she seems in shock.

“Later on, the phone rang; the Group Leader, Alfred, told me he had found Joe.

“Joe apparently was horror-struck when the Group Leader questioned him about what had happened. He said he'd been out looking for Josephine when Alfred found him. Joe thought Josephine had just left his apartment to go sleep; he had worried when she did not come back to work. He had no idea she was upset. He looked up at Alfred at one point and said, ‘Alfred, she never said no. She could have just walked out of my apartment. If she had gotten up to leave, I never would have stopped her. Why didn't she talk? Alfred, I *love* her.’ Joe told Alfred he wanted to celebrate their extraordinary success—and to propose.

“Joe, in tears and shaking, told Alfred he had no idea Josephine was engaged. He had fallen in love with Josephine. He said wanted to marry Josephine; he had bought a ring and wanted to give it to her. He had hardly ever dated; in fact, he said, he had never kissed a girl before. He was hardly able to talk with Alfred; he felt completely shattered.”

The Assistant Director—who tells you he believes both Joe and Josephine in their mutually inconsistent interpretations of the same material facts—has come to the ombuds office because of the plea from Josephine that they not tell anyone else.