

Care-full stories: Story 5: Under pressure

November 2022



Instructions

Setting:

An email conversation during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Set up:

In person:

Two people sitting in chairs (or stand, as necessary) facing each other but not looking at each other. Each has with them a device for emailing (laptop / phone / iPad/etc.). They pretend to type each time it is their turn and they read what they are "typing" out loud.

Characters:

- **Senior Manager** [this could be the Establishment Licence Holder at a smaller organisation, or may be a senior line manager or Named Animal Care and Welfare Officer at a larger establishment]
- **An Animal Technologist** who works as part of a fairly isolated group breeding, for example, genetically altered mice.

Zoom:

On the device you are zooming on, pretend to type on your turn and read what you are "typing" out loud.

Aim:

To explore the pressures created by the pandemic as well as pressures related to being part of a more isolated group within a facility, such as a team focused on breeding.



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Script

Senior Manager: Dear all, I hope you are keeping safe during these alarming Covid times! There have been updates on restrictions that affect your work as animal techs here. As of tomorrow, we will limit the number of technicians working with each group of animals to comply with social distancing rules, and you will be sent to the site where you are needed on a weekly (sometimes daily) basis in line with project demands and staff availability.

All the best!

Send

Animal Tech: Hi, I wanted to get in touch with you directly with a concern that has arisen since you emailed us a month ago, to do with the frequent changes in site locations. It has led to oversights in the care for the animals. For example, recently I needed to contact a researcher about a breeding set-up, but the inability to visit the site in person and a miscommunication led to us setting up too many cages and breeding too many animals. Can we adjust current working practices to stop this kind of thing happening?

On a personal note, my travelling costs and time have gone up heavily as I'm often travelling to sites I don't usually go to. This feels unsustainable.

Best wishes.

Send

Senior Manager: Apologies for the slow reply to your email from a week ago. I was out of the office due to Covid related issues. I'm sorry to hear of your concerns. Sadly, due to continued staffing issues we don't really have another way of doing it right now. On a different note, the arthritis project has had to shut down (due to Covid). The client has asked us to kill the mice, so please let me know when that's done.

Kind Regards.

Send



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Animal Tech: Hi, I'm replying immediately because those mice have only just been weaned and are entirely healthy. Can't we use them for something else? We just had to kill the rats for the diabetes project, and I'm worried about this trend.

Look forward to chatting further.

P.S Any info available on the outcomes from the last mice bred for the diabetes group?

Send

Senior Manager: I agree that it is unfortunate. We take particular care to manage breeding protocols to minimise waste, but this is out of everyone's hands. I hope that this isn't putting too much pressure on you. Can we set up a zoom call next week to talk about it properly?

Regards.

P.S Don't have that info to hand, sorry!

Send

Animal Tech: Hi, I appreciate you taking the time to chat with me over zoom last week. I fully appreciate that we are all trying our best. But animals have continued to fall victim to the way we have to work right now, despite all the animal techs going above and beyond. This time it was the new rabbits. Staff shortages and miscommunication meant that a case of snuffles was missed. I feel very much like our standards of care are falling by the wayside. Can we try again to address this urgently?

Best.

Send

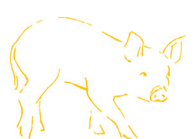
Senior Manager: You are absolutely right to continue to raise these concerns. I will address it again at tomorrow's management meeting. In the meantime, as I mentioned in our Zoom call, we do have our online mental health course available. The wellbeing of both the animals and everyone working here is hugely important to this facility.

Thanks for taking the time to push on this!

Send



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Animal Tech: Hi! Thank you for being an advocate over the last few months. I'm delighted that we have been able to turn a corner to some degree since we last spoke just under month ago. Sadly, I did have to kill a further group of healthy mice yesterday (the spinal cord injury project). I know that killing is part and parcel of what I do, but this feels different. That along with feeling isolated and lonely at work under these new procedures, and all the pressures of balancing shift work and home schooling both my kids, has proved too much for me. I've decided I will leave the facility. Thank you for the last few years.

Send

Senior Manager: I'm sorry to hear that. Your work has been much appreciated and you will be missed. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help as you move on.

Take care.

Send

In Person:

Both close devices and exit.

In Zoom:

Shut off screens

End of script



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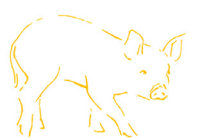


Discussion prompts

1. What in this email conversation resonates with your own experiences?
2. How did Covid change your own working procedures? For better? For worse? Did you feel involved in decision making?
3. How do pressures differ between different types of roles or establishments, and between different units within an establishment?
4. Did you agree with the way the senior manager responded to this situation? What, if anything, could they have done differently?
5. What coping mechanisms would you put in place?
6. How do new forms of working alter the physical and emotional labour undertaken by different players?



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Acknowledgements

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