

A cafeteria bashing.

A colleague has come under investigation regarding expenditures of his grant funds. He has a flawless track record and this has surprised everyone. A group of faculty in the dining hall are discussing this (the colleague under investigation is not there).

“Hey Fred, you know this guy best, what did he do?”

Fred replies, “I have no idea.”

Someone else says “He must have done something to get investigated.”

“Yeah, didn’t he get a new car recently?” and everyone laughs at the intended humor.

“He hasn’t shown his face lately.”

“Yeah, sounds like guilty behavior to me.”

“I’m going to stay away from him or else I might get investigated.” There are a few serious nods and introspective faces around the table.

Now consider this alternative conversation.

“Hey Fred, you know this guy the best, what is happening?”

“I’m not sure. The alleged charges are being investigated, so I don’t know. Maybe he did something bad. But, it could be a misunderstanding or maybe something minor. I’ve seen that before.”

“Where’s he been? We haven’t seen him.”

“I think he feels bad and maybe he’s ashamed because of the investigation. But I think I’ll give him a call and invite him to join us one of these days. Not so we can grill him, but so he can explain if he wants to. If he has made a mistake, then I’d like to learn from it.”

It’s obvious which conversation is more supportive. Does competition in the workplace – a positive force in many ways – set us up to be harsh to others? Probably so. Does human nature want us to deflate others in a self-aggrandizing way, and even to enjoy their misfortune (schadenfreude)? Perhaps yes. But again, our learned and natural tendencies may not always be appropriate or just in every situation.

From: Kuhar MJ, 2011, Collegial Ethics: What, why and how. Drug Alc Dep 119:235-238.