

Manuscript Doctoring, Code Blue Research, and the Resuscitation Decision

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Scenario #1: You are a senior professor with an active research program. Three years ago your department hired Joe Rookie, a collegial assistant professor who has proven a popular and effective instructor. He is technically current and has co-authored several conference papers and two journal articles. You discover that all his ongoing research projects have stalled and that he is now fretting about a negative tenure decision. Because of your areas of research expertise, he asks you to help him revive an unfinished manuscript based on a study he conducted as a doctoral student.

What should you say to Joe?

Scenario #2: You are an assistant professor who has experienced a modicum of success in publishing scholarly research. After completing your doctorate two years ago, you joined the faculty at Commonplace State University, which was especially attractive to you because of its supportive and collegial faculty. One day, you are approached by Adam Mature, a senior professor with a renewed interest in publishing scholarly research. Adam shows you a rough draft of a manuscript that he began eighteen months ago and asks if you are interested in helping him finish it. Although his work once appeared routinely in scholarly journals, Adam has co-authored only two scholarly articles since 1985.

What should you say to Adam?

Should you offer to help resuscitate moribund research efforts like those described in the two scenarios? To succeed means that Joe or Adam would benefit and you would earn political and/or professional credit for your effort. Although at first blush an apparently win-win situation, additional information is needed before you can rationally decide whether or not to assist Joe or Adam. What should you consider when faced with such a decision? What tough questions should you ask yourself?

Consider the opportunity costs.

You may want to help a liked colleague with a marginal research record 'get tenure' or 'be promoted'. Alternatively, you may want to further a professional relationship or ingratiate yourself with a colleague who can influence your tenure or promotion decision. Although such reasons are worthy, you must anticipate the likely costs if you are to make a sound decision.

Unless you already have the expertise essential to reviving the manuscript, you should resist doctoring it even if it has achieved 'revise and resubmit' status. Otherwise, you may spend weeks, or possibly months, gaining expertise irrelevant to you and your future research efforts. If you have an active research agenda, then working on a tangential project will divert you from completing more personally valuable manuscripts. Even if you are between projects and have several uncommitted weeks, do not assume, regardless of your analytical and writing skills, that you can finish a stalled project during that hiatus. Stalled projects often stall for good reasons, so a mere multi-week effort by a new co-author is unlikely to overcome the initially experienced obstacles.

Although each researcher's role may evolve as a project unfolds, favor a prospective role that is well defined (i.e., finite and unambiguous) and acceptable. Avoid serving as the contact author unless you enjoy writing detailed notes to reviewers and editors who request a revision of the submitted manuscript. Thus, you should ask yourself:

- (1) If published, is this manuscript of sufficient value to me?
- (2) Are my likely roles, effort, and time commitment well defined and acceptable?

Consider the colleague.

As a scholarly manuscript may be rejected and revised repeatedly before it is accepted for publication, resuscitating moribund research may take several years. During that time, your struggling colleague may change institutions; for example, he or she may transfer from a research-oriented university to a teaching-oriented college. If so, then your colleague's interest in placing this manuscript may slacken because scholarly publications have become immaterial to his or her pay and promotion. A concurrent need to justify escalating sunk costs could compel you to redouble your efforts, which would divert you from more personally and professionally rewarding projects.

All research streams mature. As a result, a highly similar manuscript may be published, making your version superfluous. Alternatively, if your colleague's enthusiasm for this research falters sufficiently, then you become responsible for guaranteeing the contribution of the related manuscript to the extant literature, i.e., for remaining current in a literature unrelated to your research program. Thus, you should ask yourself:

- (3) Will my colleague remain dedicated to publishing this manuscript?
- (4) Will my colleague remain familiar with the latest literature?

Consider the colleague's commitment to you.

Doctoring a problematic manuscript is often more arduous than producing an original one. Given the opportunity costs and hardships, ensure that your resuscitation efforts will be appreciated properly. If the manuscript is multi-authored, then establish a revised authorship sequence commensurate with each author's relative effort. Also, verify that your co-authorship invitation has not been extended to a competing author. Otherwise, you may discover, after months of work, that your version of the manuscript is superfluous. Thus, you should ask yourself:

- (5) Is the revised authorship sequence acceptable?
- (6) Has my colleague contracted with a competing author?

For empirical research, consider the data and the need for re-analysis.

To revive an ailing empirical study, data re-analysis may be required. If so, then first ensure that the data are of sufficient quality and quantity. As students in every marketing research class are taught, inadequate data cannot be salvaged with sophisticated statistical analysis. Poor data can only produce questionable results and a limited sample may preclude the use of preferred statistical methods. Next, verify that the data file has been properly cleaned (e.g., wild codes eliminated) and transformed (e.g., reverse coded, adjusted for missing data). Because colleagues' assessments of what constitutes a clean data file will vary markedly, review the data file carefully to guarantee that weeks of tedious restructuring are unneeded. Finally, like colleagues' offices, some data files are carefully arranged and other data files seeming orderless. To eliminate guessing which variables appear in what columns and which numeric values correspond to what values, insist upon a comprehensive data dictionary and a properly labeled data file. Otherwise, you

may discover, after weeks of analysis, that column 17 rather than column 21 contained values for the dependent variable. Thus, you should ask yourself:

- (7) Are the data of sufficient quality and quantity?
- (8) Are the data files clean and ready for re-analysis?
- (9) Is a clear and complete data dictionary available?

Consider your psychic needs.

Scholarly research that excites you poses an interesting challenge, but scholarly research that bores you is, at best, tedious. To avoid the latter type of research, you must believe that the related manuscript, if published, would make a meaningful contribution to the extant literature. Otherwise, your efforts will seem like Sisyphean labor because you believe that the results are bootless. A genuine interest in the research topic will help sustain your enthusiasm during the occasional trying hours and deter you from quitting. Thus, you should ask yourself:

- (10) Will the final manuscript, if published, contribute meaningfully to the extant literature?
- (11) Am I interested in the research topic?

Your answers to these eleven questions should determine whether or not you attempt to revive 'code blue' research. Regardless of your decision, you should assist such colleagues if possible. Fortunately, co-authoring is merely one of several ways to assist. For example, you could invite the colleague to co-author one of your unfinished manuscripts. (This option should, of course, trigger his or her pondering of the aforementioned questions!) Alternatively, if the colleague insists upon completing his or her manuscript, then you could volunteer to serve as a critical yet supportive reviewer of current and future versions. In that way, a few administratively unrecognized hours of reviewing and editing can replace months of co-authorship grief.