

When “we” turns wicked

By: **Sorin M.S. Krammer** (*University of Southampton Business School* - s.krammer@soton.ac.uk)

The Zoom call started routinely enough. My two co-authors and I were venting about a recent rejection from an elite journal in our field. But when I proposed a certain outlet for our next target, I was shocked by their vehement opposition. After pressing, they finally admitted they had submitted another paper using the same dataset to that journal.

That's when everything unraveled.

Further inquiries revealed their "other" paper had changed substantially since I'd last seen it; it was likely now much closer to "ours" than I could tolerate. My blood ran cold. This was my idea from the start—I'd invested nearly three years building it conceptually and supervising its empirical execution. Learning that they had poached my ideas without any credit felt like a huge betrayal—and changed deeply my approach to collaboration going forward.

My academic career started auspiciously with a single-authored publication in a top journal even before I was awarded my PhD. After publishing a second paper the following year, I felt regret that I did not push harder for a top journal again. In my defense, I was unaware of impact factors, journal rankings, and their ramifications for academic progression.

But when I transitioned from Economics to Business and Management, I hit a wall, and it seemed like the only outcome in the cards was rejection, often painful and unfamiliar ones that came after two or three rounds of revision. Clearly, I needed a major change. Collaboration became the intuitive way out of this quagmire, given my outside status in the realm of Management studies. So I began working increasingly with co-authors, seeking mentorship from senior ones and complementarities and energy from the junior ones. These partnerships culminated in multiple publications, conference invitations, and a growing network of collaborators.

I thought I had mastered the “game”. And that “we” was the answer.

But that all changed with that Zoom call.

I felt my world crashing down. I reached out to several senior editors at top field journals, hoping for guidance and solutions. Dishearteningly, all advised me to drop it—authorship disputes, they said, are messy affairs where nobody wins.

I could barely function. My health deteriorated, especially my mental state. I couldn't sleep, couldn't work, couldn't even enjoy time with my family. I felt utterly powerless, drowning in nightmarish quicksand.

Nevertheless, I followed my heart and decided to fight back. I wrote to the journal where their paper was under review. The journal ultimately rejected their paper—but based on reviewer recommendations, not ethical grounds. I contacted ethics officers at my institution and at one of theirs. While initially sympathetic, their consistent message remained the same: *drop it, it's messy, no one wins*. I reached out to mutual co-authors from other projects, but they wouldn't get involved. Professional organizations to which we belonged also shrugged off my inquiries on (COVID era) membership lapse grounds.

I finally decided to move on and focus on other projects.

For nearly two years, I worked alone.

Then, when I finally considered reviving the project, the thought of collaborating again filled me with anxiety. But I also knew that isolation was not sustainable, and that my productivity would suffer. So, after much thought, I found someone who seemed like a good fit for the project. Before our first substantive conversation, I proposed something I'd never done before: a formal collaboration agreement. We outlined roles, established authorship criteria based on concrete contributions, and agreed to document key decisions via email rather than casual chats.

A couple of years later, we published the research together using a much larger dataset and more sophisticated statistical analyses than before.

But beyond vindication, the lessons I learned have reshaped my approach to collaboration.

First, safeguard self-sufficiency. Knowing that I can execute and publish high-quality solo research has been my rock throughout these tribulations.

Second, vet collaborators carefully. I now approach research partnerships like hiring decisions, checking collaborators' work, asking around, and taking time to decide on new endeavours.

Third, always protect yourself. Before sharing ideas, establish clear collaboration agreements. I settle matters via email not casual chats, documenting key conversations and milestones, as these records prove invaluable if things go sideways.

After sixteen years in academia, I've become more selective about collaboration. It remains a joy and a blessing, but I've also learned how quickly 'we' can turn wicked. The key is choosing your partnerships wisely, and keeping 'I' as a strong safety net.
