

Case #4: Sam Gold

As he stood under the fluorescent lighting of the chemical engineering laboratory where he taught a sophomore course, Sam Gold did not know what to say. A dark expression passed across his face. He knew that his university was known as a “party” school. The students could be rowdy on Thursday nights... but this was too much!

Sam liked to use humor to bridge the divide between himself and his students. While most of Sam’s students were from rural families in the Midwest, Sam had grown up in New York City. His political beliefs were considerably more liberal than those of the professors he worked with, as well as those of his students. Because of his considerate behavior and sense of humor, Sam got along well with his professors and the other graduate students.

“All right, everyone, let’s get started,” Sam had said loudly, as his students settled noisily into their seats. “Today, we’re going to talk about catalysts.”

With some encouragement, the class had quieted down. As Sam began describing the role of a catalyst in a reaction, he heard one student say, “We could blow the Arabs away with that shit, huh?”

Most of the class had laughed at the joke. “Yeah, we’d turn Iraq into a dust bowl,” said another young man who had a brother in the Army.

“Show those ragheads what we’re there for,” a third had chimed in.

Sam felt frustrated. However, he knew that the professor he worked for would probably not have been upset by these comments. He generally adopted a “boys will be boys” attitude towards students’ shenanigans.

“Am I being too much of an idealist?” Sam wondered. He was the authority in this room, but his political views were unpopular at the university. He turned back to the blackboard. “Let’s stay on topic, all right?” he said, as he resumed the lecture.

The students who had spoken could tell that Sam was irritated, and looked at each other in surprise.