

The Case of the Dysfunctional Team

Professor Rogers thought the students in her “Introduction to Public Speaking” course would enjoy role-playing a real court trial as their last speech for the semester. She also hoped the experience would teach them to work well in teams, a skill much sought after by employers. She divided students into groups of three, with some groups assigned to play defense attorneys and other groups assigned to play prosecuting attorneys.

Each team received court transcripts of a controversial murder case, and was responsible for using evidence from the actual trial to develop a closing argument for the case, after which a jury of classmates would vote on the verdict. Each team was allowed a maximum of 24 minutes to present its case, and all team members would receive the same grade.

Students **ANTHONY**, **SYLVIA**, and **DONALD** formed one team of defense attorneys. After class, Anthony told his teammates, “We’ll meet tomorrow at 7:00 tomorrow night in the coffee shop and plan a defense for this guy.” Sylvia felt angry about Anthony’s bossy tone, but she just nodded. Donald said, “Whatever,” put in his earbuds, and strolled away singing (probably louder than he realized).

At 7:15 the next evening in the coffee shop, Anthony and Sylvia were still waiting for Donald to show up. “Look,” Anthony said to Sylvia, “we’re not waiting for Donald any longer. Here’s what we’ll do. You go first and take about 10 minutes to prove that our defendant had no motive. I’ll take the rest of the time to show that it could have been the victim’s brother who shot him. I want an “A” on this assignment.

Sylvia was furious. “You can’t just decide on your own to leave Donald out. Plus, what about the defendant’s fingerprints on the murder weapon!” We have to address that evidence or we’ll never win. I’ll do that. And I’ll go last so I can wrap up all the loose ends. I want to win this trial.”

The defense team met twice more before the mock trial. Donald came to only one of the meetings and spent the entire time reading through the court transcripts. He said he wasn’t sure what he was going to say, but he’d have it figured out by the day of the trial. Anthony and Sylvia argued about which evidence was most important and who would speak last. At one point, the group almost got kicked out of the coffee shop when Sylvia lost her temper and started shouting at Anthony that no one had elected him the boss of the group.

The day before the trial, Anthony went to Professor Rogers. “It’s not fair that my grade depends on my teammates. Donald couldn’t care less about this assignment, and Sylvia is always trying to pick a fight. I can present alone, but not with them.” “If you were an actual lawyer,” Professor Rogers replied, “do you think you could go to the judge and complain that you aren’t getting along with your partners? You’ll have to figure out how to work as a team. At this point, the trial will proceed as planned, and you will all receive the same grade for your presentation.”

On the day of the trial, the opposing team of prosecutors presented one seamless and persuasive closing argument in the allotted 24 minutes. Then Anthony leapt up, announcing, “I’ll go first for the defense team.” He spoke for 21 minutes, talking as fast as he could to present the entire case, including an explanation of how the defendant’s fingerprints had gotten on the murder weapon. Sylvia, greatly flustered, followed with a seven-minute presentation in which she also explained how the defendant’s fingerprints had gotten on the murder weapon. At that point, Professor Rogers notified the team that their time was up—in fact, they had gone four minutes past the time limit. Donald insisted that he would be brief, then spoke for 75 seconds. Donald declared the defendant innocent, then read three unconnected passages from the court transcripts as “proof.”

The jury deliberated for five minutes and unanimously found the defendant guilty. Professor Rogers assessed the defense presentation as “D” work, and gave all three students a grade of “D” for the assignment.

QUESTION 1: Of the characters in this case, who do you believe is **most** responsible for the team’s grade of “D”? Who do you believe is **least** responsible? Be prepared to explain your selections.

Professor Rogers

Anthony

Sylvia

Donald

QUESTION 2: Imagine that Anthony, Sylvia, or Donald has been assigned to your team. What strategies might you (or your group) apply in order to help the team function more effectively?