

ABC My Favorite Assignment: *Dealing with Donny* Part 1
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As experienced professionals, we've all had to "deal" with people who probably should not have been hired for the positions they held. Perhaps it was the employee who couldn't grasp the concept of "chain of command," or maybe it was the staffer who seemed to believe that stealing from the office wasn't *really* stealing. Maybe you worked with someone who smelled bad *all day every day*, or maybe you had a boss who felt it necessary to rule with an iron fist.

Whatever the circumstances, awkward situations in the workplace are a reality, and they're often difficult to understand let alone remedy. And compounding the problem is the fact that many college-level business classes tend to neglect this important topic. But as business-communication course pioneers, we're about to address this problem.

What follows is the first installment of a new series of activities designed to put you into awkward, difficult, and challenging situations so that you can determine the best courses of action for such situations. Completing these activities should provide you with some worthwhile experience in "dealing" with problem people that will translate well into your professional life. This new series will be challenging but fun, and we will refer to it from now on as

Dealing with Donny.

Episode 1: The Boss's Nephew

You've been working for an area manufacturing company for several years. You're good at your job, and you're well respected by your peers and those you supervise. For some reason, however, your executive-level boss (the VP of communications) has never been terribly fond of you. He's never come right out and said so, but you just get that *feeling* around him. And today you received a surprise from the abovementioned boss: his nephew Donny is joining the staff, and as the marketing department manager, you're now Donny's direct supervisor.

Donny recently graduated from a big liberal arts university in the Midwest with a degree in communication. He's a nice enough fellow, but you quickly find that Donny is simply not qualified for the account executive position for which he was hired. His social skills are lacking (you overheard him telling a terribly inappropriate joke to a small group of unimpressed employees), his customer service abilities are lacking (one of your staff members swears she heard Donny curse at a prospective client over the phone), and when you let one of your staff members off with a verbal warning for an offence that technically warranted a write up, Donny told his uncle on you. (The offending employee is one of your best staff members, and she never makes big mistakes. This one was simply a fluke.)

During class today, with a partner, your job is to determine how to *deal with Donny*. Termination is out of the question, and as true professionals, we don't transfer our problems. So you and your partner must determine what to say to Donny and *how* to say it. Remember that whatever you say and do will get back to the VP, but also remember that not doing anything will likely decrease morale and create problems with existing *and* prospective clients.

Deal with it.

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Episode 2: Donny's On the Job Hunt

After some solid on-the-job training, Donny's performance has greatly improved. So much so, in fact, that Donny is looking to move up the corporate ladder. He has applied for a *Human Resources Information Systems Management Specialist* position with an international corporation called Company X. He is technically qualified for the position as he has the appropriate education and some HR experience. Plus, Donny has actually done this type of work for your company for the past four years, though he hasn't officially held the "specialist" title.

Donny has submitted his cover letter and résumé to Company X, and they were impressed enough to call and conduct a 15-minute phone screen with him. At the end of the call, the hiring manager asked Donny to come in for an interview on Monday of next week. Donny's thrilled with the prospect of working for Company X, but he's terribly nervous about the interview.

Your Team's Task

Your job now is to help prepare Donny for what's coming on Monday. He's done research on Company X, so he's prepared to answer the often-asked question "*What do you know about our company?*" He is also feeling comfortable about answering specific questions about his work with information systems. The areas in which he is struggling, however, include the interview preparation (what to bring, when to arrive, etc.), the personal presentation (appearance, handshake, etc.), and the responses to several of the typical interview questions (*Where do you see yourself in five years? Why would you like to leave your current job?*)

In your teams, you are to develop a clear, informative, and understandable interview-preparation document that Donny may study over the weekend then email that document to Donny at [instructor's email address] as an attachment. This document should address the abovementioned areas in which Donny is struggling and should include a list of at least ten interview questions that Donny should be prepared to answer. You're welcome to use online resources as you complete this exercise, but you will likely find that your personal experiences will enable you to be more specific and more helpful to Donny. (You'll find the position description below.) Remember: If Donny gets this job, you'll no longer have to "deal" with him. Get him ready.

Position Description*

Like all companies, Company X needs to keep accurate records on its personnel. As the Human Resources Information Systems Management Specialist, you would ensure that our records are properly maintained and documented by operating and managing the information systems for field personnel, as well as training others on use of the system.

In this position, you would analyze, process, and maintain employee information files and supporting documentation. This involves monitoring feedback from the corporate HQ, identifying systemic problems, preparing correspondence and official forms, and posting changes to company regulations.

*Adapted from a US Army position description

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Episode 3: Donny's Giving a Presentation

Despite your team's valiant efforts at preparing Donny for his interview recently, Donny didn't get the job. (The interviewers said that he looked sharp, responded very well to their questions, and that he was very well prepared for the interview, but he simply wasn't "The One.") Don't fret, though, as you once again have a new and exciting opportunity to help Donny get ready for another upcoming event.

Since he first came to work for your company, Donny has improved in several areas. He's much more knowledgeable about the work that he does; his interpersonal communication abilities have vastly improved; and he's considerably more capable than he was when he started, which is really quite impressive considering what he was like on day one. The boss has taken notice of Donny's transformation too. In fact, the boss has asked Donny and some of his coworkers to deliver 20-minute presentations to a group of 15 staff members on each of the following topics:

- Conflict Resolution**--[Student presenter names, Team 1]
- Intercultural Communication**--[Student presenter names, Team 2]
- Nonverbal Communication**--[Student presenter names, Team 3]
- Dining Etiquette**--[Student presenter names, Team 4]
- Social Customs**--[Student presenter names, Team 5]

The problem is that Donny isn't terribly comfortable when it comes to putting together presentations and delivering them to an audience. He suffers terribly from communication apprehension, and he doesn't know how to alleviate this stress. In addition, he really has no idea how to effectively work with teammates on such projects. He has a pretty good idea of what he needs to do as far as conducting research is concerned, but he doesn't really know where to begin in terms of team organization and leadership, presentation organization, team practice, use of visuals, establishing and maintaining a rapport with the audience, team delivery, and keeping the presentations interesting.

Your Team's Task

Because of the newly-added line item in your job description that calls for you to "Deal with Donny," your team's job today is to provide Donny with the knowledge, insight and direction that he needs on the presentation topic that is listed next to your team members' names above. (You only need to address *your* team's topic.) Help Donny to become more comfortable with presentation preparation and delivery. Help him with his stage fright by explaining what it is and effective ways to deal with it. Help him understand why the boss wants him to work as part of a team and how he can make the team truly effective. And help him address his other abovementioned shortcomings.

Assignment Submission

By the end of class today, your team is asked to email as an attachment the document you create for Donny to your instructor at [instructor's email address]. There is no page minimum or maximum, but keep in mind that you should set Donny up for success on his presentation projects. You don't need to provide him with all of the presentation details (that is, the specifics on conflict management or nonverbal communication or

dining etiquette, etc.), but you do need to provide Donny with something tangible that he can refer to as he works with his team to develop the presentations. You're considerably more experienced in this area than Donny is, so draw on that experience and any other resources you feel are appropriate and set Donny up for success.

On Monday of next week, you and your partner(s) will refer to the document you create for Donny today while delivering an informal team presentation to Donny and his teammates (aka the people in this class). Your team will have six to seven minutes during which to enlighten Donny et al. on the fundamentals of delivering business presentations. You're not required to prepare any visuals for this exercise, though you're certainly welcome to. Just keep in mind that Monday's presentation is a precursor to your team's term-project presentation, and doing a good job on this assignment will help to set you up for success on that presentation. Although this is only a ten-point assignment, it behooves you to work as a team and give the exercise some effort. Doing so will pay off in the long run.

Good luck!

***My Favorite Assignment* Instructor's Note**

The above *Dealing with Donny* scenarios represent the first iteration of this assignment series. After having great success with these scenarios, I added to and adapted this series over the years to fit the needs and interests of several subsequent groups of business communication students. The series outlined here begins with a one-day, in-class exercise and concludes with a more substantial presentation exercise, which is tied into the students' term project. I've also had success with other, less time-consuming *Donny* activities for which I have simply developed one- or two-paragraph "real-world" communication scenarios for my students to deal with in class. Some of these include the following:

- Donny Delivers the Bad News
- Donny is Late to Work. *Again.*
- Donny's Harassing Donna
- Donny's Daily Body Odor Problem
- Donny's Intercultural Insensitivity
- Donny's Ugly Emails

I've found that my students tend to be most receptive to scenarios with which they feel some sort of connection. For example, if I have my students writing negative-news messages to fictional clients or customers, they tend to benefit from and enjoy the process of teaching Donny how to write a negative-news message as they write their own. I typically put my students into supervisory roles when they're dealing with Donny, though students may also benefit from dealing with uncomfortable and/or awkward communication situations with fictional colleagues.

This *Dealing with Donny* series offers students unique opportunities to hone and apply their business communication skills in unusual and sometimes fun ways. I hope that if you choose to have your students deal with Donny you find that to be the case as well.