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Focus

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I'm Going to Take a Break

In January 2002 I began publishing Focus and over the intervening 15 years I've said about all I have to say. There are a relatively small number of timeless principles in my management consulting sandbox; most of the other stuff is just a re-hash of the enduring wisdom put forth over the last millenium.

From time to time I may publish something I think is novel, but for now I'm stepping off the writing treadmill. That, in and of itself, will probably stimulate new thinking. Time will tell.

Meanwhile, I will re-post some of my favorite articles from years gone by. December has a recent tradition of Santa stories, so here goes.

The Whole Truth

Santa and Bernard, Santa's Chief of Toy Manufacturing, sat companionably in the factory conference room on December 27th. They

had both slept late, and were silently enjoying the hot chocolate Mrs. Claus had prepared. Finally Bernard spoke up, “Yesterday’s North Pole workshop party was the best in centuries! All the elves felt especially good about this year’s toys, especially the Baby Ball™. I can’t recall a toy that popular in, well, forever.”

At that moment Baxter, leader of Santa’s Kinetic Interface Design Studio, burst into the room. Almost breathless, Baxter still managed to speak, “The initial kids toy satisfaction results are in, and the Baby Ball™ scores broke records in all categories! It’s Huge! Huge, huge, huge!”

“That was an especially clever design,” Santa reflected. “Clever and inspired,” chimed in Bernard. “I wish we could create hits like that every Christmas!”

“Perhaps we can,” said Santa, with a characteristic twinkle in his eyes. And then Santa, Bernard, and Baxter reviewed the development of the Baby Ball™.

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As with all new toys, the Baby Ball™ had its origins in the February Focus Forum, where innovative toy ideas are developed. Sort of. Well, truthfully, FFF meetings had not been too productive recently. Like for the past 20 years. Truth be told, the North Pole toy design team had become comfortable with “sure things” and “line extensions” and other non-controversial concepts. The results were a steady stream of predictable, presentable, sometimes personable, but generally forgettable new toys. But this year Santa shook things up.

Santa’s intervention began at the FFF meeting when Elf Bushy (a/k/a Evergreen) reported that the Baby Toy Acceptance Factor (BTAF, pronounced bee-taff) for last Christmas sunk to an historic low. “The box and wrapping paper fascination scores (“Baw-puff” scores) were triple that of the toys,” Bushy had continued. That remark ignited a fierce discussion. “Don’t blame me!” shouted Bjugnakraekir (nicknamed Bunny), Infant Research Department chief. “The IRD has consistent PRDF wish list results and we make concept recommendations accordingly!”

“Well, you can feed your Parental Research Desirability Factors to the reindeer!” replied Baggalatur (“Baggy” to his friends), “because our time-to-closet intervals clearly show the babies don’t like our new toys.” And so it went, with each departmental representative running from accountability. An inauspicious start, for sure.

That’s when old Saint Nick changed the course of the discussion. Santa pointed out that each elf focused only on his slice of the toy pie and was not listening to other voices. “What especially troubles me,” Santa had said, “is that we don’t think outside the toy box like before. Remember those wild and crazy discussions we used to have? Now it seems we’re tied up in too many numbers and have forgotten the sheer joy of toy making.”

“What’s worse,” concluded Santa, “is that we’ve quit thinking about toys from the child’s point of view.”

A stunned silence filled the room, as each elf realized the truth of Santa’s words. They had lost their way. A few tears began to accompany the glum elfin features as the entire FFF team focused on failure.

Well, you don’t become a world-wide legend without a few leadership tools up your big red sleeve, and Santa broke the morose mood with a revolutionary (at least for the elves) action plan. “The problem as I see it,” Santa began, “is that we each have a part of the truth about what our kids want, but nobody – not even me – has the whole truth. So I want each of you to spend the next month finding out what children, especially babies, really want. We need a big-time reality check.” And so it began.

Santa and elves – not just the FFF group but elves from every part of Claus Manufacturing, LLC – met regularly and really communicated.

Uncharacteristically (because Santa had clearly laid out the rules of engagement, and you don’t mess with the Big Guy!), the elves listened thoughtfully to each other’s ideas, and asked lots of questions to bore in to the truth (get below the reindeer poop, as Sledda put it). Many inventive new toy ideas were incubated, but none as groundbreaking as the Baby Ball™. And it began with a hole.

In May, the What Matters to Kids Team had an epiphany: Babies have a hard time holding on to large balls. Bernard then took a risky step when he proposed putting finger holes in a big colored ball. A big risk, indeed. In the recent past such an idea would have been met with mockery and most likely a big loss of status in the mysterious hierarchy of elves. But not this year. The elves had changed their mindset and welcomed – even encouraged – radical new thinking. Celebration had replaced caution, even if an idea was “goofy” and ultimately discarded. Santa did his part in this transformation by presenting a Goofy Award to the elf with the most outlandish idea at each WMTKT meeting.

This fertile environment made possible conception of the Baby Ball™. Many prototypes and design conferences later, the new toy made its debut. And you know the rest of that story.

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“And there,” concluded Santa to Bernard and Baxter, “is the lesson. Because everybody contributed we learned the whole truth. Otherwise, we never would have imagined the hole possibility.”

Merry Christmas to all.

Tom



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