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A Crucial Confrontation

Now that everyone knows Santa Claus once again completed his annual toy deliveries, I can tell you that Santa faced serious problems last year and there was almost a toy shortage! Here's the story . . .

Santa gazed out from his dim library at a North Pole landscape slipping into darkness, his heart heavy with despair. Christmas was approaching, and old Kris Kringle was fearful that he would not be able to fulfill children's wishes this year because toy production had fallen dramatically. Santa knew where the problem lay, but was baffled about how to confront the issue, much less how to solve it. And time was running out!

The blame for this shortfall lay squarely with Bernard, Santa's Chief of Toy Manufacturing. Bernard was a long-term worker (actually, since they were immortal and had been working at the North Pole factories since before memory, all the elves were "long-term" employees) and had steadily risen through the toy workshop hierarchy through hard work. His job performance had always been excellent. That is, until the previous April when Bernard had lost out to Hermey in the competition for the job of Chief Toy Designer. Since then, Bernard had paid less attention to toy production – his main responsibility – and had begun to spend more time on tasks either trivial or outside his area of responsibility. Santa relentlessly exhorted his managers to focus on "Job 1," but Bernard was clearly ignoring this guidance.

"Kris, what's wrong?" asked Mrs. Claus (the former Mary Christmas) as she entered the room. "Mary," Santa replied, "I'm flummoxed over what to do with Bernard. He's been neglecting his job duties for months now, and I've talked with him several times, but nothing has changed." Mary studied her husband for a moment, and then said, "Kris, I know you well, and I'll bet you danced around the production issue with Bernard because you two are so close. Were you direct about your expectations and the consequences if Bernard failed to meet them?" Looking back at Mary, Santa morosely nodded his head. "I thought so," she said.

Then Santa's wife described how to have a crucial confrontation. Mary began by explaining the importance of confronting the performance gap "with safety" to reduce Bernard's defensiveness when confronted with a shortcoming. She told Santa to use concepts of mutual respect and mutual purpose as the foundation for finding solutions to the performance gap. This, she added, helped keep the person being counseled from "shutting down" because they became defensive, hurt, and angry.

Describe the Gap

Describe the Gap - the difference between expectations and what happened. For example, "You said you were going to meet this schedule, but the deadline is past and the toys have not been produced."

Start with facts, not *why you think* a behavior occurred

Don't play games like sandwiching (a slice of criticism between two pieces of praise) or charades (indirect, non-verbal cues)

Show Bernard that you respect him as a person (mutual respect)

Show Bernard that you care about his goals (mutual purpose)

Then Mary continued with the second phase of a performance confrontation, in which reasons, consequences, and action items are covered.

Make It Motivating

Consequences motivate. Motivation isn't something you do to someone – that's like trying to push a string. Motivation is about "pull." People are motivated by the consequences they anticipate. So make consequences, whether positive or negative, crystal clear.

Explore natural consequences; in Santa's situation these include the impact on other elves, children, communities, and even the reindeer.

Make the invisible visible by linking consequences

- To existing values: "Our workshop has never failed to meet toy demand – ever! And we elves all faithfully promise that we never will."
- Or introducing hidden victims: "Think of all the disappointed children if we don't make enough toys."

Finish well by ending the conversation with who does what and by when. Then set a follow-up time.

Santa's mood had brightened remarkably by the time Mary finished speaking. "Mary," he said, "you always seem to know just what I need and when I need it. And this advice makes perfect sense – I feel relieved and confident that Bernard and I can work together to make enough toys by Christmas Eve! Now, let's go get some hot chocolate and plan our December 26 workshop party."

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