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Focus

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Transforming a Janitor into a Knowledge Worker

Elf Baggalutur ("Baggy" to his friends), maintenance supervisor for Claus Manufacturing at the North Pole, had a problem. Baggy was under increasing pressure from Santa to cut costs and improve productivity. Moreover, Santa was complaining about messy areas within the massive production complex. Production elves used areas of the complex differently each week -- a situation that was accelerating with the rapid pace of toy innovation, but the cleaning effort was always uniform throughout the buildings, in an unvarying routine Baggy had set up centuries ago.

Then Baggy had an idea, and met with Elf Sledda, a janitor in the headquarters building. Baggy laid out the situation: cut costs but improve quality. He also relaxed some of his formerly ironclad work rules and told Sledda he could be flexible on how much time he spent on each building area. Specifically, Baggy asked Sledda to use judgment and spend more time on really dirty areas and less time cleaning areas lightly used that day. Sledda was understandably cautious, and somewhat reluctant to do things differently. But Baggy was patient and encouraging, and after a few weeks Sledda got the hang of his new freedom. The overall appearance of the building improved, and Baggy received fewer complaints from Santa.

One day a mop salesman showed up at Baggy's desk, and Baggy did another smart thing. He called Sledda to join the meeting with the salesman. At one point during the meeting, Sledda said, "I'm having problems with wax buildup in corners." Then the mop salesman recommended a triangular scrub brush, which Sledda thought would help greatly, and Baggy ordered the new scrub brushes.

A few weeks later Baggy invited Sledda to meet with a cleaning chemical salesman. When Sledda complained about having to wait for the floor to dry between cleaning and waxing, the salesman suggested a new product that cleaned and waxed in one application. Baggy authorized a trial of the new product, but told Sledda he wanted a report on the durability of the one-step application.

Baggy continued to be patient and supportive, encouraging Sledda to speak up and think more about better ways to do his job. Sledda had never been asked to think before, much less offer his opinion. Although Baggy's new behavior was mildly unsettling, it made Sledda feel more valued and respected as an elf. These new feelings made Sledda take more pride in his work because he wanted more of the positive "strokes" he received from Baggy.

Things improved for Baggy, too. Giving Sledda more control over his work took some load off him. Baggy knew he was still responsible, but still felt better knowing Sledda was at least

"thinking a little" about the end result of his labors. Like Santa always said, "Results, not excuses!"

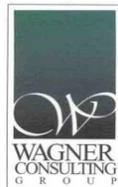
After a few more months, cleaning supply salesmen began dealing directly with Sledda for reorders and new products; they only made courtesy calls to Baggy to thank him for Claus Manufacturing's business.

Thanks to better chemicals and application techniques, the headquarters building areas looked spotless. Santa began praising Baggy for staying under budget and improving "the looks of the place." Baggy then knew for certain that he was on the right track, promoted Sledda to Chief of Janitorial Services, and soon had Sledda training other janitors how to be flexible and efficient in their work. Even Elf Pugsley, a notoriously sloppy cleaner, began performing better.

The key lesson is how Baggy viewed Sledda and his job. He didn't ask Sledda to work longer, or harder, or give him an IQ pill to make him smarter. Baggy did rethink how he could best use Sledda. He coached and delegated authority and created an environment in which Sledda learned to think on his own. Problems were solved independently and faster.

That year's December 26th office party was especially festive!

Tom



Tom Wagner

President, Wagner Consulting Group, Inc.

www.WagnerCG.com

When a leader changes the way he views his followers,
He can unleash the power of human potential.

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