

"Nick Santos, gentlemen. Nick Santos is the name, and business profits are my game. I think you'll find, gentlemen, that you will not regret appointing me as Operations Director for North Pole Enterprises. My track record speaks for itself. Four years as Ops Manager with Easter Bunnies Inc. - profits increased fourfold in my time there, and overheads reduced to an absolute minimum. Before that, two years as Marketing Executive with Halloween Pookies, where, as you probably know, sales increased 500%. And of course I have a diploma in Party Management from the University of Sylvania. Gentlemen, I make you a solemn promise: if you appoint me as Operations Director in North Pole Enterprises, within twelve months you will find investors from the City queuing up at your front door for a piece of the action."

The Polar Bear who was the Managing Director of North Pole Enterprises spoke up. "Well, thank you, Mr Santos, for a most informative and - I'm sure my colleagues on the Board will agree - a most dynamic presentation. Now, we've asked you all our questions - would you have any for us?"

"Oh, most certainly, gentlemen. I have, of course, conducted a most thorough investigation into the history of your company and looked at the reports of your recent distribution problems. I think it is well known that last Christmas was nothing short of a disaster as far as North Pole Enterprises was concerned..."

There was an embarrassed coughing and shuffling of feet from the members of the Board of NPE, sitting at the long table before Mr Santos.

"But" continued Nick Santos, "It is better to have the problems out in the open, where we can see them, and perform surgery where surgery is needed. My one and only question to the Board is this: if I am appointed to the post, do I have full power to make whatever changes to methods and resources which I see fit? I have ideas, gentlemen, some tried and proven in practice, some radical and new, but all of them to the greater benefit of the Company's profit margin. But I need the authority to carry them out without interference."

The Polar Bear waved a paw airily.

"Mr Santos," he said in a rumbling voice, "If you are appointed, it is on the understanding that we place full trust in you to re-organise the Christmas Operation as you see fit. Questions will not be asked. If this Christmas is anywhere like as bad as the last one, you will be out the door without any questions asked. If we can return to profitability and a good public profile, then no questions will be asked on how you managed it."

Nick Santos got the job. It was August, and the work-force was returning from the summer break.

The first task was to review the fiasco of the previous Christmas. Nick Santos piled his office high with the letters of complaint from angry children and even angrier parents:

*The gulls destroyed my living-room carpet with their droppings...*

*The fox you gave me didn't stay more than two days...*

*What am I supposed to do with bags of coal - we haven't got a fire...*

*My little boy cried his eyes out...*

*Don't you ever come down my chimney again...*

*...court-case...*

*...all my pals said the same...*

*...write to every newspaper in the land...*

Nick Santos booked two-minute slots on the tv. In the ads, a deep-voiced Santa with twinkling eyes sat a little girl on his knee and asked her what she wanted for Christmas.

"I want a doll - not some rotten old seagull like last year!" said the little girl, tear-stained and grumpy.

"Well, well, well," said the Santa, "I had some problems with my elves last year, my dear. But this year you'll get what you want. And what's more - here's a little surprise gift for just now. And if you tell all your friends to phone this number ... then I'll make sure they get a little surprise as well." Fade to beaming little girl with doll under the Christmas Tree...

So, of course, there were thousands of telephone calls from little girls and their friends, and thousands of little packages went out. The packages contained all the little things which could be salvaged from the outhouses and storage rooms from the previous Christmas, so it neatly solved a storage problem at the North Pole. And Santa Claus was back in favour.

So the next task was to get rid of Santa Claus.

"Well past his sell-by date, him and everything that goes with him," said Nick Santos confidently. "Get him in here tomorrow at nine sharp, Miss Keene."

It was past half past nine when Santa Claus shuffled in. "You wanted to see me, Mr Santos?"

"Come in, come in, Mr Claus!" gushed Nick Santos, "Sit down, you look a bit tired. Take the weight off your feet. Cup of coffee?"

"Well, I wouldn't say no, thank you most kindly, Mr Santos"

"Miss Keene, a cup of our best Brazilian for Mr Claus! Now then, San - you don't mind me calling you San? I don't like formality - San, I think the time for some changes has come. I've got some ideas to make Christmas a much less stressful time for all of us. I'll bet you've seen a few stressful ones, eh, San?"

"Well, I certainly have, Mr Santos," agreed Santa, relaxing a bit, "Why, I could tell you about the time - "

"Well, maybe we can swap stories some other time, San," interrupted Nick, "But I'll get straight to the point: I want you to retire. We'll give you a handsome pension, you can keep your house, and you can spend all those winter evenings watching tv, or going south, maybe. So I want you to sign this, and then I'll get Mr Unctious from Human Resources to take you along and sort out the details. And thanks from all of us. Miss Keene, see San here out. Ciao and thanks for everything, San."

Santa was so stunned that he could say nothing; he allowed himself to be led away by Nick's secretary.

There was a big presentation a few days later, a huge card full of best wishes, and then Santa retired to his little house on the hillside. Nick Santos sent a letter out to all employees:

*The end of an era ... all sad to see Big SC go ... A new broom in North Pole Enterprises .. all the old methods must go ... efficiency ... market-position ... SC and all his friends will be fondly remembered, but we cannot afford to rely on old friends ... efficiency...*

There were grumblings of discontent, but the Board was right behind Nick Santos.

The next task was to bring the orders system into the twentieth century. The report from the fashionable consultancy firm *State of the Obvious* proposed a network of computers for the warehouse with all input coming in from the Internet. Nick Santos agreed wholeheartedly: apart from anything else, it was what he had told the consultants to write in their report.

So an address was set up on the Internet - *santa@grotto.northpole.co* - and the Post Office was asked to drop a note into every home advising that, this Christmas, priority would be given to orders coming in on the Internet. Other orders would be despatched within 42 days "or as conditions permitted".

Full computer tests were carried out in October, and all went well. Test orders arrived at the Internet address, were automatically picked up and transferred into the ordering system, and despatch notes were printed in the warehouse.

Nick Santos was very pleased. So was the Board of Directors. Nick Santos estimated that two hundred of the order-clerks - half the total number employed - could be made redundant.

In the warehouse, Nick Santos ordered a completely new method of working. Elves would only ever pick one item - so there was a team only for teddy-bears, a team only for bicycles, a team only for boxes of magic tricks and so on.

Of course, unhappiness was widespread. The real joy of working in Santa's warehouse was spending the days wandering up and down all the aisles, picking a doll here, a bear there, a set of skates from *way up there*, a book from right across *here*, maybe stopping for a chat with another elf, having a shot on a gyroscope before wrapping it up nicely - all that would disappear with the new method of working. And - it was almost like magic - all the right presents would just turn up when needed and no one bothered when they arrived or where they went to, because all the children got the presents they wanted, and there was usually an empty warehouse after 25th December. (Except for last year of course, when Santa Claus lost his teeth.) So why change it all?

There were grumblings of discontent. But no one really knew how to complain, so Nick Santos got his way. By the middle of November, the warehouse was fully computerised, and there was a test-run of a large present-shipment. It all worked like clockwork.

Nick Santos was very pleased. So, for the most part, was the Board of Directors. Nick Santos estimated that two thousand of the warehouse staff - a quarter of the total number - could be made redundant. There was only one objector on the Board of North Pole Enterprises - the Oldest Eskimo, who noticed that there was one thing missing from the whole exercise: there was no laughter, there were no jokes, there was no singing, there was no happiness in the warehouse. But no one listened any more to the Oldest Eskimo.

It was the twentieth of December. The weekly Board meeting took place.

"I'm pleased to report to the Board," said Nick Santos, "That orders are being despatched within six hours of receipt, and that very few orders require new stock to be ordered. I think we're on target for a good Christmas."

Despite his report, Nick looked worried. His eyes would not meet those of the assembled Board members.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, Nick. But perhaps you explain why we have only received 5% of the orders taken last year?" enquired the Polar Bear in a silky voice.

"Well, I think there is still a lack of public confidence from last Christmas, P.B. Customers are probably just beginning to get their orders in now. I expect all the orders to come in over the next 48 hours. And I've been chasing the Post Office - they've been very slow at delivering the thousands of letters submitted on paper. They've promised to shift the backlog tonight - or I'll go public."

"Doesn't give us a lot of time to get them packed and sent out, though, h'm?"

"No...no... but I have every confidence in our new systems. We'll cope." What still worried Nick was that the problem with the Post Office did not explain a very puzzling lack of orders.

The Oldest Eskimo lifted his eyes. "Perhaps Mr Santos could advise us how to deal with all those children who might not get any presents this year?" he asked quietly.

"Unfortunate," agreed Nick. "But teething troubles, I assure you, teething troubles. Our customers will just have to learn to use new technology. I predict a major change in the next 48 hours..."

It was the twenty-second of December. There was an emergency Board meeting.

"Mr Santos," growled the Polar Bear, "Your new computer system tells me that the number of orders received is dropping rapidly. That we only received 17 orders yesterday. What is going on, Mr Santos?"

Nick Santos played nervously with his Filofax. "Market forces, perhaps, sir. Sabotage by our competitors... I'm sure the system has also told you that we processed all of these orders within 20 minutes of receipt, Mr Bear, sir."

"Well, indeed, Mr Santos. Your computer system certainly told me that. But it's scarcely a record to be proud of ! We've got a warehouse jam-packed full of presents, a world full of children out there. We have no competitors, Mr Santos. And we have *no orders*, Mr Santos!!"

There was an awful silence.

The Elder Elf spoke up. Nick had never noticed him before, because the Elder Elf usually spent Board meetings curled up in an armchair, snoozing.

"Perhaps Mr Santos has upset the Wind-Sprites?" murmured the Elder Elf. His words, though quiet, seemed to fill the air.

Nick Santos looked up aghast. His eyes darted from one Board member to another.

"The Wind-Sprites?" he stammered. "Who are they? I can't have upset them, I've never heard of them!"

Eyebrows were raised on the Board. Growls and nods of understanding were exchanged.

"Well, Mr Santos," said the Polar Bear in a pitying voice, "If you haven't heard of the Wind-Sprites, then you probably have upset them. I thought you would have got them on your side before you did anything else."

"But who are they, tell me!" begged Nick, on his knees. "Who are they, how have I upset them?"

The Elder Elf was enjoying himself. "If you cast your mind back, Mr Santos, to your own childhood - which was probably not that long ago - you will remember putting a note to Santa Claus up the chimney. Did you never wonder how that note got to Santa?"

Nick said nothing. His brain was in turmoil - how could he have forgotten that!? Nick Santos knew he was finished.

"Out of the chimney it flew and up into the air. And in the upper air, Santa Claus had a group of tiny helpers, called the Wind-Sprites, who would collect all these notes blown in the wind and bring them to the North Pole. But since Santa Claus has been retired - how did you put it? - '*we cannot afford to rely on old friends*'; so the Wind-Sprites probably decided they weren't needed any more either..."

"Goodbye, Mr Santos," said the Polar Bear, "And don't forget to leave your car-keys with Security."

There were only two days and nights left. But somehow, with Santa Claus back out of retirement, teeth and all, the warehouse bustling with all the elves, the orders magically collected from upper regions of the air, the reindeer fed with the choicest grasses, no one was left out when Christmas Day dawned. The disappointment of the year before was forgotten. And many a good child said: "Why, a Merry Old Christmas and bless you, Nick Santos!"