

Leadership Lessons From Santa

Authored by Sharleen Smith

We all are familiar with the story, "Twas the Night Before Christmas". In fact, it is a tradition in the memories of many small children and, perhaps, a tradition we have carried on into our families. However, have we ever thought about the leadership lessons that Santa demonstrates? Yes, that jolly, rose cheeked, plump, sleigh diving soul could have a lot to teach us. After all, his business is 365 days per year, no holidays. His service is global. He manufactures products for very diverse customers. All this -- while relying on elves and reindeer! So let us see what he has to teach us.

Leaders engage with a vision. If you are around Santa for one minute, then you know his vision. Toys for all the girls and boys across the world. No mistake. Day and night, he focuses on this target. When he holds staff meetings with elves? He communicates the vision. Breakdown at the North Pole, Inc.? His response, "We have to get this fixed so that all the world's children will get toys!" How about dinner with Ms. Claus? Well, ask her? That is all they talk about! A vision is defined as where you want to go. It is your destination, what you want to accomplish. If we do not talk to others about the vision, they do not know how to support us and work with us.

Leaders have audacious goals. How does Santa achieve his vision? Santa has a list of goals that he must achieve daily and monthly. Goals are his milestones that help him reach his vision. Santa hired me to speak to the elves this past summer. The subject? Elf Motivation! Anyway, I got to the staff meeting a tad early. I overheard Santa discussing the monthly goals. I cannot remember everything but I distinctly remember he said they had to make more than 2 billion teddy bears per month, 1 billion dolls with blonde hair per month, 1.5 yellow construction trucks per month and 2.5 million laptops. I am sure there were more. I know the elves were complaining because Santa had them exercise every morning. They did not like that but Santa thought it kept them strong and fit. Goals are necessary for leaders.

Leaders make a list and check it twice. Yes, even Santa Clause is not blessed with excellent organization skills. He carries a list with him always. The list may be his goals. Another list may be his daily responsibilities. A third list may be the grocery list Ms. Clause gave him. Moreover, the famous list? Yes, he checks the list of what all the children said they want for Christmas. He goes over this list twice. In fact, you may not realize that Santa checks his reindeer's workout list, the number of times the sleigh is cleaned, and even the number of cookie breaks per day that the elves take. He has found that the key to achieving goals and reaching his vision is staying on track. Leaders operate by checking things twice.

Leaders are consistent. Santa, and all leaders, must be consistent. Santa does not have the luxury of being in a bad mood. He does not have the luxury of taking a year off because he just does not feel like working. Does this mean that we always feel like being consistent? No. One night when I was visiting the North Pole, after speaking at Santa's annual Joy Conference, I found Santa in the reindeer's stable. He was talking to Rudolph about how tough it was to always be the one who others always looked up to. He said he wished that sometimes he could just back off and relax. I walked up and we discussed how important it was to stand firm even when things got tough. Even during the valleys, leaders maintain a consistency in their daily behavior. Santa always operates in a way that elves respect, trust and look up to him. He displays the most ethical of behavior. He walks out his values minute by minute. Consistency is the key to being a leader.

Leaders build strong teams. Any leader knows that he or she cannot do it alone. The people you hire, the coworkers you spend time with, the friends you hang out with and the family you love – they all are teams that help us to achieve our vision. We do not always choose our teams but we do have a responsibility to assist in building up our teams. Teams are made of the people and the work we have to do. Let us look at Santa and how he balances the two – people and work responsibilities. He has learned that if he lets the elves and reindeer play too much, he cannot get the work done. Yet if he works them too hard, they lose motivation, focus and start making mistakes. Team building is a delicate balance. He allows the elves to take breaks and gives the reindeer time to play reindeer games. Balancing the "people time", he assigns jobs and deadlines for them to accomplish. He maintains operations. How do we know if the team is growing correctly? Well, Santa has never missed a Christmas Eve ride around the world!

Leaders share the milk and cookies. You may not know it but Santa takes some of the milk and cookies left by children to Rudolph and the other reindeer. He knows they need this sugar high to stay up all night and protein to stay strong. See, Santa knows one secret that many people do not. He knows that there is always enough to go around. Leaders do not need to control, manipulate, be greedy, fail to share, hoard and/or be aggressive. Leaders that excel in life are those that do the opposite of these. Life offers us time to be generous, help others succeed in what they are doing. Many times these actions result with the leader succeeding in his/her endeavor. Allow others to come into your life, serve others, assist others, mentor others and give to others.

Leaders lead with influence. Well, one thing we can say is that Santa is influential. That is what leadership is about. Leadership is not about dominance and power. Leadership is influence. Santa influences the elves daily. He definitely has influence with the reindeer. He calls them by name and they fly. Most impressive is his influence across the world. Little children know that if they are nice all year, they receive gifts. Little children know that if they are naughty; they receive switches and coal in their stockings. Thus, parents around the world remind their children of this fact --- often.

And the last two of leadership lessons are very personal ones.

Leaders follow their purpose. Now to many of you, this may be confused with vision and goals. That is why I mention it. Before a vision and before goals, we must know our purpose in life. Each one of us is born with strengths and weakness, specific personalities and diverse interests. So was Santa! His purpose in life was to bring joy and happiness to boys and girls. He never lost sight of his purpose. Even in retirement, when his son or daughter takes over the business, Santa will still be bringing happiness to others. Now, maybe he will continue to be a toy makers or a beach bum in Miami. Whatever it is, Santa will share his happiness and “ho, ho, ho” wherever he “go, go, goes.” That is his purpose and once he found his purpose, he will not walk away from it. Walking in their purpose is where leaders find greatness.

Leaders leave a mark. Tonight as I was writing this article, I took a break and walked outside. The minute I looked up, I saw a shooting star. It flew from one side of the horizon to the other, leaving a trail of fire that lit the sky. That is how we usually see pictures of Santa. The shadow of his sleigh and reindeer against the moonlit sky is a signature picture of his leadership. See, leaders leave their mark. They never touch elbows with anyone where they do not leave a positive mark. People are changed by the presence of leaders - by working with them, socializing with them, living next door to them and even living in the same household with them.

Well, now you have heard the leadership lessons from Santa. Enjoy and emulate this jolly fellow. I have had the privilege of authoring leadership lessons for Family Voices for over one year now. I hope in some way I have left a mark, influenced you in some way. Not just influenced you to think about leadership but take action as a leader. Leadership is verb. Well, anyway, my time is up for the monthly Leadership Link. However, if Family Voices allows perhaps I can make occasional appearances with more motivation on how you and I can excel in leadership and in life.

So, we have made it to the end of 2013. May you all be blessed in your leadership efforts now and in 2014. I guess there is only one leadership lesson from Santa to share. In the true spirit of leadership, Santa wants the best for everyone. So, as Santa would say, “Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night!”