

A fluffy white chick is the central focus of the image, set against a clear blue sky. The chick's downy feathers are soft and voluminous, particularly around its neck and body. The text is overlaid on the chick's body.

# **1 Build A Wonderful Workshop**

## MAKE THE MISSION THE MAIN THING

When it comes to getting “big things” done well, there are few (if any) businesses that can hold a Yule candle to our North Pole operation. I’m extremely proud of the workshop that the elves, reindeer, and I have created – and we’re more than happy to show it off. But, at ninety degrees North latitude and minus fifty degrees Fahrenheit, we get very few takers on our standing offer to tour the facility. Most Southerners (everyone’s a Southerner to us) only see our plant through their imaginations ... through the stereotypical images they’ve had of Santa’s workshop since childhood.

What’s your vision of our workplace? Do you see candy canes and chestnuts? Wood chips flying in the air and falling into neat little piles? Whistling and singing? Busy little elves and reindeer, with smiles on their faces, scurrying around to make and package toys? If so, your image is right on – except for the candy canes and chestnuts ... and the wood chips (we rarely use wood any more).

Yes, we do run a productive and happy place here. And that’s in spite of the intense pressures and challenges we face – ones that undoubtedly were *not* included in your vision of us. So how do we do it? Just how do *I* keep everyone, including myself, on track and motivated throughout each long year – all for one long night’s big splash? The answer is basic and simple: through an unwavering and uncompromising focus on OUR MISSION. And as the leader,

I've taken several steps to establish and maintain that focus:

First, I've made sure that all the elves and reindeer know what our mission is (“Making spirits bright by building and delivering high-quality toys to good little girls and boys”) and why it's important. Ask any member of our North Pole staff and they can quote our mission verbatim ... *and* explain its significance.

Second, I've spent time with individual employees – discussing how their respective jobs specifically link with, and contribute to, the accomplishment of our mission.

Third, I've kept the mission “in front of folks” by posting it on walls, discussing it at staff meetings and training sessions, including it in internal correspondence, and through a host of other activities that help ensure it stays our central focal point.

Finally, I've made it a core component of our decision-making and work-planning processes. If an action we're considering doesn't support our mission, either directly or indirectly, we don't do it!

With all the team members we have, orders we get, toys we make, and issues we face, it could be way too easy to dilute ourselves, head off on tangents, or just plain lose sight of why we're here. We avoid those by keeping our mission at the heart of everything we do ... by making our mission our main thing. I recommend that you do the same in *your* workshop.

## FOCUS ON YOUR PEOPLE AS WELL AS YOUR PURPOSE

**H**ere's a nugget of leadership wisdom that I've picked up over the decades – something you can take to one of the toy banks we occasionally deliver: You can't possibly focus on your mission without also focusing on the folks that make your mission happen. The two go hand-in-hand ... hoof-in-hoof (sorry, but the reindeer insisted). And besides, since you manage *things* and lead *people*, common sense suggests that it's *people* who are at the core of all leadership activities.

But alas, common sense apparently isn't all that common. There is a handful of managers out there who don't get it – they don't get the message, and they don't get the positive results that the message can help produce. That point was clearly brought home by a short letter I received several years ago:

*Dear Santa:*

*This year I only want one thing – a manager who cares as much about me as the work I'm doing. It's hard to be committed when there's no reciprocation. Please help!*

Now that's a sad commentary ... and a tall order to fill. There was no need to check our production schedule. I already knew that "caring leaders" weren't on our list of deliverables. But I needed to respond in some way, so I decided to do two things: 1) Write this book, and 2) Vow to do my very best never to be the kind of leader described in that letter.

I'm happy (even jolly) to say I've done both. Writing this book was by far the easier of the two responses; living up to my vow – turning my good intentions into predictable behaviors – was more challenging. It took abandoning a few old behaviors and adopting a few new ones; it required commitment, self-discipline, concentration, and prioritization. And I needed to monitor my progress (and still do) through both self-evaluation and periodic feedback from the workshop team that provide answers to the following:

**In the last several months, what have I done to ...**

- ... Be accessible (physically and mentally) to employees who would like my attention?
- ... Be considerate of staff-member needs?
- ... Provide employees with the training, tools, resources, and feedback required for success?
- ... Keep employees in the “what’s happening” information loop?
- ... Help team members maintain an appropriate balance between their professional and personal lives?
- ... Demonstrate respect for employees’ time and talents ... as well as respect for them as individuals?
- ... Solicit, and listen to, staff-member ideas and concerns?
- ... Help everyone develop and grow?
- ... Fairly distribute the work and workload?

These, and many others like them, are the questions I ask – and the things I do – to make sure I focus on the wonderful workers who comprise our wonderful workshop. What questions do *you* ask? What action items would I find on *your* list?

## LET VALUES BE YOUR GUIDE

Every once in a while, a truly special moment occurs in education – the *student* turns out to be the *teacher*. I experienced one of those moments not too long ago, and I'd like to share it with you. This next leadership lesson comes courtesy of a savvy little elf named Virginia.

It was a Tuesday morning and I was conducting a leadership development training session in the workshop classroom. I gave each participant a set of plastic building blocks along with an assignment: “Build a model of a wonderful workshop.” The purpose of the task was twofold: 1) Test student creativity and thinking, and 2) Provide me with ideas for improving our North Pole facility. After starting the exercise, I left the room.

I returned an hour later and found that everyone was busy building their structures – everyone, that is, except Virginia. She was just sitting there, staring into space. “Is there a problem, Virginia?” I inquired. “No, Santa,” she replied, “I’m just thinking.” So I left her to her thoughts and exited the classroom.

After another hour had passed, I returned to the room to conclude the exercise. As I moved from table to table, I was truly impressed by the array of detailed models with structural components like smoke stacks, loading ramps, conveyor belts, sleigh landing pads, cafeterias, gyms, offices, and even high-tech classrooms.

When I came to Virginia’s model, however, I was taken aback. There, in front of her, were six vertical columns – and nothing more. “Need more time?” I asked. “No thanks,” she answered, “I’m done.” Hearing that, I probed further: “Virginia, I’m not sure I understand. All the other models are very detailed structures, but all you have are six columns. No walls, no roof, no nothing. How come?” The explanation she offered is where you’ll find the lesson for leaders everywhere:

“Well, Santa, it seems to me that what makes a workshop wonderful is not walls and ceilings, but what happens *inside* those walls and *under* those ceilings ... it’s not how a workshop *stands*, but what it *stands for* that makes it special. These six columns you see are pillars, and they represent values – the values of respect, integrity, quality, customer service, responsibility, and teamwork. I found them listed on our website. Maybe for some folks they’re just words, but for me, they’re blueprints to follow. And that’s where leadership comes in. **Making sure that everyone knows what values are important**, and then **helping everyone turn those good beliefs into everyday behaviors** is how leaders create a great place to work. At least that’s how I see it. And that’s why my model looks the way it does. Did I do okay?”

With a huge grin on my face and a twinkle in my eye, I responded: “Yes, Virginia, that *is* a wonderful workshop. And I think that you are going to be a wonderful leader. Thank you for giving me such a valuable gift.”

**Santa Summary:**

# **BUILD A WONDERFUL WORKSHOP**

- **Make The Mission The Main Thing**
  - **Focus On Your People As Well As Your Purpose**
  - **Let Values Be Your Guide**
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