

Holding the Elves Accountable

Father Christmas was worried. Less than two weeks to go until Christmas and the list of things that he had to personally attend to seemed endless.

He had tried delegating things to the elves, he had even tried inserting an AA size battery into some of them to see if that would make them more empowered (he thought that was what the term meant). Whatever he did he couldn't find a way to make them behave as if they were accountable for getting things done themselves.

At times like this he envied his friends the Easter Bunny (a sole trader) and the Tooth Fairy (franchise operator) - why did he have to be the one with a large staff to manage.

In his search for a solution he had even "diverted" a number of management self help books from senior executive's Christmas stockings into his own private reading collection but they had contained no answers for him (except for the hint on empowerment).

In desperation he had arranged a discussion with his CEE (Chief Executive Elf) Dobby to discuss the problem. Dobby was semi-retired now and was focussing on his film career in the Harry Potter series but Father Christmas was relying on his insights.

"Nick," said Dobbie "the boys and girls all love working for you and are trying to do their best, but you can't expect them to take on accountability for their work unless you do your managerial role of creating work for them correctly."

Father Christmas had never really thought that his role was to create work for his subordinates – but it did make some sense. If he didn't create work for them where else would it come from? And if he didn't do it right then he could imagine that might cause real problems.

As they talked further Dobbie was able to explain that creating work required a manager to do 3 things:

1. Tasking

- Clearly specifying the outputs required, but not how to do it

2. Trusting

- Believing/ensuring the subordinate has the capability and tools required to do the job

3. Tending

- Providing guidance and confirmation/correction at just the right time

Furthermore, Dobbie explained that in doing these 3 things Managers had to find the right balance between **Micro-managing** (being too close to the action and taking over the work of their subordinates) and **Abandoning** (leaving subordinates without direction and feedback on how they are going).



If a Manager gets that balance right then:

- **Tasking** and **Trusting** lead the subordinate to exercise **Judgement**
- **Trusting** and **Tending** provide **Coherence** for their work
- **Tending** and **Tasking** leads to appropriate **Review** taking place

Father Christmas was starting to get a little worried at this stage. He was pretty sure he didn't do all these things as well as he should, but he wasn't sure if he tended towards micromanaging or abandonment.

Things didn't improve for him when Dobbie went on to explain that perhaps the most consistent pattern for people who didn't get this right was to veer from one extreme to another i.e. leave people alone and without direction for long periods of time and then appear and take over and give detailed instruction for a short period of time before heading off to do the same to some other unfortunate employee or group.

Dobbie said that employees like to call these sort of managers "seagulls", a reference to how seagulls suddenly appear from nowhere whenever a bag of hot chips is spilled on the ground, cause a lot of noise and mess for a few minutes and then disappear again.

Father Christmas had an unfortunate recollection of his previous week, running from group to group, solving their problems for them and then heading off to the next group without taking the time to make sure that the elves had all they needed to continue their work in his absence. He was also pretty sure that the time he spent doing the elves work for them could have been much better applied to planning and organising the operations of the entire Winter Wonderland.

"Dobbie," he cried with anguish "am I without hope, will children not receive their presents because I couldn't manage a snowstorm at the North Pole?"

"Nick," Dobbie replied "of course there is still hope. You are a good man and the elves want to do their best for you. Sit down with them and find out where you are out of balance in how you create work for them and what you need to do to get back into balance. Then get them to help you stay in balance in the future by making sure they know they can tell you when things are not working for them."

And so it was that Christmas 2010 was saved – at least until the reindeer called a snap strike over alleged bullying and harassment of their shop steward Rudolph – but that is another story.

