

## Santa's Revised Christmas Eve Plan

Eliza cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Glancing around the room, she noted that all of the who's who of the North Pole were in attendance. "What am I doing here?" she wondered.

Santa called the meeting to order, apologizing for the absence of Tech Elf. "Tech Elf had to attend to a problem with the new iPods."

"Let's get right to the point of this meeting," Santa continued. "We have a huge problem and no time to waste. Christmas Eve is just around the corner.

"Eliza, you may be wondering why we brought you here today. We are in desperate straits, and we hope that you can help. This economy is hard on everyone all around the world, even us here at the North Pole. We need a revised plan for Christmas Eve.

"That is why we asked you here today. You see, your reputation precedes you. We heard that you can sell cement to a drowning man. The Eskimos told us that last year you sold them ice, and they loved it! One of your clients calls you a marketeer. We think that you may have just the ideas that we need."

"Sir, while I appreciate your kind words, I am uncertain as to my role. What--"

Interrupting, an elf exclaimed, "Let's just send fewer reindeer. That will save on feed."

"Santa could cut back on his food, too," suggested the Reindeer Stable Elf, looking down at the table to avoid Santa's glance.

"And not eat all those tasty cookies," rejoined another elf. "I don't understand why he can't bring some back for us. After all, his sleigh is getting lighter with each stop. Cookies don't weigh that much."

"How 'bout sending only lightweight toys?" said another.

"Or fewer toys?" chimed in a third.

"Let's not have Santa stop everywhere."

"Yeah! Maybe Santa can make neighborhood stops instead of individual home stops."

"Or cut out the naughty children completely, and just stop for those who have been nice."

"Santa would save a lot of time by not going down the chimney. Just toss the toys on the doorstep like the paperboy tosses the paper. People are used to that."

"Hey! Let's just ship the toys via UPS or FedEx-"

"That won't work; the toys will arrive during the daytime!"

"Do you think that they might make a special Christmas Eve delivery?"

"They just might if we sent out a press release that Santa was relying on them to drop off the toys this year!"

"I still think the best idea is to have Scotty beam the toys into every home. If we preprogrammed the coordinates, he could get it done, I'm sure."

"But what if his coordinates are off and the toys get stuck someplace other than under the tree? Maybe in the chimney-"

"Imagine children finding their toys in the toilet or the tub!"

Exhausted and out of ideas, all eyes turned to Eliza. Quietly, she said, "What do the children want?"

A chorus of replies erupted. "Toys!"

"Santa!"

"Rudolph!"

"XBox!"

"iPod!"

"Nintendo!"

"Cabbage Patch Dolls!"

In unison, they turned and stared at Ancient Elf. "Cabbage Patch Dolls?" They queried.

"Oops, that was last century, wasn't it?" he mumbled, shrinking into his bean bag.

When they ran out of replies, Eliza continued, "Have you asked them?"

"They write letters every year."

"In the past, we had rooms full of them. Now we get them via e-mail." Suddenly materializing a laptop out of thin air, Data Elf tapped *enter* and began scrolling through the inbox of Dear Santa e-mails.

Getting up, Eliza walked over to Data Elf and leaned over his shoulder for a better look at the e-mails. "These letters tell you what toys they want, but I want to know what is important to them about Santa? They can get these toys from many stores. Why does Santa need to deliver them?"

No one knew. Silence crept around the room as each gave Eliza a dumbfounded stare. "Let's find out," she suggested.

Finding their voices, questions flew. "How to we do that?"

"Do you have a magic wand that you can wave and we will know?"

"Do you know the answer?"

"Can you read their minds?"

With a loud jingle, Santa took charge. "We have all been doing way too much talking, interrupting, and sharing our points of view. Let's allow Eliza to have the floor without interruption."

"But-"

With a kindly but firm look, Santa silenced the elf and nodded to Eliza. "I don't have any special powers that allow me to answer your questions right now, but I do know the secret to getting the answer," she continued.

Ancient Elf blurted out, "What secret-" Noticing Santa's attention, he stopped. Folding his arms over his chest, he leaned back into his rocker. "Humph!" he muttered.

Eliza continued, "We ask them. The secret is in how you ask. I will help you formulate the questions and tell you how to ask them so that we get the information that we want. Only one of you will ask these questions. Who will that be?"

Anxious to learn the secret firsthand, volunteers piped up all around the room.

"I will!"

"Glad to do it!"

"No, I will!"

"Choose me!"

Santa held up his hand. Pointing at the center of the table, he materialized a multi-colored array of square slips from one end of the table to the other. "Write your names on these slips and put them in my cap. Then I will reach my hand in and pick one of you to work on these questions."

Fingers snatched slips and scribbled down names.

Santa's cap was passed around the table, and one-by-one the slips were dropped into it. "Let's see who will help with the questions," said Santa as he reached his hand into his cap. "Intern Elf!" He announced.

Sighs of disappointment mingled with a high-pitched squeal of excitement. "It's me! Okay, what do I do?" She eagerly asked.

"We'll stay behind after everyone else has left, and I will help you with the questions. Then I will instruct you how to ask them, and we'll decide who to ask." Eliza paused. Looking around, she continued, "We will all meet back here in three days to review the results. If there is not anything else, Santa, everyone else may go back to work. I know that you are all very busy."

Dismissed, they crawled out of bean bags, jumped down from rockers, slid off chairs, and trooped out of the room.

"I'm anxious to hear the results," whispered Santa, the last one to leave. "I know you can help us, Eliza."

Eliza hoped he was right.

Three days later, the same group reassembled in the same room, each in the same seat that he or she had occupied at the first meeting. The air hummed with excitement.

Once again, Santa opened the meeting. "Welcome back, Eliza. We are all on the edge of our seats, wondering what Intern Elf has learned and what you recommend as a result."

Directing his gaze at Intern Elf, Santa said proudly, "Intern Elf has been very busy talking to children and has a very good way with them. She also has stubbornly refused to give any hint of what she has learned to anyone, including me." Chuckling, he added, "I have witnessed some very well-thought-out and sneaky attempts to get the information from her."

"Yeah," injected an elf from the kitchen. "Food doesn't work."

"Neither does a chance to ride in Santa's sleigh," mumbled Reindeer Stable Elf.

"I even offered her an iPod," snapped Tech Elf, "and she turned me down. Said that she was doing this for Santa and for all the boys and girls. Right! I think that she just loves being the *only* one who knows!"

"That's not true!" defended Intern Elf. "Santa asked me to do this, and I wanted to ask these questions so that we got the best information for Eliza so that she could help us with the best revised plan. That's all."

"And you did very well," said Eliza. "Let's not hold them in suspense any longer. Let's tell them what we learned. Would you please do the honors?"

Excitedly, Intern Elf picked up her notes and began to read her findings. "Well, what the children want most of all for Christmas is presents--"

"There's a surprise," grumbled Tech Elf. "What's so new about that? I could have--" Noticing Santa's please-stop-interrupting glance, Ancient Elf reached over and clapped his hand over Tech Elf's mouth, muting the rest of the comment.

"But what they love about Christmas is the magic, the wonder, the excitement, the anticipation, and the surprise of getting those presents. Once they have the presents, they play with them for a while, and all too quickly the presents are old. However, their excitement and anticipation are new every year, much like yours have been to hear these results," Intern Elf added smugly, looking around the room.

"As to some of the actions that Santa takes on Christmas Eve to deliver the toys," she continued, "you will be surprised. Most children don't know how Santa gets into their house. They know that the reindeer land on top of their house, but they don't know how Santa gets in. Many thought that he walked through the front door or opened a window and crawled in. When asked about the chimney, almost all of them said, 'What's that?'"

"Do you mean that we've been forcing Santa down the chimney all these years for nothing?!" questioned Ancient Elf. "That's taken a lot of his time and effort. Unbelievable!"

"A couple hundred years ago that might have been necessary," replied Intern Elf. "Apparently, today Santa's chimney entrance is irrelevant."

"He could have been faster getting down those chimneys if he'd dropped some weight like I advised him to do decades ago," said Nutri Elf.

"That would not have been a good idea," continued Intern Elf. "Turns out children like Santa chubby. When asked how to describe him, that was the first thing that they said. The second thing is the individual attention Santa gives each child. Most children said they appreciate that Santa listens to what they want and brings it to them. However, they weren't sure which of their actions fell into the naughty category and which fell into the nice one. That whole concept made them nervous, but they did say that they thought about it all year, not just at Christmas."

"Well, at least Santa's reason for delivering these toys is still working," noted Ancient Elf. "That's good to hear."

"One more thing. Next to Santa, children love his reindeer, especially Rudolph. They mention his red nose right away. They know that there are more reindeer with Rudolph, but they have a much harder time remembering the names of the rest.

"On a sad note for us, only one child mentioned the elves," concluded Intern Elf.

"Did that child like us?"

Eliza answered, taking over. "Absolutely! You elves are the foundation of this entire effort, aren't they, Santa?"

Nodding briskly, Santa replied, "I couldn't do it without them!"

"That's why I recommend we involve them even more," Eliza added.

"More than what we do now? How can we do more than what we do now?"

"When Santa takes off on Christmas Eve, what do you do?" Eliza asked.

"I put my feet up," said Ancient Elf.

"Pour myself a cup of hot chocolate."

"Take a nap."

"Walk through the empty stable."

"Get depressed. I have no more excitement for another six months until we start gearing up for next Christmas," sadly lamented Crafty Elf.

"Track Santa on-line to see how he is doing and check that he doesn't miss a stop," returned Tech Elf.

"What if you could delay those actions and extend the excitement of Christmas a little longer? What if you could be involved not only before but also *during* Christmas Eve? What if you could help make Christmas Eve even more special for the children?" Eliza offered.

In one voice, everyone said, "How do we do THAT?"

"We'll need the help of everyone at the North Pole, including you, Reindeer Stable Elf. Just because the stables are empty, doesn't mean that you can't be busy," said Eliza.

"Really?" perked up Reindeer Stable Elf.

"Really," echoed Eliza. "Here's what we will do. We will streamline Santa's actions and use technology to add more excitement for the children. First of all, let's address the streamlining. As Intern Elf mentioned, children are not that concerned how Santa enters their house. In fact, most of them don't even know if their house has a chimney, so let's skip Santa's arrival down the chimney. Instead, Tech Elf, can you rig up a system where each house can be surveyed to find the Christmas tree? You will need lots of other elves to run the system and find the trees before Santa arrives at the homes. Can you get this set up and train everyone in time? I know that we

are getting very close to Christmas."

"I can do that!" Tech Elf replied enthusiastically. "I've got all the tech toys ready for Christmas Eve. Teeny Tiny Elf has even snapped all the batteries in place. I have nothing to do. I can get on that today!"

"Wonderful!" returned Eliza. "To further streamline, we will have Santa stop the reindeer on one house in a neighborhood, grab his bag, and magically arrive in each house by the Christmas tree. That will save a great deal of Santa's time and reindeer stress. If children in a neighborhood look out and see the sleigh on the neighbor's house, they will think that Santa has not yet arrived at their house-

"Or possibly has already been there," added Intern Elf.

"Exactly," continued Eliza. "Teeny Tiny Elf, you will accompany Santa-

"Oh, my dream has come true! I always wanted to go along," squealed Teeny Tiny Elf.

"And you will be busy." said Eliza. "You will be responsible for taking a digital movie of Santa placing the children's toys by the tree, burning that movie onto a CD, and leaving the CD labeled, *Until Next Year*, for the children to find. You will have to do this quickly so that you do not delay Santa in getting out of the house once the toys are placed. Can you do that?"

"I can use the new technique that I just developed. Oh, this will be so fun!" said Teeny Tiny Elf.

"Good. In addition, several elves will need to remotely control the Cookie Robot which will detect any cookies left for Santa and gobble them whole to bring back to the North Pole," Eliza turned toward Santa. "This will further save Santa time and weight gain plus make the children happy that Santa took their cookies. Is that okay with you, Santa?"

"You've done me a favor, Eliza," boomed Santa. "Mrs. Claus has been telling me not to eat the cookies for years, but, somehow, I just can't bear to refuse the children's gift and let them down. This way, I won't do either one, and Mrs. Claus will be happy, too. Great idea! Just be sure to get my best side in your movie, Teeny Tiny Elf, okay?"

"Okay, Santa!"

"That *Until Next Year* CD will add to the children's excitement of this Christmas and prompt them to look forward to next Christmas by being nice all year long. Teeny Tiny Elf, you will have a greeting from Santa for those children that goes on each CD," Eliza noted.

"Wow! We've got a lot to do in preparation for Christmas Eve. Just when everything seemed to be winding down, you have given us more to do. This is great!"

"Yeah, and when Santa gets back, we can all have a big Christmas Day party, eating all the cookies along with our hot chocolate!"

"That's the idea," agreed Eliza. "For your extra efforts on Christmas Eve, you get rewarded with lots of tasty cookies."

"All right!"

"Yes!"

"Finally!"

"Let's get started," said Santa. "There's not a minute to delay. This meeting is concluded."

Bumps, thumps, crashes, and skids were heard as everyone rapidly departed the room, seemingly as one.

Santa paused by Eliza before exiting. "You did it, Eliza. You made Christmas more streamlined for us and saved us a great deal. Most importantly, though, you made Christmas Eve more exciting for the children and for us. Our purpose is renewed, and our spirits are soaring. Thank you. Thank you very much."