

Why Santa is “The Big Guy”

Thoughts On the Strategic Value of Being Santa

Many people think of Santa as a frivolity, an afternoon’s diversion during the Christmas season. I do not. At the very essence of the club experience is emotion, bonding individuals to each other and to their fellow members and guests. The Santa experience, indeed the “Christmas Spirit,” has the potential to amplify these deep feelings and to magnify the value of “club.” Those who promote this bond are both treasured and revered. Theirs is meaningful work because it lifts the human spirit and welds people together as one. It might even be suggested that the highest aspiration of any general manager or club President is to become the club’s Santa for an afternoon, day or week. Let me explain.

The defining feature of an effective and long remembered club manager or President is less their technical expertise, their conquering of the “hard science” of club management, than their humanism, their ability to connect with other people as individuals and with other groups as communities. This is the “soft science” part of the club business and is of a deeper, more profound value than the cost of sales calculation could ever be. Do they connect with people and is their “emotional intelligence” exceptional? Do they promote “good values” and, as an authority figure, help socialize (that is, give right values and behavior to--) children, their parents and friends? To do these things, and to find moments appropriate to their doing, is meaningful work. Santa can be part of that work and a powerful symbolic tool for the manager or President.

People naturally love those who love their children and are, in turn, loved by those children. Those who attract this affection occupy a special place in the hearts and minds of parents and grandparents. If not necessarily revered, they are nonetheless cherished for having touched those children with warmth and affection and a special “values message” that such “outside the family types” uniquely provide. The Santa experience with its powerful emotional impact adds in a substantive way to one’s “goodwill bank account” with the staff and membership. And leveraging this goodwill bank account is what leaders do to effect change in other significant but unrelated areas of the club.

Every club is a unique culture, that is, a group of people bonded together by transcendent values like family, education, the work ethic and giving to others. Those who lead cultures set the “values standard” that others follow. What one does is important and how one explains the value of what one does is more important still. To be Santa is a large statement in itself but to use the “Santa Platform” to address “the good” within the community and the season is the greatest of leadership opportunities.

So what is the “Spirit of Christmas” and how can that message be given to members of every sex, ethnicity and religious persuasion? The Spirit, indeed the propelling spirit of any community is “the love embrace,” that deepest of human emotions, the cement that holds the individual “people bricks” together. But knowing that this “love embrace” should exist in the club community is never enough. The “love embrace” must be nurtured, dramatized, amplified and given to others. Where better to receive this message than Santa School, who better to “teach and preach” than the “Big Guy” himself and who better to amplify that message via the Santa routine than the very symbols of your club community, the General Manager and Board of Directors?

People remember those who have impacted their lives, who have touched them profoundly during special moments. There is a power in the symbolism surrounding these people and those moments. Santa provides the authority figure, the spokesman for “the good,” the message and the location----Santa’s Private Grotto where family and “teacher” come together for a reflective moment; the hugs given by The Big Guy to children, parents and grandparents; the “Santa Speech” which addresses the transcendent messages of Christmas (love, giving, sharing, family and friends); the gift exchange between Santa and the children, between the children and relatives, between the children and their siblings and the symbolism of

those gifts; the promise of future rewards for being good; the photo memory that captures this symbolic moment for future review; the final hug and squeeze before the parting farewell. These contacts and connections are remembered and each gesture leaves a powerful imprint on everyone in the room.

Santa gives the manager and president the opportunity to touch others on several different levels of experience. Emotionally through the hugs and the gentle touch they give to all who are gathered. Intellectually through the values statements they articulate. Touching people in this way, at a time when people are ripe for such connections, is memorable. Stories will be created. People will be told. The larger community will come to know of the person, the message and the emotion. They will know that a truly meaningful exchange has taken place and that the person or persons manufacturing and delivering that exchange are to be cherished.

And the community will remember that it was “Santa” who orchestrated the production, delivered the message, touched all who were gathered, amplified the community and affirmed the emotional and spiritual bonds which weld the membership together in the very best clubs. There is a power in these moments and in these gestures and both help to affirm and amplify the core humanism of manager and president within the club. Their “goodwill bank accounts” will grow and deepen.

Each manager and president works to create his or her own myths, stories told by others which amplify the values and the character of those at the center of the myth. Experience here at The Beach Club would suggest that there are no more powerful and no more positive myths than those which spring up around the Santa Experience. This Santa Myth has great power: who would fire the manager who dressed up for hours, touched a member’s children, taught them and their loved ones about the great issues in life, connected in a unique and special way with each adult in the room and emotionally touched each and every man, woman child they met with a hug, a comment, a gesture and a smile? Will they not be remembered, years after leaving the club, as a maker of community and an advocate of the “emotional embrace” that welds people together as one?

What sort of manager or president should make the Santa Commitment? I’d like to suggest that any personality, properly coached, can be transformed into an effective Santa but I’d be remiss in doing so. The “right type” of person needs to believe that being The Big Guy for ten hours is fun, entertaining and truly meaningful; that a Santa type experience is needed by the community; that it’s an important moment for the children, parents, grandparents and accompanying friends alike. The right type of person needs to exude “The Warmth,” a genuine caring that everyone can read in the twinkle of the eyes, the quality of their laugh, the warmth of their hug, their delight in the unscripted verbal exchange with the assembled. People will know when the show is a sham, a fabricated experience---people can feel it, can sense it, can smell it. The wrong manager or the wrong president in the “right” job will undermine the effort and compromise the message.

So how will you know if you’re the right person for the job? Each of us is revealed through experience. You might be sitting with your management team, exploring the idea, frightened by the prospect, doing it because you feel compelled, then discovering as you comfort a frightened child that you’re a natural, ready to take your “Santa Persona” on the road. On the other hand, you might understand the need, appreciate the value of Santa to your “manager / president myth,” purchase the clothes, decorate the room, jump into the role and discover in the first five minutes that Santa is a chore, a burden and an entirely counter-productive experience for you and everyone you encounter. So how will you know which of these two characters you are? Simple: just give it a try for a single day and you’ll know by the end of that day if Santa is in your soul and that you, as manager or president, are truly “The Big Guy.”

Managers and presidents should leap at the chance to be “The Big Guy.” Certainly anyone wanting to polish their image should do so. So too would those searching for opportunities to experience humor, insight, contact and “substantive conversation” with member families. The Santa Experience allows the manager or the president an opportunity to see each member family and each member child as a unique and very special entity. Who better to know about children (or parents for that matter!) being good or bad than someone who’s seen them in the act of doing throughout the year. Who better than the general manager

who understands their values, their expectations, their loves, their spiritual nature or their philosophy of life? Who better, indeed, than Santa!

Being Santa is fun. Being Santa is a deeply meaningful part of the “club experience.” Being Santa is good for your job and good for your presidential administration. But perhaps most importantly Santa is good for the humanism, the “soft science”, the compassion which lie at the very core of your being---both personally and professionally---and of every relationship you have with others in your community.

Now that you’re primed for the Santa Experience, you need to translate the strategic imperative into the tactical by building for yourself and the club a “The Santa Theatre,” the “Three Act Santa Play” and the “Santa Personna.” If you have become a believer in the possibilities, then drop me an e-mail at gipair@aol.com and I’ll send you the Santa Checklist and the Santa Script to guide your own creation of the universal Santa Experience.