



Short Safety Subject

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A Risk Management Success Story From Santa

Santa Avoids Catastrophe



NORTH POLE - A catastrophe with worldwide implications was recently avoided here, thanks to the timely incorporation of the five steps of risk management (RM). St. Nicholas "Santa" Claus, president of Jolly Old Elf Enterprises and head of the world's largest toy making elf cartel, had been considering the cancellation of Christmas due to inclement weather.

"Flying around in a sleigh pulled by eight tiny reindeer is a risky operation even under the best conditions," explained Claus, whose considerable weight adds even more risk to the equation, "but when you throw bad weather like we've been experiencing into the mix, it would have been easy to make a snap decision and say, 'forget it, this is too risky.'"

Claus said that he and his crew have a checklist to follow, and that Claus himself even checks the list twice. However, there was no standard operating procedure (SOP) in place for dealing with the unexpected, like this year's blizzards. Fortunately for good little boys and girls everywhere, prior to making a final decision on Christmas' fate, Claus checked with his safety elf, who recommended implementing the five-step RM procedure. This procedure required Claus to gather input from all personnel - from the tiniest elf worker to Mrs. Claus - and then discuss that input with all hands.

The first step was to identify the hazards. "Many risks had already been identified and had been included in our SOP since the first Christmas," Claus said with a nostalgic smile, "There are always the slick rooftops, the breakneck timetable, and the risk of fire when I'm going down a chimney. But, due to the severe weather, new hazards were identified which required us to put a temporary hold on operations while we moved to the next step."

That second step was to assess the hazards, something Claus did with help from his reindeer flight team. "Visibility was practically zero," said Donner, the port section flight leader, "and that was one of the critical factors we identified during the assessment. I mean, our team is good, but we're not infallible. If we can't see, we can't fly."

Once the hazards were identified and assessed, Claus tackled step three: making the risk decision. "If we were grounded, that would mean canceling Christmas and breaking all those little hearts," Mrs. Claus pointed out. "Nobody else in the North Pole chain of command could make a decision like that. That responsibility rests solely with the big guy."

Nonetheless, Claus called a meeting to discuss the decision...a move that proved provident. "One of our junior elves came up with the idea that saved Christmas," Claus said. "It just proves the value of getting advice from all quarters." The elf, a stable attendant named Lotsa Hay, pointed out to the assembly that a young reindeer in training had an olfactory anomaly - a Very Shiny Nose (VSN) - that might be bright enough to penetrate the whiteout, making it possible to go ahead with flight operations.

A subsequent practical test of the VSN proved that it shined - you could even say it glowed - with such intensity that visibility was markedly improved. "I was a little nervous getting called up to perform in front of the old man on short notice like that," said Rudolph Reindeer, owner/operator of the VSN, "but when he patted me on the back and said, 'won't you guide my sleigh tonight? Well, it's a moment I'll never forget."

With the decision made to accept the risks - which, though managed, still existed - and fly, Claus ordered step four, implementing the controls, by having Rudolph and his VSN hitched to the front of the team. Claus then determined to continue supervising, the fifth step of RM, throughout the flight in order to re-evaluate in case conditions changed.

"There was still a chance we might have to abort at any time," Claus said of step five. "As important as the Christmas gifts are, the safety of my elves and reindeer will always be my primary concern. After all, as long as they're healthy, there will always be a 'next Christmas.'"

Like so many Christmas stories, this one has a happy ending. Jolly Old Elf Enterprises updated their SOP to include changes in the weather and to set guidelines for maximum acceptable risk. The toys were all delivered ("if your readers didn't get one," Claus said with a wink, "it wasn't because of the weather.") and Rudolph went down in history. Since then, Claus has been traveling the lecture circuit singing the praises of risk management. In fact, I heard him exclaim as he drove through the storm, 'Merry Christmas to all, and to all, good RM."