

Smart Talk

Insights from
entrepreneurs

MICHAEL SHERLOCK ON CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

Smart Talk is a weekly column by successful entrepreneurs about their daily challenges. This week Michael Sherlock, ex-CEO of Brumby's Bakeries and co-author of growth strategy book *Jumpshift!* talks about building company culture at end-of-year functions.

● The end-of-year company event provides a business with the opportunity to celebrate the success/reflect on the year and consider the challenges ahead.

The festive season also provides the opportunity for leaders to undertake some team-building activities to reinforce their corporate culture and enable them to gain some insights on how everyone fits together.

Typically, businesses hold Christmas parties that are either enjoyable, memorable events, or hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

At Brumby's we used the Kris Kringle (Secret Santa) gift exchange for our party. The first year we ran this process we asked each team member to buy a Secret Santa present for one other (secretly nominated) team member of about \$15 in value.

The presents were handed out at the Christmas function and opened so each person was able to see whether their present was valued by the recipient. We observed that there were different levels of effort applied to the gift exchange and some people seemed disappointed as not everyone had put in enough effort.

It was also evident that this "usual" Secret Santa process was over too quickly and short on entertainment, so we decided to ramp it up.

We therefore devised a new recipe for the Kris Kringle system, which we called "predatory presents".

We asked each team member to spend \$15 on something they would like for themselves. All the wrapped presents were placed in a central area at the function centre. Everyone's name was placed in a hat and drawn out one at a time.

The first person drawn would usually pick out the biggest present and open it in front of everybody. All would focus on the present opener to gauge their reaction, either positive or negative. Each person would do the same in turn.

However, once they had opened the present and considered what is worth to them, they had the option if they did not like it, or had seen

something better, to exchange one of the presents already opened by another person. It was often difficult to figure out which was the most prized present.

The tension built as each person had their turn and the last person drawn from the hat would slowly walk around the room considering which present to compulsorily acquire (or which score to settle).

With more than 30 people in the room, this activity was the main focus for the night and as chief executive, I was able to observe lots of by-play and character traits in evidence. I also observed that late at night people would sometimes swap their presents most amicably.

One of my former senior managers, Michelle Sprenger, shares her thoughts on the subject.

"Our traditional Christmas gathering was the time we got to celebrate the year's success as a team, the highlight of the evening being the secret Santa game," she says.

"A lot of thought was put into the \$15 unisex gift, which might become the hottest, most sought-after item of the night.

"All you needed was the luck of being one of the last names out of the hat and any item was yours, pink cowboy hat, garden hose, cow ice cream scoops or a bottle of rum.

"It took a lot of skill to hide a keeper or haggle to get rid of the booby item you had chosen. The fun and laughter could only be experienced by those who truly enjoyed working hard together as a team and achieving results.

"Our Christmas party would not have been the same without the build-up of the Secret Santa game."

The lessons from my experience are to create great fun activities which are highly engaging and memorable for all the right reasons.

Moreover, these cool activities become an integral part of the company culture by reinforcing the positive aspects of working hard together as a team, enjoying each other's company and developing loyalty. These shared experiences lead to the development of the business as a place where everybody wants to be, resulting in preferred employer status. **BRW**



Cool activities become part of the culture by reinforcing working together as a team

Next week: Online electronics retailer Ruslan Kogan

