

Toxic Santa

by Pawel Jasinski

A tragicomedy for 7+ players about toxic role models in the entertainment industry.

toxic: extremely harsh, malicious, or harmful - [Merriam-Webster online](#)

The aim of this game is to promote empathy towards victims of toxic workplace behavior, empower victims by allowing them to shape the narrative and overcome their oppressor, explore ways of dealing with toxic behavior and encourage whistleblowers to take action.

About safety

This game includes topics of workplace harassment and discrimination. Play at your own discretion. Before the game starts, decide how to handle physical and psychological safety, including safe-words and accepted level of physical contact. I recommend using the safety rules which are known to all participants and acceptable in your gaming culture.

Setting: Santa's Workshop

In this game, one person plays the perfectionist, despotic Santa Claus, while others play the roles of his helpers: privileged Elves or shunned Reindeers. Helpers spend the whole year making toys, packing gifts and preparing Santa for his journey around the world. Helpers universally love making toys that are popular and in high demand - customizable dolls, action figures, video games, connectible building blocks. They also hate working on practical and boring presents such as socks. But the worst kind of job is at the coal mine, where Santa gets his coal lumps for the naughty kids. Prolonged exposure to coal dust gives Reindeers a disease called rednose - painful and humiliating, albeit not deadly.

Game prep

You'll need: a pen and paper for each of the players, a tag to mark half of the players as Reindeers (e.g. a ribbon, a pin badge, reindeer horns, etc.), an identifier and symbol of power for Santa (I recommend a red Christmas hat), two balls of yarn or string.

Get volunteers to play First Elf and First Reindeer. They take turns (starting from the Elf) to pick a player for their group, one at a time. If you consider yourself privileged, I recommend volunteering for a Reindeer role to experience a point of view you might not be familiar with. The last player without a group becomes Santa Claus.

While Santa reads through the whole script of the game, helpers should gather in their respective groups and do the following:

1. Collectively invent a nickname for each member of the group. Explain how this nickname reflects their character.
2. Take a ball of yarn. Hold the string and pass the ball to another player (unraveling the yarn), call them by their nickname and invent a relationship with them. That player should do the same, passing the ball to someone who isn't holding a piece of yarn yet. Finish when everyone is holding a piece of yarn.
3. Invent a gesture or saying your group uses when you're sad. Invent another one which you use when you're happy.
4. Discuss:
 - What makes you different than the other group of helpers?
 - Why it's better to be in your group than theirs?
 - What do you think of the children who receive your gifts?
 - Why do you work for Santa Claus?

How to play Santa

Santa believes that the happiness of children is the topmost priority of his team. He often tells his helpers "We don't bring them toys, we bring them joy!". He is a perfectionist dedicated to that one goal. He generally treats his helpers with what he calls "tough love", because he thinks it's an effective way to manage such a demanding, all-year endeavor.

Santa considers Reindeers frail, capricious creatures. He won't tolerate that sort of behavior in the workshop, of course - **his** Reindeers have to be well-behaved. Otherwise, he treats them in a condescending manner. He needs them mostly to look good pulling his sleigh, with shiny fur and all, while the Elves do what Santa considers "real work". Reindeers need to work really hard to impress him.

Santa treats Elves as his buddies, with high-fives and all, but also reaffirms his position as their leader, ruling them with a firm grasp. He thinks of himself as their role model and expects them to be just like him, dedicated to the bone. They need to be hard-working and tough. Santa hates when elves become soft, because he thinks it hinders their work.

Scenes

Prologue - "Dear Santa!"

Helpers have an opportunity to personalize their relationship with Santa. Santa starts in the spotlight, as the hero of all children.

Every helper writes a short letter from a child of their choice to Santa Claus. The child is the sender, but the letter should reflect the relationship between Santa and the helper. When the letters are finished, Santa calls out helpers (in any order he chooses) to read the letters out loud. He can ask helpers what do they think about the letters. It's obvious that the kids love Santa - it's a glorious moment for everyone, but maybe more for some than the others.

Scene 1 - All I want for Christmas

Santa clearly treats Elves and Reindeers differently.

Santa is brainstorming with his helpers to figure out the gifts kids want to get. He stresses how children satisfaction is the top priority for everyone. That said, some of the helpers are held to a higher standard than others, when it comes to ideas.

Scene 2 - Santa Claus is coming to town

Santa has a thirst for power and it's up to the helpers to quench it.

Santa decides it's time to expand into a new area, where Christmas isn't very popular. Maybe North Korea, maybe Saudi Arabia - you figure it out. Helpers have the choice to either convince Santa it's a bad move, or bandwagon and propose crazy ideas how to make that reckless vision come true.

Scene 3 - Who's been naughty or nice?

An authority figure can be perceived as having a moral high ground, while being immoral at the same time.

Each year, Santa prepares a naughty list of all the children who misbehaved. But which "crimes" deserve to be punished with a lump of coal? All helpers should write down crimes worthy of punishment and pass them to Santa. But it's no surprise Santa is harsh when it comes to some misdeeds and lenient when it comes to others. Helpers try to influence his decision, but whom will he listen to?

Scene 4 - Santa's little helper

Santa divides and conquers. It's an ancient strategy to pitch your enemies against themselves.

Winter is here, and Santa has to make appearances in shopping malls all around the world. He needs someone who will manage the workshop in his absence. That's why he starts a competition. Helpers

are divided into 2 or more mixed groups: they have to invent the best new toy or Christmas decoration. The leader of one of the groups will get the title of Santa's Little Helper. Yeah, the helpers have to pick the leader of the group at some point. While the groups are busy working, Santa invites some of the helpers for some one-on-one chit-chat. It's a perfect opportunity to spread vile gossip about the helpers.... for both helpers and Santa alike.

Scene 5 - Down the chimney

Punishment and harassment are casual methods of managing helpers. Cruel punishment births desperate measures to avoid it.

The coal quotas from the mine are shockingly low, and this year's naughty list is longer than ever. This is the perfect excuse to send some of the helpers to the coal mine. Preferably those who were troublesome for Santa. How far will the helpers go to make sure they won't be the ones sent to the mine? Santa can send any number of helpers to the mine, but between $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{3}$ is optimal.

Scene 6 - Dashing through the snow

Reindeers are judged mostly by their superficial features, like looks.

All presents are packed, it's almost time to depart! Santa is preparing his sleigh and everything must look perfect - including the Reindeers. If you have rednose, this is the best moment to hide it. While Reindeers are in a very stressful situation, the Elves have little to do now, so they're hanging around, commenting how the Reindeers look and giving unsolicited advice.

Scene 7 - Grandma got run over by a reindeer

To enforce total control over his enterprise, Santa creates a sense of perceived threat.

Kids rejoice, but not everything went perfectly. Some presents got mixed up, there were errors in the naughty list. Some kids even said that Santa isn't real! So Santa decided to do an audit. Oh, I said audit? I meant witch hunt. Santa tries to convince helpers that there are traitors among them who wanted to sabotage Christmas and put all their hard work to waste. Furthermore, he wants those traitors to turn up by the end of the meeting...

Scene 8 - Jingle all the way

While some may relax, others have to keep their guard up.

Santa throws a party like you've never seen! It's a reward for the whole year of hard work. The peer pressure to have fun and let it all go is immense. And yet, Reindeers are held to higher standards than Elves when it comes to being "decent". And oh, Santa loves to indulge on his sherry.

Happy New Year!

The vicious cycle continues without proper action.

You thought it's all over? Not at all. The cycle continues: start from scene 1 all over again.

You better not cry

Taking a stand against an authority figure is a risky endeavor - and the only way to bring change.

There's only one way to break the cycle: confront Santa when he's powerless, without his Santa Cards. But how to tell how many cards (power) does he have left? You have to take the risk. More than half of the helpers have to vocally support the rebellion against Santa to succeed. If an attempted rebellion fails, Santa gets 2 cards back (from the ones discarded). No one said life's fair. If the rebellion succeeds, it's up to the helpers to decide the fate of Santa and the workshop.

Santa Cards

Santa starts with a set of cards. When played, they force players to take specific action(s). This simulates the immense power Santa has over his helpers. Whenever Santa plays one of his cards, he has to pass that card to an Elf of his choice. That Elf can use the card at any moment, starting from the next scene onward. When the Elf uses the card, discard it.

One set contains 10 cards. You should have more cards than players: if you have less, just print out more sets and shuffle them together. You can find printable cards at the end of the document.

List of cards

<p>Honorary Elf</p> <p>Choose a Reindeer. From this moment onward, the helper you picked becomes an Elf. Remove their Reindeer tag. This helper cannot disagree with you till the end of the Scene.</p>	<p>Demotion</p> <p>Choose an Elf. From this moment onward, they become a Reindeer. Give them a Reindeer tag. The helper should act like they really are a reindeer until the end of the scene.</p>
<p>I did it!</p> <p>Choose a helper and claim that it was you who are responsible for their success (e.g a good idea). No one can contradict your claim and they have to act like this was your achievement all along, until the end of the scene.</p>	<p>I don't bite</p> <p>Choose a helper. They need to stay close to you - as close as the safety rules allow it. This might include holding your hand or sitting on your lap. The helper can voice their own opinion, but has to be nice to you till the end of the scene.</p>
<p>You should smile more often</p> <p>Choose a helper. They have to smile and be cheerful till the end of the scene.</p>	<p>You've been naughty</p> <p>Choose a helper. That helper has to publicly admit to a serious wrongdoing that affects the whole team, real or otherwise. They cannot retract their statement till the end of the scene.</p>
<p>Know your place</p> <p>Choose a Reindeer. They cannot interrupt any Elf speaking till the end of the scene.</p>	<p>You trust me, don't you?</p> <p>Choose a helper. They have to answer one question truthfully.</p>
<p>Elfsplaining</p> <p>Interrupt a helper who's currently speaking. Explain to everyone what that helper actually meant to say. The helper cannot contradict your statement until the end of the scene.</p>	<p>Scapegoat</p> <p>Choose an Elf and pin all blame on them - they are officially responsible for every evil deed you did. At least that's what everyone has to believe until the end of the scene.</p>

Debriefing

Sit down in a circle, with Reindeers, Elves and Santa mixed together. Take a piece of paper and write a letter to the toxic Santa about how you (the player) feel. Let it all out. After everyone's finished, take turns to introduce yourselves with your real names and tell others about the letter you wrote and/or about how the game made you feel. Don't interrupt each other. You can keep your letters as mementos or destroy them to symbolically liberate yourself from the troubles you endured. When you're done, discuss what actions can be taken to avoid and/or combat situations like that in your real life. Brainstorm to create a list of commandments for a safer, less toxic work environment.

Printable Santa Cards

The cards are in 63 x 88 mm (2.5 x 3.5 inch) format. You can print them on card stock and put them in card sleeves (often used in collectible card games) for extra durability.

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