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# Christmas Tales of Negotiation



# The Night a Military Hotline Rang and a Child Asked for Santa

On Christmas Eve each year, our house becomes a mini air-traffic-control centre. The boys sit in front of the Santa Tracker calling out updates. Last year one shouted, “He’s over Tristan da Cunha!” – a tiny volcanic island with fewer residents than their school year, yet suddenly part of our festive journey.

The whole thing exists because of a mistake. In 1955, during a tense Cold War monitoring shift, a phone rang on Colonel Harry Shoup’s desk at CONAD. He expected a military report. Instead, a child asked for Santa. A Sears advert had printed the wrong number by accident. Shoup could have ended the call, dismissed it – but he didn’t. He stayed with it, then took the next call, and soon his entire team joined in. Someone even pinned a sleigh image onto the radar board.

When NORAD replaced CONAD in 1958, they kept the tradition. Today, hundreds of volunteers and millions of followers track Santa in real time – a global piece of festive magic. None of this was designed. It began with one moment where someone chose not to automatically say no and was curious enough to explore it. A wrong number turned into long-term value: soft power and visibility that no marketing department could ever engineer. And now it’s part of our family’s Christmas too, all because someone in a bunker once picked up the phone and didn’t shut it down.

**Ed Clapham, Scotwork International**



# The Dresdner Christstollen

There are very special Christmas traditions here in Germany. We don't have Santa Claus, we have the Christkind, the "Christian Child". All across Germany, you'll find Christkindl Markets where you can buy Christmas decorations and (more importantly) enjoy hot mulled wine with friends!

German families also celebrate Christmas on the evening of the 24th, dressed in their best clothes, gathered around the tree with wide-eyed children staring at the presents.

Another specialty is the Dresdner Christstollen, a raisin-filled sweet loaf covered in powdered sugar. My friend visits Dresden every year and brings back Stollen for friends. One year, he ordered six, paid extra for the fancy cardboard boxes, and watched the lady pack them all into one plastic bag so full that the handles couldn't be used. When he politely asked for a second bag, she replied, "Sorry sir, we're only allowed to give one bag per purchase!"

He paused, then smiled: "No problem! I'll buy two times three." The shop burst into laughter... and he received two bags.

That, as we say at Scotwork, is brilliant repackaging.  
Merry Christmas from Germany!

**Beate Shaw, Scotwork Germany**



# The 12-Dish Dilemma

In Poland, Christmas Eve dinner isn't just a meal, it's an endurance event. Tradition says you must serve 12 different dishes, symbolising the months of the year. In our family, that includes pierogi, carp, borscht, herring in five styles and poppy-seed everything. The rule is: everyone must try a little of each. No exceptions. The problem is... not everyone wants to.

Last year, my cousin flat-out refused to touch the carp. “I’ll eat anything else, but not that fish.” Normally this would set off a small culinary war, but I decided to negotiate instead of lecture. I made a simple proposal: “If you take one bite of carp, I’ll take one spoonful of your mushroom soup.” He accepted. One grimacing fork-full later and the 12-dish harmony was restored.

It reminded me that even during family traditions, persuasion rarely beats proposal. When disagreement shows up at the table, a small trade can save the evening AND the tradition.

## Waldemar Nogaś, Scotwork Poland



# The Pavlova Peace Talks

In most Kiwi households, Christmas dinner is a relaxed, sunny affair – ham sizzling, pōhutukawa blooming, and everyone saving room for the star of the table: pavlova! In our family, though, the real tradition is the annual argument about which kind of pavlova. My mother-in-law swears by the classic, topped with kiwifruit (“it’s the only proper way!”), while my sister-in-law campaigns for the berry-loaded version (“strawberries make it festive!”). Every year, the “Pavlova Peace Talks” erupt sometime around Christmas Eve.

This year, inspired by the negotiation skills we teach at Scotwork, I tried a new approach. Instead of debating fruit, I made a proposal: “Let’s have two mini pavs, one with kiwifruit, one with berries, and I’ll take charge of baking them both.” The tension evaporated faster than sugar in the oven. Suddenly, it wasn’t an argument; it was a deal.

It struck me how even a simple dessert squabble can mirror business negotiations. When you shift from arguing and persuading to proposing, collaboration rises – just like a well-whipped meringue. And in the spirit of a true Kiwi Christmas, (you read that right Aussies)... everyone ends up with something sweet.

**Georgina Simpson, Scotwork New Zealand**



# How Dad Bowled His Way into Boxing Day

Beach holidays, sunburn, left over gammon and turkey sandwiches and the Boxing Day Cricket Test epitomises a South Africa Christmas.

On one year in particular my Dad announced to my Mum that by some stroke of luck he had managed to get “free” tickets to watch the Proteas play at Kingsmead Cricket Ground in Durban.

The problem was that after having at least 30 people over for Christmas lunch (a lunch that inevitably went on until the wee hours), my Mum declared the 26<sup>th</sup> December as her day of rest. No amount of persuasion or problem-solving was getting my Dad anywhere near Kingsmead and he realised that in order for him to get to Durban to watch the cricket he would have to give my Mum something in return. They finally settled on a spa day for my Mum on the 27<sup>th</sup> December at a local hotel.

You see, my Dad quickly realised that sweet-talking my Mum wasn't melting the frost, so he switched tactics. When persuasion failed, he did what any wise man would do... he started negotiating.

**Leigh-Ann Moulder, Scotwork South Africa**



# Traditions Are Not Laws

In Italy, traditions might as well be written into the Constitution:

“We’ve always done it this way.”

“Christmas lunch is at your aunt’s house.”

“On the 25th, we eat these dishes – no discussion.”

But families change. New partners arrive. Children grow up. Distances increase. Energy decreases. And at some point, certain traditions become more of a weight than a memory.

So we started adjusting them: One year at one house, the next at another, new recipes alongside the classic ones, fewer rules, more spontaneity...

We didn’t ruin Christmas. We updated it to reflect our reality. Just like in any good strategy: if the approach no longer works, you change it. You don’t worship it.

**Claudio Cubito, Scotwork Italy**





# The Three Kings Stand-Off

In Spain, Santa is basically a subcontractor. He might pop in briefly, but the REAL event happens on January 6th, when the Three Kings deliver the presents. As kids, we always left out water and cookies for the Kings' camels, hoping the generosity would be rewarded.

One year when I was about eight, I wrote my wish list (long enough to qualify as a legal document) and handed it to my parents to "forward to the Kings." My father raised an eyebrow and said, "I'm not sure Melchor's camel can carry all this."

Instead of throwing a tantrum (my usual tactic), I made a proposal: "Okay... if I choose only one big present, can I also ask for two smaller things?" My father smiled and said, "That's a reasonable deal. I'll make sure the Kings hear it." And indeed, they delivered.

I later realised the lesson: even when asking magical wise men for gifts... knowing how to prioritise and find a workable way forward goes a long way in negotiations.

**Jorge Borrego, Scotwork Spain**





# The Silent Night... Out!

In Brazil, it is common for young people to go out after the Christmas dinner. As a teenager, I was at a phase where I thought it was practically a constitutional right for me to go out to the party. Funnily enough, my parents didn't seem to be aware of this right of mine...

The first year I attempted to get permission, my negotiation strategy was a disaster. I knew it wouldn't be an easy win, so I kept postponing until the worst possible moment: right after the dinner was over. I got a "no" so big it practically echoed. No argument, no leverage, no chance (and as a teenager, no power!). I went to bed frustrated, imagining the party going ahead without me.

The following year, I decided to execute a different strategy. I started preparing days in advance. My tools were basic, but my observation skills were sharp. I watched my parents' signals and, when a window opened, I made my move.

To sweeten the deal, I offered to help with dinner preparations. Incredibly, it worked. We reached an agreement, I left the house with an official approval and enjoyed a memorable night with my friends. To this day, I remember that small triumph as a successful strategic move.

**Luiza Valle, Scotwork Brazil**



# The Wrap Battle Resolution

In our family, the Christmas season officially begins when the first roll of gift-wrap appears on the dining table. Every year, the same debate unfolds: I prefer simple kraft paper with a ribbon. Neat, quick, and impossible to mess up. My sibling, on the other hand, insists on elaborate wrapping with layers, tags, glitter and bows that look like they came straight from Santa's private workshop.

One evening, after 20 minutes of debating "simple vs. spectacular," I caught myself doing what we often warn managers about: trying too hard to persuade. So I switched gears and made a proposal: "If we stick to simple wrapping for the family exchange, I'll help with the decorative ones for the kids' gifts, and I'll handle cleanup after." The atmosphere changed instantly. Instead of arguing, we found ourselves laughing at old Christmas mishaps while working out what actually mattered.

It reminded me, yet again, that whether it's gift-wrapping drama at home or year-end negotiations at work, the same truth applies: persuasion has limits. Proposals move us forward. And sometimes, the best holiday harmony starts with a well-timed give-and-take.

**Grace Soo, Scotwork South East Asia**



# Christmas Sanctions and Incentives

In Hungary, the Christmas tree and presents are delivered by Baby Jesus, not by Santa Claus, and arrive on Christmas Eve, rather than on Christmas Day. This tradition works as a kind of annual appraisal for children: if they behaved well, they receive gifts... and if they behaved badly, they still receive gifts! Parents and children both seem to have a short-term memory of what happened earlier in the year. No matter how often parents say, "If you behave badly, Baby Jesus won't bring you presents," children eventually stop caring, because experience has taught them that presents will come anyway. Baby Jesus simply has no real authority to withhold rewards.

That is where Santa Claus comes in. Santa acts as a one-person "good cop, bad cop," someone who can both reward and punish. Unlike Baby Jesus, good behaviour alone is not enough for Santa to bring gifts, children must also meet an additional requirement: they need to put out their clean boots for him. In the morning, they may find either sweets (if they were good) or a bundle of birch twigs (if they were bad) placed in their boots.

In reality, parents act like negotiators juggling incentives and sanctions: the carrot and the stick. But, wanting to play it safe, most of them never choose only one or the other. Instead, they include both: sweets as a reward for good behaviour, and birch twigs as a symbolic threat for past or future misbehaviour. In this way, Santa represents the balance of power and authority, while Baby Jesus can remain the figure of unconditional kindness.

**Zoltán Papp, Scotwork Hungary**



# The Holiday Shift Swap

In Bulgaria, Christmas is a holiday when many people travel back to their hometowns and spend time with their families. For several years now, if December 25th falls on a weekend, the government designates the following Monday as a non-working day. The same rule applies to

Easter and all other national holidays: Monday is always declared as non-working. As a result, between Christmas and New Year's Eve there are only three working days. Naturally, everyone tries to "bridge" them into one glorious stretch of uninterrupted holiday... and suddenly, the office resembles a festive Hunger Games where the real question is: *who will stay on duty and who escapes to their hometown?*

Instead of waiting for conflict or relying on office telepathy, make the first festive proposal:

*If you agree that I can take a long break from Easter through May 1st, then I'll happily cover December 28–29–30. Deal?*

Suddenly, it's not a battle, it's a fair trade. And with a little forward planning, everyone gets their holiday magic... without the drama.

**Tchavdar Vaklev, Scotwork Bulgaria**



# The Cost of Not Negotiating

Christmas time can be magical, especially as a parent watching your offspring growing up and see their changing relationship with a special family occasion.

The season begins early – almost as early as the first TV adverts. In our family, it traditionally begins with the requests for presents. Once we've reduced this down to a more sensible number, a letter is written to Father Christmas, with some typical over-exaggeration of how well-behaved they have been for the last 10-11 months.

For many families this is also the time to begin our negotiations – starting early with “if you are extra good, then you may be lucky”, progressing through “if you keep your room tidy, then we can see what arrives from Santa” to “just be nice, smile and spend some time with us...” in the teenage years!

Not only is this a great way of introducing conditionality into the conversation (“if you..., then Santa....”) but there is a clear, but mostly unspoken consequence of not entering into this agreement – there will be nothing coming if you do not deliver your end of the bargain. Sometimes we face counterparts who do not deliver on their agreed actions – is that because we have let them “get away” with this in the past, are they testing our resolve to not “damage the relationship”. Having a clear cost of not delivering helps us to realise the benefits of our agreements and set everyone up for success for the following year's negotiations.

**Paul Duckworth, Scotwork International**



# A Tropical Christmas Tale

If Christmas is WHITE for most of the countries in the world, in Mauritius and the islands in general, Christmas is HOT with the summer season at its peak. It's the perfect period for beach BBQs with family and friends. It's also the period where tropical fruits are ripe and ready! Hence, lots of small temporary fruit stalls crop up along the roads selling lychees, pineapples, mangos and watermelons among others.

Last weekend, while driving to the beach for a BBQ with some friends, I stopped by one of these fruit stalls to buy some to share. I enquired about the prices, which were quite premium as we were still early in the harvest season.

I faced a small dilemma: on the one hand, I don't like to haggle on prices as I believe that small local businesses should be protected and encouraged, but on the other hand, I did not want to get the feeling of being abused with such high prices.

My reflex was to add another variable into the negotiation and tried to give him what he wanted – on my conditions. I told the vendor that I was ready to pay his price but that I would need him to clean, peel and prepare the fruits to be consumed at the beach with friends.

Deal was sealed and we were both happy.

**Vincent Kong, Scotwork Mauritius**



# The Christmas Tree Standoff

In our house, the Christmas season doesn't begin with carols or mince pies... it begins with the annual Christmas tree debate. Some members of my family insist on a real tree ("it's not Christmas without the smell of pine!"), while I prefer the practical, reusable artificial one ("no needles, no hassle, no vacuuming"). Every December, the discussion plays out like a seasonal sequel:

The Great Tree Negotiation: Part IV

This year, I decided to practise what we preach at Scotwork. Instead of trying to persuade them (again), I made a proposal: "If we get a real tree this year, we'll go with the artificial one next year, and I'll handle setup both times." The tone shifted instantly. The persuasion battle turned into a proper negotiation. We found common ground, and peace (along with tinsel) returned to the living room.

It's funny how often the smallest domestic disagreements mirror the biggest business ones. Whether you're debating fir versus faux or finalising a year-end deal, the principle's the same: when persuasion fails, stop arguing and start proposing. Even at Christmas, collaboration is the best gift of all.

**Daniel Freeman, Scotwork Ireland**





# The Gift of Saying No

A few years ago, I ran a Scotwork course at a company just before Christmas. One participant, let's call her Noelle, admitted she never negotiated, she just helped colleagues whenever they asked. A year later, she called me full of festive cheer. "That course changed my life!" she said. Before the course, she was everyone's office elf; arriving early, staying late, and saying "yes" to every request. After learning to ask for something in return, she discovered the magic of balance, and suddenly, her workload (and stress) melted away like snow.

This Christmas, remember: giving is wonderful, but conceding without boundaries isn't negotiation, it's gifting. And sometimes the best gift you can give yourself is the confidence to say no.

**Xavier Debril, Scotwork France**



# Santa Who?

My parents were born in Jamaica in 1935 and came to the UK in the early 60s as part of the 'Windrush Generation'. They left behind two young children who were looked after by their grandparents, and they joined us in the UK shortly after I was born.

Growing up, Christmas was a bit of a grey area. As many parents will know, for the first couple of years children care more about the wrapping paper than the presents. But eventually, Santa begins to matter. The problem was that in Jamaica, where houses have no chimneys, presents were simply placed under the tree by parents. Meanwhile, in Britain, Santa somehow squeezed down chimneys that half the country doesn't actually have. Yet to this day, both of my adult children still have stockings with their names embroidered on them, left for Santa to fill. Christmas Eve rituals are adhered to, complete with mince pie, whisky, and a half-eaten carrot... the main consolation for me is I get to polish off the whisky!

Despite more than 20 years of this tradition, every year I still manage to accidentally break some unwritten Santa-protocol. I'm still learning. And that's the negotiation lesson: even when you think you understand the other side's expectations, never assume, always check, clarify, and adapt. Christmas, like negotiation, works best when we're willing to flex, learn, and meet people where they are.

**Horace McDonald, Scotwork UK**

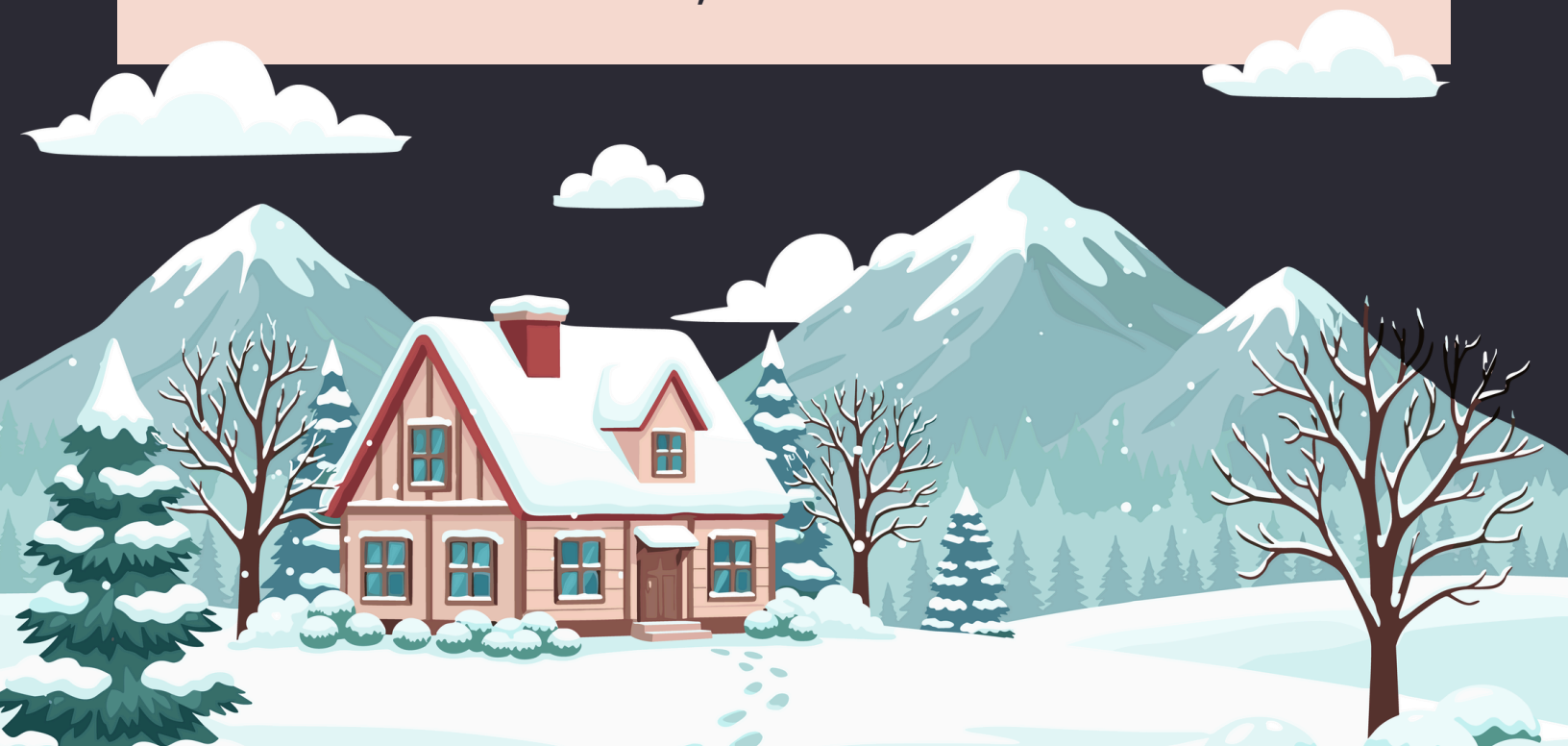


# The Spirit of Agreement

It's been an interesting year – the first of the, controversial to some, second Trump presidency, conflict and strife on the streets of England in particular and history-making changes in our Royal Family. Of course, without conflict there would be no negotiation and without negotiation there would be no Scotwork. So, here at Scotwork, we value conflict as it nurtures our existence.

At Christmas, I will spend a few days with my family in a large house on a big estate that we are “babysitting” for its owners who will be away skiing for the holidays; my granddaughter will ride her horse in the grounds and we will all enjoy the winter scenery on our walks. There will have been prior negotiations, of course – everyone agrees I supply and cook a beautiful joint of Wagyu beef (I hate turkey) to ensure that it is medium rare just as I like it and my wife and I will be able to occupy a smaller house in the grounds so that we are not woken too early! So, with the (only slightly) contentious issues resolved we look to have harmony and consensus together. Let's not forget that the purpose of negotiation is to resolve conflict and build agreement so that we all live on in peace!

**David Bannister, Scotwork International**



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# Merry Christmas

from the Scotwork Team!

