

Scoutmaster Conference Training

The Role of the Scoutmaster Conference

According to the Boy Scouts of America charter, the purpose of Boy Scouting is to develop in a young man the ability to do things for himself and for others, to train him in outdoor skills, and to teach him patriotism, courage, self-reliance, and kindred virtues. We use the methods of Scouting—including advancement, the outdoors, and adult association—to accomplish these goals. The Scoutmaster conference allows the Scoutmaster to review

- The Scout's growth in his understanding of Scouting's ideals
- How the Scout applies these ideals in his daily life and in the troop
- The requirements of the Scout's next rank so that he can be properly encouraged

Why does the Scoutmaster engage in this one-on-one review? The relationship between a Scout and his Scoutmaster is important for the troop's health and for the Scout's success. The Scoutmaster must watch the troop's dynamics to see who is showing leadership, who is holding back, who is shy, who is working with the younger boys, who is skilled in outdoor activities, etc. Further, the Scoutmaster must watch the individual Scout to determine whether he is advancing, whether he is having fun, and whether he seems eager or uneasy.

These functions are not easily performed if a Scoutmaster delegates a Scoutmaster conference to assistants. In a boy-lead troop, the Scoutmaster does not assert his authority, but guides and counsels every Scout so that the troop can function well and serve the purposes of Boy Scouting. The Scoutmaster conference is one of the primary ways the Scoutmaster does this.

In large troops, delegating this function may be necessary, especially when large numbers of Webelos Scouts are joining the troop. In these cases, an experienced assistant Scoutmaster can fill in to conduct the Scoutmaster conference. Remember however, that this first Scoutmaster conference is vital to the new Scout's development.

Even in a large troop, a Scoutmaster should not delegate a conference with any candidate for Star, Life, and Eagle.

When and Where to Hold a Scoutmaster Conference

The Scoutmaster conference should be held in a quiet place that is conducive to give and take between the Scout and Scoutmaster. There should be no possibility for embarrassing the Scout, but remember that the BSA Youth Protection policy requires that one-on-one sessions between a youth and an adult be visible and accessible by other people.

Some possible meeting places include a quiet corner of the Scout meeting hall during a troop meeting or, in a larger troop, a hallway outside the troop meeting area. At a campout, on a hike, or at summer camp are good times for a Scoutmaster conference as long as the Scout and Scoutmaster remain visible to the other Scouts. An ideal place for a Scout's first Scoutmaster conference might be his home, where he would be more comfortable and better able to express his hopes and desires.

Because the conference is designed to provide direct give and take between Scout and Scoutmaster, for both the Scout's good and the good of the troop, a Scoutmaster conference can take place any time, especially when a Scoutmaster senses that a Scout needs a conference or if the Scout asks for one. Of course, each rank advancement requires that a boy have a formal Scoutmaster conference.

Types of Scoutmaster Conferences

A Scoutmaster conference is simply a chance to talk to a Scout about how he is doing, how he feels about the troop and his role in it, how he is advancing, and how he is striving to live up to Scouting's ideals. Consequently, a Scoutmaster conference can take place anytime and for any reason.

Some reasons to have a Scoutmaster conference may include:

- A Scout's lack of advancement
- A perceived trouble between the Scout and others in the troop
- A certain event at the last campout or troop meeting

The required Scoutmaster conferences for advancement should not be perceived any differently than any other conference. Making a Scoutmaster conference an advancement requirement affords every Scout at least one opportunity at each rank level to meet with his Scoutmaster in this personal way. Each rank involves progressively greater mastery of Scouting skills and advancing leadership growth. Therefore, the advancement Scoutmaster conferences should reflect the Scout's increasing maturity.

Another issue to be considered at the Scoutmaster conference is the concept of Scout spirit, which is part of the advancement process.

How to Hold a Scoutmaster Conference

The Scoutmaster conference is neither an interrogation nor a retesting of a Scout's competence. It should be an informal conversation between Scout and Scoutmaster either toward a certain goal or as a requirement for advancement. In either case, open-ended questions are good to prompt the Scout's comments. Encourage him to come to conclusions on his own; don't simply tell him what you think.

The nonadvancement conference may be related to a problem, either with the Scout or with the troop. In these cases, you will be counseling the Scout, helping him form his own conclusions about the problem at hand. In a good conference you may listen more than you speak.

Listen carefully to what the Scout is saying, then listen to what he is not saying. Skilled counselors often respond to comments by others by simply smiling or giving encouraging sounds like "uh-huh" or "OK." Ask the Scout to repeat what he is saying a different way to get an entirely different take on the situation. Confirm your understanding of what the Scout is saying by summarizing, but try not to put the boy in a corner.

If there is a solution to the problem, try to allow the Scout to come up with it. Perhaps he cannot formulate a solution, but could choose from among several you can think of. In all events, try to have the Scout make the conclusions. If a solution cannot be found, agree to meet in the future to see if circumstances have changed or whether the Scout has found an answer to his problem.

In the advancement conference, you will assess the Scout's readiness for his board of review and his progress since his last Scoutmaster conference. This should not be a time of retesting his competence in Scouting skills; someone has already attested to that. The Scout must have completed all of his requirements for rank before the conference can take place.

It is appropriate to review the Scout's achievements and to discuss them without retesting. Of course, this may be the time for you to check his advancement record for the appropriate signatures.

You can and should ask a Scout how he felt about certain accomplishments and how he felt he handled himself on a service project. Ask a Scout about his leadership position and whether he believes he was successful. You can discuss any problems with an eye toward solving them.

A young man who is not ready to face a board of review (the last step in the advancement process) can be counseled if you sense a lack of Scout spirit or leadership. The Scoutmaster conference

should not be a time to shut the door on advancement but to work with the Scout to create goals that will allow him to succeed.

The board of review is the final step in the advancement. However, the members of the board of review are troop committee members who might not know the Scouts as well as the Scoutmaster. If a Scout's advancement is to be deferred, that should come at the Scoutmaster's conference.

While the board of review is not a rubber stamp, the Scoutmaster should not approve the Scout at the Scoutmaster's conference and then expect the board of review to defer the Scout.

The requirement for advancement is that the Scout participate in a Scoutmaster's conference, not that he "pass" the conference. Even after a negative Scoutmaster's conference, if the Scout desires a board of review, he should be granted his request.

When advancement may be deferred, it is important that there be no surprises. The Scout should not come to the Scoutmaster's conference or board of review thinking that everything is OK and then be surprised that his advancement is deferred. He should have had plenty of warning and guidance prior to the negative Scoutmaster's conference or board of review. "A Scout is friendly," "A Scout is courteous," and "A Scout is kind" should be the points of the Scout Law that guide the Scoutmaster when the advancement of a Scout must be deferred.

This is particularly true for Eagle boards of review. Rarely a Scout may complete the requirements for Eagle through the Scoutmaster's conference but then be deferred by the Eagle board of review because that board's members believe that he does not meet Eagle Scout standards. When this happens, it represents a failure in the advancement process by all concerned and a severe violation of the "no surprises" principle.

Always end a Scoutmaster conference with praise for the positive aspects of the Scout's character, his skill level, and/or his accomplishments.

The following discusses the general nature of specific advancement conferences. Checklists of questions could be (and have been) developed for each of the specific ranks, but the Scout's *Boy Scout Handbook* and your troop's advancement chart provide the skeleton for questions of that nature. The following are simply guidelines for the specific conferences.

The Joining or Scout Scoutmaster Conference

This first Scoutmaster conference allows the Scoutmaster and the Scout to size each other up, to get to know each other, and to encourage the openness that is so important between the Scout and Scoutmaster.

This is an opportunity for the Scoutmaster to explain a bit about the Scouting program, about the troop and its traditions, and about how Boy Scouting differs from Cub Scouting. A Scout probably will not know the Scoutmaster, nor the Scoutmaster the Scout, and this is a good chance for both to learn about each other.

In some ways, the joining conference is one of the most important meetings of a boy's Scouting career because it will set the tone of the relationship between the Scout and his Scoutmaster. It should be informal; it should be friendly; and from the standpoint of the Scout, it should be encouraging and supportive.

Discuss some possible questions you could ask the Scout as well as some key points to explain.

The Tenderfoot Through First Class Scoutmaster Conferences

The Tenderfoot through First Class Scoutmaster conferences are ways of getting to know the Scout better, to review his progress in achievements, and to discuss how he felt about the various steps he has taken on the Scouting trail, including his individual achievements. This should not be a time of retesting, but rather a time to reflect on the skills learned and how the Scout has absorbed the ideals of Scouting.

Questions here naturally will deal with a certain campout, for example, or the difficult time the Scout had with knots, but it also may deal with how he is getting along with certain other Scouts or how he exhibits Scouting ideals outside the troop.

Other aspects of the conference should never take a back seat. This is the time to ask the Scout how he feels about the troop's program, whether he feels he is learning anything, and whether he is having fun.

Discuss some possible questions you could ask the Scout as well as some key points to explain.

The Star and Life Scoutmaster Conferences

The Star and Life conferences will be a bit longer than previous ones. The Scout will have acquired many more skills and will evidence more maturity. Leadership will be one of the significant topics to be discussed. Each of these ranks involves service projects, and you should ask the Scout how he felt about the projects.

As a Scoutmaster, you may be evaluating how a Scout has done in his leadership positions, but this is not the time to tell a Scout that he was a poor leader. If that is the case, or was the case, it should have been the subject of a Scoutmaster conference long before the advancement conference. Leadership skills should be reviewed as they are exhibited, not held over to a Scoutmaster conference where the Scout is flunked for failing to meet expectations.

On the other hand, it may be that a Scout will conclude that he needs to work on certain aspects of leadership before he achieves the next rank, and you should be supportive of this concept.

As before, you will be evaluating his Scout spirit. Remember that at these ages the Scout will change fundamentally much quicker than you might imagine, and the Scoutmaster conference can be an opportunity for you to reevaluate the candidate.

Discuss some possible questions you could ask the Scout as well as some key points to explain.

The Eagle Scoutmaster Conference

If you have watched him from the date he joined the troop, you may know this Scout well by the time of his Eagle conference. He should be congratulated on all he has accomplished thus far.

This is an occasion to review the Scout's Eagle service project, but not an occasion to criticize it.

After all, you, as Scoutmaster, have already approved the project concept and both the troop committee and the head of the agency for whom the project was accomplished have determined that it was satisfactorily completed. Rather, you should review the Scout's project with him so that he will feel comfortable explaining it to his Eagle board of review.

You will be counseling a very accomplished young man, one who has an experience with the troop that is inherently different than yours. It is wise to understand what the Scout feels are the strengths and shortcomings of the troop.

You also can ask the Scout whether he believes he is prepared for his Eagle board of review. Of course, Scout spirit is a part of this discussion. The Eagle candidate's spirit should be such that he is an example to other Scouts.

Discuss some possible questions you could ask the Scout as well as some key points to explain.

The Eagle Palm Scoutmaster Conference

Like the Eagle Scoutmaster conference, the Eagle Palm conference is an opportunity for you to learn. Listen carefully to what the Scout says.

By now you will have a strong relationship with the Scout and will be able to discuss his goals and how they may have changed. You should encourage the Scout to remain visibly connected to the troop. You should not be discouraged if a high school student is less able to devote his spare time to Scouting alone. You may notice that this Scout's activity with the troop is less than you would desire, but you should be able to tell if a Scout is living up to the ideals of Scouting outside the troop as well as inside it. Again, always conclude these conferences with words of encouragement.

Eagle Palm conferences are opportunities for you to have a give-and-take discussion with the very best in Scouting. Enjoy it.
Discuss some possible questions you could ask the Scout as well as some key points to explain.

The Scoutmaster Conference and the Healthy Troop

The discussion so far should give you an appreciation for how the Scoutmaster conference can contribute to a healthy troop. This conference is the ideal place to encourage leadership, to check on arising problems, to head off future problems, and to make sure the Scout is on track to accomplish the goals and methods of Scouting.

There should never be a heavy-handed approach to a conference; this is no attempt at disciplining a wayward Scout. Rather, it should be thought of as a way to make it easier for a Scout to do the things that contribute to the troop's health. Perhaps a Scout can be encouraged to work with younger Scouts or to let other Scouts perform their roles in the troop without badgering.

The Scoutmaster Conference and the Healthy Scout

Most importantly, the Scoutmaster conference should be a way of encouraging the individual Scout. The Scoutmaster conference is the most personal method in Scouting to assess the needs and desires of a Scout, to encourage and support him, to learn of his fears and hopes, to help him to see himself in the greater context of Scouting, and to encourage his personal growth, both in skills and in living up to the ideals of Scouting.

The BSA is a values-based organization with a goal to develop in young people and adults a life of service to God and country, to others, and to self. We do this by holding up the Scout Law as a guide for personal conduct in all contexts. Our world can be a better place if we succeed in this process.