

The Purpose 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 these benchmarks:

- 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-led 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. 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 adults and Scouts. An ideal place for a Scout's first Scoutmaster conference might be at the boy's home, where he may 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, both for the Scout's good and for 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.

A conference unrelated to advancement may be due 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 draw the conclusions. If a solution cannot be found, agree to meet in the future to see if circumstances have changed or if 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.

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

The following outline discusses the general nature of specific advancement conferences. Checklists of sample questions have been developed for each of the specific ranks (they can be found in Appendix H), but the Scout's *Boy Scout Handbook* and your troop's advancement chart provide the skeleton for questions. Following are guidelines for the specific conferences.

The First Scoutmaster Conference: An Introduction

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 conference provides 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 will the Scoutmaster likely know 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.

Be sure to prepare some possible questions you could ask the Scout as well as some key points to explain.

The Scoutmaster Conferences for Tenderfoot Through First Class

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.

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

The Scoutmaster Conferences for Star and Life

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 more quickly than you might imagine, and the Scoutmaster conference can be an opportunity for you to reevaluate the candidate.

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

The Scoutmaster Conference for Eagle

If you have watched him from the date he joined the troop, you may know this Scout well by this time. 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 from yours. It is wise to understand what the Scout perceives as 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.

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

The Scoutmaster Conference for Eagle Palms

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 connected to the troop as much as he is able to be. You should not be discouraged if a high school student has less time to devote to Scouting alone. Though this Scout's activity level with the troop may have decreased, 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 them.

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

The Scoutmaster Conference and the Healthy Troop

This discussion so far should give you an appreciation for ways the Scoutmaster conference can contribute to a healthy troop. This conference is the ideal place to encourage leadership, to check on problems that may be developing, 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 meeting is not the time for 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 for assessing the needs and desires of a Scout; for encouraging and supporting him; for learning of his fears and hopes; for helping him see himself in the greater context of Scouting; and for encouraging 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 of developing in young people and adults a life of service to God and country, to others, and to self. Scouting continually strives to accomplish this goal 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.

Appendix H: Sample Scoutmaster Conference Questions

The Scoutmaster Conference for Joining and Scout

- What did you like about Cub Scouting?
- What do you think you will like about Boy Scouting?
- Do you have any brothers or sisters?
- What are your interests outside of Scouting?
- Why did you join our troop?
- Do you have any questions about Boy Scouting or the troop?
- What do the Scout Oath and the Scout Law mean to you?

You should explain:

- The advancement process, including who will be approving and recording his progress
- The purpose and timing of Scoutmaster conferences
- How the boy-led troop works and his advancing role in it
- The patrol method and the new-Scout patrol

Make sure you give the Scout handshake, and see that the Scout can demonstrate the sign and salute —and knows when it is appropriate to use them.

The Scoutmaster Conferences for Tenderfoot Through First Class

- Who is your patrol leader, and what do you think of him?
- What do you think of the problems you are facing?
- How have you progressed on first aid?
- What are your goals for the next few months, and how do those goals meet advancement requirements?
- What do you think could be done to improve the troop?

You can review what a Scout has learned in achievements so far, and see how he has absorbed the skills. Ask the candidate about the service hours he contributed, how he felt about his efforts, whether the effort was meaningful to him, and how the overall efforts impacted others.

You should explain:

- That a Scout does not always retain a skill simply by doing it for advancement; he must repeat it, and in some cases, teach it, to really have the skill
- The value of planning to achieve his goals
- How setting advancement goals involves looking ahead to see what must be accomplished and in what order
- How to use the merit badge program to explore interests and accomplish advancement

The Scoutmaster Conferences for Star and Life

- What merit badges did you enjoy, and why?
- What merit badges did you get the most out of? How and why?
- How did you feel about your position of responsibility?
- How did you feel about how you exercised that position?
- What did you accomplish in that position?

- Did you experience any frustrations?
- Who do you think is doing a good job in the troop?
- Have you decided what merit badges you will be earning next?
- Have you thought about achieving Eagle?
- Have you thought about a service project for Eagle?

You should explain:

- The progressive nature of providing service to others from Star to Eagle ranks
- The nature of required and non-required merit badges

The Scoutmaster Conference for Eagle

- How did you feel your Eagle service project went?
- Did you run into any rough spots?
- Did you plan enough to get you over the rough spots?
- How did you work with your project beneficiary?
- Was the project beneficiary clear in its goals for you?
- Would you do the project differently now?
- How do you think the troop is doing?
- How do you intend to help the troop after you become an Eagle Scout?
- Do you have any goals for the troop?
- What are your personal goals and ambitions?
- Do you feel you are prepared to become an Eagle Scout?
- Do you believe you have accomplished all you need to in order to become an Eagle Scout?

You should explain:

- That his Scouting career is not over; Eagle Palms, leadership, and adult leadership await him
- That additional opportunities exist through Order of the Arrow, Venturing, and Sea Scouting

The Scoutmaster Conference for Eagle Palms

- How do you plan on contributing to the troop now?
- What are your goals for the troop?
- What are your personal goals?
- How will your Scouting experience help you?
- How do you live the Scout Oath and Law in your daily life and non-Scouting activities?

You might explain:

- Scouting opportunities for older boys
- National Youth Leadership Training
- Leadership in the Order of the Arrow
- Camp staff opportunities
- The Hornaday awards
- Venturing
- What happens when a Scout turns 18
- Potential service as an assistant Scoutmaster
- Remaining active in Scouting in college or when one moves