

Lessons and Suggestions on Boy-Run troops -- Part II

by Barry Runnels

While scouting is for boys, it is under the guidance of adults. The adults control 100% of the direction of the Troop, and it is their responsibility to develop a boy-run program. Here are some habits that help a troop grow towards a boy run program.

-- Have a PLC meeting every week. About 30 minutes before the Troop meeting works well. I know that BSA suggests a long boring PLC meeting once a month, but the weekly PLC was the most significant habits our troop developed in moving toward a boy-run program.

Scouts have a hard time keep up with the weekly business of a Troop on a monthly basis. Weekly issues need to be addressed to maintain control at a youth level, and holding off meetings to only one a month requires either the SPL spend a lot of time on the phone each night, or the adults takeover much of the responsibility--neither of which is a good thing for a boy run troop. Also, building habits of character and leadership requires practice. It's much easier for the SM and PLC to practice on a weekly basis.

-- No matter what his age or experience, the SPL runs the troop meetings. Adults should, ideally, be outside the room. Several times adults of new troops have told me they will wait until the scouts are mature enough to take responsibility to run meetings before they let the SPL plan and run it. But all scouts to some degree can run a meeting. The sooner your program starts developing the habits of a boy run program, the faster everyone learns how to make changes towards a boy run program.

It's not the job of the adults to take the responsibility for the scouts, but to guide the scouts in their responsibilities. The more the adults take responsibility for troop management, the harder it becomes for them to hand that responsibility back to the scouts, and it takes all that much longer for the scouts become accustomed to shouldering this responsibility.

-- The PLC and SM must look at troop activities, situations, and meetings and ask, "If the adults weren't here, could this part of the program still run with only the scouts?". When you say no, it's time for the SM to work with the PLC to develop habits that would bring the troop to that point. It's a slow process--solid boy-run programs take months and years to develop, not days or weeks.

-- The SPL runs the Troop, so there is no reason for an adult to assume the role for any reason. Any concerns by adults should be addressed through the SM and SPL. Adults are allowed to guide, to suggest, to coach--but not to do scouts' jobs for them. It's very difficult for adults to keep from helping scouts (out of a sincere desire to be helpful and friendly).

-- All behavior, good and bad, is the scouts responsibility. Most boy-run programs have very few behavior problems where adults need to get involved. That's because each scout is held responsible by all the other scouts. Until safety becomes an issue, the PLC should be held responsible for taking care of bad behavior. The PLC should also report misbehavior to the SM so he can talk with the scout if needed. That is one of the Scoutmaster's jobs. Bad behavior should be seen as an indicator of a scout needing guidance. Too many adults see bad behavior as an embarrassment of their program, rather than a part of the program--but if scouts were perfect, why would we need the Oath & Law? Adults must be passive in their guidance, but fearless in their objectives.

-- Adults should never lead a group of scouts. I am always amazed watching adults lead their troop around at summer camps and camporees. Scouts are the leaders, let them lead. I can't imagine

anytime where the adults should take the lead. If you can't trust the scouts, then something needs to change. The adults' place is well behind the scouts. (I am also amazed at summer camp when I see troops that don't trust their scouts to get to merit badge classes without adult guidance).

There are some clear signs of when adults are over-involved in running the troop:

-- All scouts are dressed perfectly. While I am sure there are some good boy run Troops with all the scouts in perfect uniform, I have not met one yet. I am using the uniform as an example here, but it can be anything where adults force the scouts to conform **as a group** when the scouts don't understand. From the adults perspective, a boy run program is where each scout is guided individually, not as a group. What we adults need to understand is that every boy growing up questions the logic of many things that don't make sense to him, especially at this age. A scout may rebel against the norm to force some kind of response because he doesn't know any other way. Adults in boy run programs should not force a scout back to the norm, but instead guide his understanding of the situation so that he voluntarily changes. Usually when we understand a logical purpose for anything, we voluntarily conform to it. If the reason for the situation is not logical, then maybe it's time for the adults to consider change. I have always challenged my PLCs that if I can't identify how a part of our program helps build better habits and character, I will throw it out. Only pride could get in the way of making changes. It's the scouts program, they should be allowed to ask questions. The troop should be a safe place to do that.

-- Adults who stand with scouts or in front of scouts during activities are usually a sign of a more adult run Troop. The Boy run program works well because the struggle of leading, planning and managing the Troop naturally motivates a scout to seek out knowledge to stop the struggle or failure. For that to work, adults must stand out of the way of the scouts. Let the scout make the mistakes, take the wrong trails, cook food wrong and so on. Some of the worst examples of adult run that I have seen in our Troop are High Adventure Treks. An inexperienced adult often thinks he knows more than the inexperienced boys.

-- A troop focuses on advancement, to the exclusion of other elements of the program. Adults are afraid to fail, afraid to get hurt. They are also protective by nature against their children's suffering. Because of these reasons, adults sometimes tend to push advancement within a troop program, because it's safe. Earning patches is a relatively low-risk way to achieve self confidence and stature. But without real challenge and real risk of failure, awards lose their meaning.

Watch for these other signs of adults taking over the program:

- Who sets the time to wake up or lights out, adults or scouts?
- Who picks the places to set up the tents, tarps and eating area?
- Who sets up the times to eat, and program activities?
- Who loads the Troop trailer, and who says when it's time to go?
- Who counts the scouts in the cars to make sure everyone is there?
- Who decides what kind of camping gear the troop should buy?
- Who decides when it's time to go home from the campout?

Having a boy-run program is simply giving boys trust to manage their activities and actions in the troop. Imagine everything you the scouts to do without them standing in the room. That could be as little as just saying the pledge of allegiance, or as much as letting the SPL run the whole Troop meeting. Imagine a circle defining that area of trust. That circle is your boy run program. The area outside the circle is the area where the scouts grow in their struggle, and we adults grow in our trust that the scouts can manage their actions without our guidance.

That circle is worth little if its limits never expand or grow. We adults must push the limits of the

circle so the boys grow in the ability to manage life's skills. This takes courage from the scouts, to keep trying and learn from new experiences. It also takes courage from the adults to let the scouts go beyond their limits (our limits!) so they struggle in their troop responsibilities and become motivated to learn the skills to ease their struggle.

An adult-run troop is not necessarily one with a small circle of trust. An adult-run troop is one where the adults are not comfortable allowing the circle to grow, because they are afraid of failure. Allowing our boys to struggle in their activities is not natural for a parent. We want to make it easier even up to the point of holding their hands. But our scouts are young men on the verge of being sent out into an unforgiving world. Scouting is where they will learn the skills of men in a safe and controlled environment. Your goal should be that every scout *and every adult* goes home saying, "I like Myself when I am with the Troop".

Teach the adults how to watch and recognize the moments when the earth moves. You know, when the young scout's eyes get big because he figured out how to tie a knot. Those times when the Patrol all of a sudden acts like a patrol instead of animals scurrying around. The day the SPL runs the perfect PLC meeting or the Troop meeting goes off without a hitch. I remember once when an ASM and I watch the Troop break camp and load the trailer in 30 minutes. It was perfect. We looked at each other and said, well it's time to raise the bar on breaking camp, but we were smiling at the moment.

A boy run program requires a lot of work from both the adults and scouts, but the rewards are worth bragging about. For the Troop to be successful, both the adults and scouts have to grow in the program. Real growth is slow and unexpected. One day you are looking at a confused boy wondering how he can manage his Patrol of yelling, rambunctious boys. Then it seems like all of a sudden, a much taller version of the same scout is inviting you to attend his Eagle COH. "How in the world?" you wonder. But while we give all the credit to the will of a boy, let's give a little credit to the adults who had the courage to stand up and get out of his way.