

Lessons and Suggestions on Boy-Run troops

(Excerpts from "Boy Run Troops Part II" by Barry Runnels, edited by Chuck Boblitz)

While scouting is for boys, it is under the guidance of adults. The adult's control 100% of the direction of the Troop, and it is their responsibility to develop a boy-run program. This may seem complicated but it really isn't. **Guidance, Vigilance** from a distance, **Patience, Understanding** the boys point of view, **Trust** in your skills as a trained leader, **Trust** in the Boy Scout program as it was designed by the BSA, and **Trust** in the boys themselves, are the 7 keys for adults helping to foster a Boy Run Troop.

Here are some habits that help a troop grow towards a boy run program.

- **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 behaviors, good and bad, are the scout's 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 adult's 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 PLC's 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 do.
- 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 challenges and real risk of failure, awards lose their meaning.
- A troop focuses on outings, to the exclusion of advancement and leadership. Here too, adults are afraid to fail, afraid to get hurt. They are also protective by nature against their children's suffering the loss of FUN time. Because of these reasons, adults sometimes tend to push for outings only within a troop program, because it's fun. Having the adults Plan and execute the outings is a relatively low-risk way to achieve full control by the adults since they become the center of attention for all of the fun stuff. This is great for Adult Egos but not the Boys Egos. Without the true challenge presented by having the boys plan and execute the events, and the real risk of failure, troop outings lose their meaning. When the scouts are not provided the opportunity to plan and work their own advancement trail with guidance from troop members and adult Scouters, the feelings of achievement, and success are lost too.
- 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 their 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.

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by Barry Runnels

It's not normal to let our children struggle-it can be a painful sight. Our natural tool of protective parenting creates the pain of watching our sons perform the same mistakes we made.

But there are some facts we must understand about boys of the scouting age. Boys learn most of their behavior (80% or more) by the actions of others. Ever listen to who they respect and follow? Ever watch them talk and mimic someone they respect? Boys of the scouting age don't want hear someone else's life experience, they want to live it.

Experts tell us that we learn far more by the struggles of our actions than by the instructions of someone else. Boys don't want to sit, they want to do. They want to touch the bugs, and watch the clouds, they want to run through camp, not waste time walking.

Boys are excited to get up and live, but they get bored easily and need to be stimulated quickly. Adults want to give wisdom, but are lazy and would rather sit and lecture. Boys want to taste the juices of life, adults want to limit the flavors. Boys have no fear of life, experienced adults fear life and want boys to live within the limits of their fears.

Role models in a boy run Troop have to be active in the scout oath and law. Because the scouts are watching, you can yak trustworthy all day, but we adult role models have to act trustworthy for them to learn trustworthy.

I can give examples of boy run Troops running rings around adult run troops, but the reality is boy run is a state of mind. Boy run is the freedom adults give the boys to test the waters of life. Boy run is a matter of perspective. Experience has shown me that a nurturing mother has a different idea of boy run than an adventurous father. Boy run is simply the limits that we can comfortably give our sons.

So, I want to give a few points that might help you learn boy run-lessons I learned through trail and error. You see, if your unit is to be a successful boy run unit, then the unit has to agree on what boy run is.

First a few rules for adults. Get in your mind that adults have to learn more, faster than the boys. I find many Troops are adult run because the adults are simply too lazy to help boys as individuals. It's far easier to order Troop to wear full uniforms than to advise and find the motivation of each individual boy. Also, as the scouts learn to lead, things change fast, adults have to learn to keep up and stay out of the way. When our PLC finally started running good PLC meetings, I had to change the way I help the meeting a long. I had to let them go and look for something else to fix.

Resist thinking your idea is better than theirs. I have seen more scouts lose their trust in adults by the simple words, "that probably won't work." Just get it in mind that it might work, no matter how ridiculous it sounds or looks, it might work.

Don't be afraid of change. I was once asked why our Troop is always progressing. It's because we aren't afraid of change. Go look back though the years in the Scouts-L archives and look for Barry Runnels, you will see me asking for a lot of guidance. In eight years, we

tried nine different new boy programs, six different Troop guide programs and two dozen different JLTs. If something is simply not working, don't waste time hammering on it, change. This especially works for Cub Packs.

OK those are the rules. Now here are a few suggestions to teach better role modeling in a boy run Troop.

- Walk in to activity and ask yourself, "If there were no adults here, would these guys behave the same?" If you think no, then change what you're doing. Get the adults out of sight. If you want to develop habits that lead to good character, you have to learn what the bad habits are. All of us act by what we can get away with, good or bad. What you want is for scouts to act from what they think is appropriate, not from your intimidation and what you want.

Once you see the problems, work WITH the PLC to change. It took about two years to teach the PLC how to get meetings started on time, now they not only do they start a meeting on time, they make sure the SM Minute stops on time. Boy, that sure put a wet blanket on my ego.

- When you want the boys to take action, give them your action item and walk away. I have learned that most boys want your approval and look to you for it. That is not boy run. You have to get out of sight so they plan what they think is appropriate, not what they think you want.

Example: We started weekly PLC meetings, but the SPL struggled and would always wait for me to keep the discussion going a certain direction. And me (being a self-serving adult) always took his lead away. I started leaving the meetings, first for five minute, then ten, then fifteen. The first year or two the meetings lost control. The SPL would seek help and I helped him think of new ideas to help his job, then I walked away again.

Don't try and get what you want by standing there until you get your way. Hand them your idea and the wisdom of the idea them walk away. Then you will see what they really think of it. You earn their trust by allowing them to make decisions. Remember, even if they reject your idea-their own way may work.

- In all things, ask yourself, how would the boys do this? I have had many Troop leaders ask me how to get their Troop boy run. Some Troops have three or four big activities a month with one monthly PLC meeting. To me, this indicates an adult run troop, because it is very difficult for boys to organize four big unit activities.

Seven years ago we ADULTS decided that the boys wanted Patrol Boxes. We didn't ask the scouts, we just did it. In short, we spent about \$1000 to build these big heavy boxes that would cripple a scout if dropped. It got to the point we needed a diesel truck pull our trailer.

With the advice of another scouter, I changed the troop back to packing in their gear. I started by suggesting we use the boxes six months out of the year, thinking the scouts would initially hate packing into camp, and miss the patrol boxes. When I proposed this idea, the adults resisted any change, but the scouts said something that change my role modeling method. They said, "we never wanted the boxes anyway". And sure enough, the changes were welcomed by the scouts. They wanted to burn the boxes.

Every time some new adult comes up with a complicated method for advancement, merit badges, accounting, anything, I ask myself, how would the boys do it, and I try the task to the boys. We still have adults doing some of the tasks, but they are very simple and many of our older boys have taken over adult tasks. Boys think in direct simple terms, and that keeps our program simple. As for the Troops that have four activities each month. I know of a couple that folded when the driving adult left.

- **Do not be afraid of bad behavior.** Take no responsibility for the boys actions, good or bad; they deserve what comes from their actions. We keep talking about building character by letting boys learn from their mistakes, and then we get angry when they do something we don't like. Stop it!

We have one Troop in our district where there seems to be this game for the older scouts to get the adults angry at them. The scouts leave camp in the middle of the night--the adults react. The scouts pick on some younger scouts--the adults react.

Teach the PLC to handle most of the behavior of the scouts, good or bad. If the scout passes the BOR, teach the older scouts to praise the scout. If a scout causes trouble, teach the Scouts to handle that behavior. The adults are advisors, so advise. Don't preach boy run and then take over just because you are embarrassed or angry by a boy's behavior. You have just set boy run on your terms and lost all trust.

If you are worried that scouts will run amok, you will likely be surprised that, once they get used to it, the scouts are harder on themselves than you are. And if something comes up they can't handle, they will bring it to you for advice or to just to vent about the problem. But make sure it stays their problem. We have very few behavior problems because the boys pretty much nip it in the bud. They don't like to deal with problems, so they stop them. I find first year scouts the worst offenders because they don't believe the Scouts are really the leaders, when the adults are out of sight, they misbehave. Last summer at camp I caught two new scouts running races through camp. They didn't get in trouble from me. I pointed my disappointment at the SPL. There were no more problems the rest of the week. I refuse to yell or get mad, only disappointed. I hate getting mad, and it's terrible role modeling. In most cases, if it's a scout problem, it's a PLC problem.

I hope I don't appear bold or arrogant, but it's been a long road of learning from my mistakes. I also am handing over the SM duties in a few months. It's a good move for the Troop, but I am in mourning over it and helping the new guy seems to ease the pain. Nothing has been more rewarding for me than helping scouts grow into self-confident young men. I love this scouting stuff.