

Tips From the Campfire

Richard Evans, Assistant Council Commissioner

The official policy of Scouts BSA is that a unit is considered 'New' until it has rechartered for three years. That is all very well, but what does it mean? Why three years? When I first heard this policy it made perfectly good sense. Then I began to wonder why it made sense. From my experience with new units, I figured out why three years are so important. I hope that my reasoning can help New Unit Commissioners in the role of guiding, providing service, and mentoring a new unit to this important milestone.

When a unit, especially a Scout Troop, is new, it is often 'pulling itself up by its bootstraps'. The Chartered Organization Representative (COR), Committee Chair, and Scoutmaster may not know very much about Scouting. They may not understand the subtleties of Scouting, such as the Patrol Method. This is especially true with respect to the Scouts themselves. If they are all new to Scouting, they likely don't have a clue about the Scout Oath, Law or Motto. They certainly don't know the roles of Patrol Leader or Senior Patrol Leader. A great deal of time is spent on recruitment, retention, and adult training. Little is spoken about the all-important transition of the Troop itself from, literally, a bunch of Tenderfeet into a fully functioning Troop.

What is a fully functioning Troop – precisely? First, it is composed of Patrols, with a Patrol Leader who is a First Class or above. They should be using the Patrol Method: a collaborative team, teaching and learning from one another, under the leadership of the Patrol Leader. For campouts, they plan their menus, set up, use duty rosters, all as a team. While home, they are conducting Patrol Meetings, helping to teach the newer Scouts and working on other Scouting skills. Second, there is a Senior Patrol Leader (SPL) who is leading the Patrol Leaders. The SPL is ensuring Troop business is getting done, offering guidance, finding out what the Patrol Leaders need, and communicating with the Scoutmaster. Finally, adults are no longer involved in basic Scout training. The more experienced Scouts are teaching the new Scouts, gaining valuable training and leadership experience. That is, in a nutshell, what a fully functioning Troop looks like.

It is simply impossible for a New Troop to be fully functional. There are no experienced Scouts to take on the roles of Patrol Leader or Senior Patrol Leader. The Troop is often small, having only one Patrol to start with. Without experience and knowledge, the Scouts cannot teach one another. It is a simple, practical fact that all of these functions must land squarely on the Scoutmaster. The goal is to transition these functions from the Scoutmaster quickly. Gently, responsibly and enjoyably – but quickly. This is the real goal of the first year of a Scout Troop. Even if the Scouts gain rank quickly, they still need time to get comfortable with leadership and teaching. The Scouts need an opportunity to go to National Youth Leadership Training, return to their unit and begin applying what they have learned. They also need opportunities to make mistakes, learn from them, and come out as better Scouts and leaders.

In the second year, the New Troop will have a small core of Scouts ready to take on the functions of Patrol Leaders and Senior Patrol Leader. They are not quite ready to go it alone, but they are improving. The Scoutmaster still needs to teach some essential skills, but not as much. Instead, the

Scoutmaster must be prepared to closely mentor and guide these new leaders. After all, they have been told what to do all of their lives. This is the first time they have been given freedom to lead and be truly responsible for something other than taking out the trash, cleaning their rooms and doing their schoolwork. Something else will occur: retention will increase. Youth like being in charge. They want to be in charge. They want to continue being in charge. They do not get these opportunities anywhere else. The Scouts have found a comfortable home where they can have fun, be in a team, and have opportunities to lead, follow, teach and learn. Recruitment will also increase. Friends will learn of this in lunchrooms and classrooms. They, too, will want to have this genuine experience.

By the third year, the Troop will be nearly fully functional. The experienced Scouts will know what they need and want to do. New members of the Troop will be welcomed and made comfortable by their youth leaders. All of the Scouts will understand their roles and that there will come a time for them to step up. They will be confident that they will be ready, supported, and that it will be fun. This is also the first time that the Patrol Leaders, Senior Patrol Leader, and Assistant Senior Patrol Leader will be directly involved with the Scoutmasters and Assistant Scoutmasters in planning the Scout year. They know what needs to be done. They know how to do it. They should own their plan. The growth of the Troop will normally stabilize in the third year. There are only so many youth in a population, and only so many who are interested in this kind of experience.

Those first two years are the most critical. Often times, the Scoutmaster and Assistant Scoutmasters can become overwhelmed. Sometimes, they are spending the week before learning what they need to teach this week. Burn-out, frustration, and a driving desire to ensure success can become an excessive burden. It is not at all unusual for a Scoutmaster to become so burdened that he or she forgets that they are supposed to be unloading those burdens. If a Troop gets through its second year without the youth taking over, the problem will become set and entrenched. The Scouts will not understand their roles. A habit of how the Troop runs will be established. It potentially could never become fully functioning. Ensuring that this never happens is a major role of the New Unit Commissioner. A Commissioner can be objective, helpful, supportive and instructive. A Commissioner can remind the Scoutmaster of the transition plan. You can be assured that the Scoutmaster will forget, being so caught up in the details of running the Troop. This is the reason why we want so few New Troops assigned to a Unit Commissioner. The Scoutmaster and, in turn, the success of the entire Unit depends upon close, helpful, friendly, courteous, and kind service by the New Unit Commissioner.