

The District Commissioner/ Professional Relationship:

*The Commissioner's Trail To Resolution
When Things Go Off Course*



Doctoral Thesis- MTC College of Commissioner Science

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Dedication

Dedicated to the Scouters of Walton Trail District



*"There are no great people in this world, only great challenges
that ordinary people rose to meet."*

-William Frederick Halsey, Jr.

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Foreword

In Scouting, all of us, high and low, are bound by the points of the Scout Oath and Law. We do our utmost to let it guide every action we take in our roles in Scouting and life. The point is well taken that the very nature of this topic could be considered a potential “powder keg”. It is felt that sharing our district’s experiences will serve to help someone who may be seeking how best to solve issues within their own district and bring them to a positive resolution, rather than letting them fester and become worse. Any good commissioner knows that preventive management is easier than crisis management. While the thought of discussing difficulties or conflict in Scouting may not taste sweet, we are charged with being prepared.

While it is felt that our districts and our relationships there should always strive to be Scout-like and positive, it is helpful to know what to do and what not to do when things are less than ideal, because that is the reality of life. At times, the actions we take or the words we say, although intended to be helpful, can actually do more to harm the workings in a district than heal. This thesis intends to discuss these issues using examples- not to lay blame on any entity, but to illustrate and understand the far-reaching effects on a district when things don’t go as prescribed. Even as we work toward the solution, we must remember that at the end of the day, we are bound by the Scout Oath and Law, and our words and actions should demonstrate just that.

Introduction- “Be Prepared.”

It is well known to all in Scouting that the slogan of the Boy Scouts of America is “*Be Prepared.*” Countless hours of instruction, expert writing and research have been done to help our Scouters be just that. With a quick search, one can find numerous helpful resources on how to be successful and have things go well in Scouting. However, there is less material available on the subject of how to find the trail out of the dark woods when things go off course within our districts. As commissioners, it is felt that there is a place for everyone in Scouting. Nearly all of the time, the district key three maintains a cheerful, productive working relationship. While it is a delicate subject, at times, a professional just doesn’t ‘work out’ or the job just isn’t for them. This thesis will attempt to provide some guidance and a road map to resolution. The effects upon leadership and program will be discussed, as well as how the district commissioner’s role must adjust to assist the volunteers to work through the issues, manage potential conflict and make a way forward.

Not everyone who is in the role of district commissioner is experienced in corporate practices, managing conflict and dealing with the corporate protocol of problem solving. Effective solutions and guidance will be explored as to how to address issues and bring them to a positive resolution. This thesis will also share strategies and describe courses of action taken to find a way forward in the district and explore the idea of an assessment tool. As stakeholders, the volunteers in a district can and should provide valuable feedback for the development of Scouting professionals, always adhering to our guiding values and principles in the Scout Oath

and Law. At conclusion, the thesis will have laid out a plan and constructive guidance to assist district commissioners to be an advocate for the professional and the council, and serve the needs of their units' leadership in the rebuilding/recovery process.

When we were expecting our son, one of the many books read was *'What To Expect When You're Expecting'*¹. The book, among many others, was read from cover to cover, and all was prepared. As happens often in life, the unexpected happened. Our son was born ten and a half weeks early, and suddenly, we were faced with a whole set of circumstances that weren't covered in the book. The book spent a great deal of time talking about the ideal outcome, but very little on what to do when things didn't go as the book described. Numerous searches turned up very little information on preparing to spend the next two months with our child in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. In the end, all turned out fine and we are blessed to have a healthy 12 year old, but it would have been comforting to have a bit of a road map to guide us through those difficult days and help see the light at the end of the tunnel.

It's the same in Scouting. There has been a great deal of research, consultation and time put into all of the guides, training and field service books for Scouting and commissioner service, all designed to lay out a road map for how to have things proceed successfully in Scouting. All of these impressive resources allow us to be prepared to deliver the best in commissioner service. What happens when circumstances arise with our districts that aren't covered in the book? As a starting point for this thesis, the roles of each of the key players is examined.

The Role of the District Commissioner

"The role of a district commissioner involves just five things:

- *To **envision** what effective unit service in a district will look like and what goals must be accomplished during their term of service to fulfill that vision.*

¹ *'What to Expect When You're Expecting'*, 2004 edition. Heidi Murkoff

- To **represent** volunteers and Scouts to the district committee and district professionals.
- To **recruit** assistant district commissioners and an adequate number of roundtable and unit commissioners to provide effective unit service.
- To **retain** commissioners and units (ensuring commissioners are given assignments that fit well with their passion, potential, and priorities and recognizing their achievements and that units receive effective service to support retention).
- To **enable** commissioners to be successful (including ensuring commissioners complete onboarding, and training, are given assignments that are a good match for their passion, potential and priorities, are provided with a clear definition of success and are recognized for their achievements).”²

Beyond the roles listed above, the district commissioner also consistently strives to show through actions and words that they support the BSA and council policies, procedures and the council professional staff. Every effort should be made to keep a positive working relationship with all levels of leadership and volunteers. District commissioners are usually chosen for their people skills- their ability to relate well to all. The relationship between the district commissioner and the other members of the key three should be friendly, positive and productive, embodying the idea of a “volunteer driven, professionally guided” program.

The Role of the District Executive

The role of the district executive, as described by the BSA Website:

“The responsibilities are as broad as the tasks are varied, and no two days are the same for a typical Scouting district executive. No matter where they work, in the city, the suburbs, or the countryside, one thing is for certain—this is anything but a "cubicle" job. Our field staff are typically found in the community, not behind a desk. The job of the professional Scouter is to

² *‘The Role of the District Commissioner’*, www.scouting.org/commissioners/manual

inspire, recruit, train, and support the BSA's adult volunteers. In addition, they work with community leaders to rally public support for Scouting."³

For the district, the main job of the district executive is boiled down to what has often been called “the M & Ms” - the membership and money. While it is true that district executives function in many different roles in the district, a large portion of their interaction with the volunteers is to conduct the yearly roundup season, start up new units, and to assist in the role of fundraising and promotion of Scouting in the community. Further, they are the professional in the ‘professionally guided’ part of the district’s Scouting program. They serve as the connection to council resources. The role of a district executive is not an easy job- each district within a council presents unique challenges to be met and mastered, such as demographics, impressions of Scouting in the community and sometimes, even the very geography itself. The job can include long hours, many meetings and obligations other than those of their district, on top of guiding the volunteers and activities within their own district. The person in this role must walk a fine line between the corporate needs of the council and the needs of their district and its volunteers. The district executive, like the volunteer, also strives to find balance in their job duties and family life. It is not always an easy task, and requires the support of the volunteers who work with them to have a successful program. It must also be understood that the hiring of a Scouting professional represents a sizable investment on the council’s part of time, money and training.

It is helpful at this point to also discuss what is not the district executive’s primary responsibility. While a district executive’s job does include some ‘customer care’, steps should

³*The Role of the District Executive*, www.bsa.org

be taken to encourage volunteers to follow the proper chain of command. Being in a paid position does not allow volunteers the right to expect district executives to handle every situation or request, even though volunteers are in place at the district level to handle most inquiries. Often, unit leaders feel more assured that their concerns will be more immediately addressed if they go straight ‘to the top’, but this is often counter-productive. The unit leader’s first line of defense should always be to contact their unit commissioner, and the commissioner then connecting them to the proper resource at the district committee. Clogging the professional’s lengthy to-do list with small tasks, questions and phone calls that the commissioner, a district chairman or the volunteer themselves can handle prevents the professional from focusing on the services they need to.

The Role of the Council

From the BSA Council Key 3 training syllabus, the role of the council is described as following:

“One unique characteristic of the Boy Scouts of America is the effective relationship that has developed and is maintained between professionals and volunteers. The ratio is significant; there is on average only one professional for every 400 volunteers. This is what characterizes the Scouting movement as being primarily volunteer. The professional provides guidance while the volunteer provides leadership and renders service. With the president and the Scout Executive, this relationship becomes extremely important. Each has separate and distinct responsibilities, and yet, to be effective, they must complement each other.” The Council provides the overall “steering of the Ship”, and the corporate management of the Scouting program within the Council’s territory.”⁴

⁴*The Role of the Council*, www.bsa.org

The Role of the District Chair-

“The district chairman is the top volunteer Scouting leader of the district in a defined geographical area, whose job is to motivate a talented team of people. They preside at district committee meetings and represent the district on the council executive board. They are responsible for the membership, program, and finance functions of the district. The Major Tasks of the district chairman:

- 1. Identify and recruit enough of the right people as operating committee chairmen.*
- 2. Initiate plans and help committee chairmen recruit an adequate number of members to carry out the functions of the district.*
- 3. Plan (with the district executive) and preside at district committee meetings.*
- 4. Work with the district commissioner and district executive to stimulate and to coordinate the work of the district, to ensure the success of the Scouting units.*
- 5. In cooperation with the district executive, ensure the attainment of district goals.*
- 6. Represent the district on the council executive board, once elected.*
- 7. Recognize individuals, committees, and chartered organizations for their Scouting accomplishments.*
- 8. Support local and national Scouting policy, procedures, and practices.*
- 9. Help to secure support for Scouting from top community leaders throughout the district.*
- 10. Track and help attain goals for the Journey to Excellence District Award and other annual goals.*

11. *Annually appoint a district nominating committee to select nominees for district officers and district members at large.*⁵

The Role of the Volunteer

The Scouting volunteers make up the largest segment of the Scouting delivery structure. Volunteer leaders take the main role in the daily running of Scouting units and have the most direct interaction with youth. While the district executive fills the role of the Scouting professional, all other roles are filled by volunteers from the community and Scouting. They serve as unit leaders, trainers, merit badge counselors, unit committee members, chartered organizations representatives, specially trained or certified instructors, district committee members or officers, commissioners and program leaders for camp programs. They are the direct contact leadership and the driving force behind the Scouting movement, playing a large role in the direct delivery of the Scouting program to our youth.

At its very core, the Scouting program thrives on the successful relationship between volunteers and professional staff. Anytime a new professional begins the position of district executive, there is a mountain of training and orientation undertaken by the new hire. If they have moved into the area for the job, they are likely searching for housing and trying to orient themselves to their new community. There are new skills to learn and lots of information to quickly process. Rapport building by the volunteers is an extremely important strategy, especially with a new district executive. Building those caring, working relationships with others helps to make the difficult conversations easier to have, and rapport building ensures that

⁵ *'The Handbook for District Operations,'* Boy Scouts of America

the professional knows that his co-workers genuinely care about him and his success when feedback is requested and offered. Volunteers can assist the professional during this learning curve, tempered with patience and understanding, as many of the long time volunteers are more familiar with the practices in the council and district than the new professional. A positive, constructive relationship between the professional and the volunteers serves to build the collaborative atmosphere needed to succeed. At times, this collaborative atmosphere breaks down, due to expectations not being met, or a commitment being unfulfilled. When the normal flow of the program is disrupted, conflicts can arise.

A Word About Conflict

It must be said that what made this district's situation unusual was that the experience was not the norm- in fact, it was felt to be more toward the extreme end of the spectrum with regard to interaction with professionals. Anyone starting a new job has the best intentions of doing well in it and being successful. Normally, when a person is given constructive feedback in a kind and supportive way, apologies are made, and assurances are given that it will be handled better in the future- and nearly all the time, it is.

For the district's volunteers, a professional neglecting a commitment was one thing- but as time went on, when the feedback was met with the shrugging of shoulders and a flippant response of, "*Oh well...*", the volunteers were uncertain how to react to that. Volunteers were repeatedly confounded by the response from their professional, and the apparent apathy that a commitment or responsibility had gone unfulfilled. This type of response immediately began to chip away at the efforts of collaboration in the district, and led to conflict between the professional and the volunteers.

No one feels comfortable when conflict arises in our dealings with work or other activities- however, it is a reality when people of differing work ethics, expectations and experiences come together. The most amazing thing about Scouting is that such a large number of people, from all walks of life, can work together and deliver the most successful youth program in the world. Scouting is infinitely easier when everyone is getting along. Our Scouting values and the Scout Oath and Law go a long way to help that happen, but even with our best efforts, conflict can and does arise at times. When it does, human nature dictates varying responses to conflict. There will be those who do anything they can to avoid the situation- even pretend it isn't happening. There will be those who ignore protocol and chain of command, listing their complaints directly to the corporate level, convinced that the council will immediately act on their concerns. Lastly, there will be those who will stand and work actively and collaboratively with all parties to bring it to a resolution. While it is often easier to simply say, *"I'm only a volunteer,"* or *"it isn't my job,"* one must make the difficult choice between what is right and what is easy. One must also consider that some of the people who choose to avoid dealing with the conflict may be those who serve in a leadership role, and would normally be expected to help direct efforts toward resolution. One must be prepared for the fact that they may not offer assistance or support when things get rough. While not pleasant, conflict is a normal part of team building, and efforts to work toward a resolution can be a valuable learning experience. Managing and resolving conflict is a powerful teaching and leadership tool.

When conflict arises within a district, 'the buck stops' at the district key three. The starting point of any strategy for managing conflicts is to listen and assess the situation. This is done by the asking of directed questions and careful listening to the answers. A conversation

was had with the involved parties for each situation that arose, and the following questions needed to be answered in order to form a course of action and assign a priority to it.

-What happened?

-Why is this issue important to the leader/district, and how important is it?

-What is the worst that could happen to the unit/district if this problem is not resolved?

As each situation arose in the district, all of the problem solving strategies used and courses of action taken were based upon the answers to these questions.

Signs of Trouble

The signs of trouble were unhappy volunteers or district committee members sharing experiences that failed to meet their expectations. The very first sign of trouble was that 15 Scout applications from an early August roundup, conducted by the district executive, were still not turned in at the council registrar's office- and it was late October. This prevented any online advancement from being logged for those Scouts, prevented the Scouts from being covered by BSA insurance for outings, and affected the upcoming recharter process for the unit. Additionally, the missing Scouts could not be counted in the district's Journey To Excellence membership goal. In order to assess the situation, the following questions were asked:

What happened? Applications were not turned in and processed at the council office.

How important is it? Online advancements for the Scouts were being prevented; unregistered, active Scouts did not have coverage under BSA insurance, in case of emergency. The active Scouts were not listed on the unit's charter, and could not be added, since they did not exist in the system.

What is the worst that could happen if it is not resolved? A Scout will not receive their advancements in a timely manner with their fellow Scouts and may leave Scouting, feeling disappointed; the Scout could get injured during a unit activity and realize that there is no insurance coverage as previously thought; and the unit's recharter process can be delayed if the active Scouts are not listed. Also, the district's ability to reach yearly Journey To Excellence goals in membership would be affected without the active Scouts being counted.

In this case, the course of action was education- since the district executive was working through his very first roundup season, a conversation was had with him regarding the importance of getting the applications turned in as soon as possible, and helping him to understand the ripple effects of the Scouts not being listed in the system- in other words, helping him to see the big picture and the effects. This strategy allowed him to learn, and for the volunteers to be assured that he now understood why it was important to them.

The key to everything in the commissioner's world is the ability to objectively and empathetically observe and listen. The second key is to act upon the unit service role that a commissioner has, as soon as one notices the signs of trouble. If the problems are ignored and left to build, the issue becomes crisis management instead of preventive management. As a commissioner, one must always seek to build up- not tear down one side to build up another. Every effort must be made to avoid the situation becoming a 'volunteers vs. professional' situation. It is important not to allow unhappy volunteers to get mired in embellishment, gossip, ranting, or war stories as they share the problem. This does not serve the forward progress of finding solutions for the district or their unit.

At times in Scouting, we deal with those who perhaps are not able to fill their roles as well as expected. There are many reasons for this: misunderstandings about a person's role in the district, perhaps the job just isn't for them, they have difficulty managing time and priorities, personal stressors, or the person may lack experience to handle some issues with confidence. Whatever the issue, one must remember that friendly, constructive feedback (and even showing and teaching) goes a long way to help resolve most issues between volunteers and the professional. Assurances that the person and their success is cared about makes these discussions much easier to have. It is also felt that the unit volunteers need to be trained in a more self-sufficient path of carrying out their unit's responsibilities, relying on their unit commissioner as the first place to go for questions and guidance. Empowering unit leaders to handle most of their own issues avoided many potential conflicts between the volunteers and the professional, and has been taught to the unit leaders in our district as a roundtable topic at least once a year. The source of many conflicts within a district stems from a misunderstanding of what each person's job really is, and isn't. When the volunteers have a clear understanding of this, everyone can "stay in their own lane", and allow each person to handle their unique responsibilities. In our district's case, some of the same problems recurred, along with other commitments going unfulfilled. As more issues came to light, the volunteers began to worry about how well the relationship with the professional was going to work out.

Commissioners must consider that their role is that of a builder- builders of relationships, builders of trust and builders of knowledge. The first place to go with any professional-related concerns is not always to council. Commissioners always need to discourage volunteers from going to council on their own with a "laundry list" of complaints, claiming to speak for the

district. For most situations, the strategy was handling the problem by talking and working directly with the involved parties to get it resolved within the district level, and assuring them that it was not necessary to involve the council unless it was an extreme situation. At times, it was a simple issue of someone not realizing that the task was their responsibility, not being trained in that particular task, not understanding the importance of it, or simple forgetfulness. As the professional-related problems continued to occur and escalate in our district, there were other ways the district's volunteers and their efforts were affected.

The Ripple Effect

Perception is reality for anyone in the scouting program, no matter who it is, and regardless of the position in which they serve. Unit leaders in our district were primarily engaged in the daily running of their units and their activity with the Scouts. When breakdowns occurred, the leaders came to their unit commissioners and to the district commissioner, sharing their experiences. In one particular case, the volunteers were disappointed once more in the professional taking too long to get new scouts' applications to council for processing, and some of the applications had been lost. This resulted in parents having to fill out applications and write checks two or three times. Volunteers were becoming upset with the delays and having scouts fill out multiple applications to try and resolve it. It was difficult at times to hear volunteers "vent", but the very act of feeling that they were being heard helped to dispel some of those feelings. The volunteers had become frustrated with being put in the position of explaining to their youth or parents for the fourth week in a row that *"the patches just haven't arrived yet,"* or *"I'm trying to find out why your son's registration has not gone through yet."* It was important to understand their position; they felt that more work had been put upon them due

to background support activities not happening as they have in the past. When situations like this happened repeatedly, the tendency was that the volunteers blamed much of whatever else was going wrong in the unit on the actions (or inactions, as the case may be) of the professional. While it was important to listen, it was also important to be even handed and not let anyone unfairly lay blame- this was not constructive. Focus needed to be kept on the present and the future- not dwelling on the mistakes of the past. For example, if a unit leader was upset over not getting a roundup, it is neither fair nor accurate for the leader to lay blame on the professional for the unit's low membership for the last two years, when it is known that there have been infrequent meetings and lack of delivering a good program for those two years. For a unit that was not delivering a solid program, all the recruiting and roundups in the world still would not solve the underlying issue. On the other hand, it was helpful for the district chair to know that a scheduled school night or roundup was never held- that was an actionable item. At that point, rather than letting the leaders dwell on the problem, the focus was shifted to how the unit can move forward and overcome, with coaching and guidance on retention and recruitment from their unit commissioner.

At times, the commissioner was placed in a position where the survival of a unit had to be placed above solving the recurring problems. For example, one of the oldest units in the district had an exemplary track record of delivering a great program and training long-term committed leaders. They did not receive a roundup. As it happened, the unit had just crossed over an unusually large class of 12 Webelos Scouts that year, leaving a total of 5 Scouts left in the unit prior to recruiting season. When the unit did not receive a roundup, the leaders were very concerned for their unit's survival. While assessing the problem, it was discovered that, once

again, applications were missing at the registrar's office for three of the five remaining Scouts. The applications had already been filled out twice by the parents and given to the district executive, but none of them had made it to the council office. This left the unit with two active Scouts on the council roster- not enough to have a viable unit, and in their frustration, the leaders were ready to give up and close the unit down. The strategy in that case was to preserve the unit at all costs and dispel the anger and frustration as quickly as possible. The decision was made to write a personal check to pay for the three scouts and be certain that they were registered with the council, delivering the applications personally to the registrar. Once it could be ascertained that the Scouts were indeed registered, alternate solutions were then discussed to recruit more members.

As the trend of disappointing professional service progressed, a ripple effect occurred through the district's volunteers. This showed in lower roundtable meeting attendance (although in our case, it increased at first, since it was the best time to catch up with the district executive and discuss the issues), lower district committee participation, lower morale in units and the district, and less willingness to reach out and work together. Eventually, this trend changed into avoidance, with the professional avoiding the leaders' attempts at communications and the leaders avoiding asking the professional for help. The district executive would leave the roundtable meetings as soon as the leaders went to breakouts, to avoid having to talk with them. The general feeling in the district then became "I have enough problems of my own". The longer the situation hung on, another effect was a drop in unit contacts by unit commissioners. They were not as anxious to make visits or call upon their units, knowing what they were likely going to hear when they got there. Their attendance dropped off at commissioner staff meetings

and roundtables, seeking to avoid hearing more complaints from the volunteers or not wishing to be the bearer of more bad news. The commissioners became frustrated at not always being able to offer definitive solutions to help their units. They felt helpless to fix what was wrong, knowing many of the concerns were beyond their area of responsibility, or their attempts to correct the problem went unanswered by the professional. The members of the district committee felt the effects as well, when roads to resolution were blocked by unfulfilled commitments and unanswered phone calls and emails. Attempts by the committee to discuss and improve the situation with the professional were also ignored. The district commissioner's strategy was to remain in a supportive role- keeping the lines of communication as open as possible, providing moral support to the commissioner staff as well as being a ready and supportive listener to the volunteers.

The district commissioner had to step a bit outside their role to counter the ripple effect- the best course of action at this point became doing all one could to hold the district together. By this point in time, everything was dissolving; communications were breaking down, and the strategy was to keep the units functioning as well as possible until the council could take care of the professional. The volunteers knew that this situation was not normal, but it was pointed out that there were many volunteers in the district and one professional. While there were admittedly some roles only the professional could fill, the volunteers were entirely capable of keeping the basic functions of the district going until the problems were resolved. The district commissioner continued to acknowledge their frustrations and their situation, and continued to thank them and praise them for their successes. The whole experience of "shepherding" the flock at times felt overwhelming and draining, especially after giving up a day job and evenings

with family to make time to handle the many unfinished tasks in the district. Days were spent carrying paperwork and questions to council, and many evenings were spent traveling and meeting with upset leaders, trying to help them. The district commissioner's role at this point shifted into more of being a cheerleader, chaplain, arbitrator and negotiator.

The Shift in Roles

The district commissioner who served as a friend, unit doctor, representative, teacher and counselor now took on the added roles of being cheerleader, chaplain, arbitrator, negotiator, peacemaker and even courier. When the trust in the professional waned, volunteers asked the district commissioner for help with getting paperwork to council or to try to find a “workaround” to get a task accomplished without the professional being involved. Frustrated and angry with months of not being able to count on the smallest commitment from the district executive, many unit leaders threatened to walk away, drop their charters, or find their own solutions. The unit and district commissioners spent a great deal of time sharing coffee, lunches or talking with volunteers at their meetings to try and avoid losing leaders and units. The situation felt like trying to put out a quickly spreading wildfire on a windy day. At its worst point, seven of the district's units were ready to throw in the towel. The main strategy at this point was to not allow the leadership to give in to the panic they were feeling, and not to allow it to spread uncontrollably in the district. The panic they felt was very real to them, and efforts were made not to minimize those feelings or make light of them, but to help them see that things in their units really were not as bad as they had perceived. The leaders had to be brought to the realization that the district executive was not completely preventing their ability to have their

regular unit meetings. The district executive was not completely stopping their delivery of the program. After honest reflection, the main pressing issues for them were having paperwork delivered to council, having promised materials delivered in a timely fashion and processing registrations. The leaders were encouraged to focus on what they were already doing right every day in their units, and the commissioner staff did what they could to take care of the other nagging issues for them. Due to the dedication and extra attention of the commissioner staff, all of those units are still operating in the district. The district commissioner could help correct most situations, but in others, it was beyond the scope of the duties of the district commissioner- and when commissioner staff could not solve it, an honest answer was given to the volunteers. For example, when the day camp director still had not received their reimbursement check ten months after the day camp was conducted, that was not something a district commissioner can handle- that had to be taken up with the appropriate office at council. Great care was taken to avoid making promises to volunteers that could not be kept- every attempt was made to under-promise and over-deliver. Commissioner staff made certain that all information or advice delivered to volunteers was accurate and timely.

It was at this point that the district commissioner had to exercise discretion. As a commissioner, one must always make the effort not take sides or slip into a cycle of enduring gossip or fostering drama, whether in meetings or social media platforms. During this time, there were occasions where there was contact from professionals at council, attempting to assess the situation. While it was difficult to be diplomatic when it was felt that the district was coming apart at the seams, the realization was that a positive attitude and efforts to keep things constructive carried much more weight than griping or giving a laundry list of complaints. The

focus of all communications with council stayed on what could be done to help make the situation better. It was still the district commissioner's job to be the advocate, and one did not want to create a divide between the council, the district and the volunteers. When the district commissioner was asked to provide feedback on the professional's service, it was considered that from the corporate side, they are interested in "actionable" information. Merely sharing personal gripes or personality conflict issues was not of interest to the inquiring parties. In a nutshell, actionable items were incidents that effectively stopped the work of others in the district, like a lapsed district recharter resulting in the entire commissioner staff being locked out of commissioner tools, thus preventing any unit contacts from being logged. Information relayed to the council was specific- examples were cited with details to help clarify the concerns. Only the facts were presented, without embellishment. The problems were clearly laid out and how they had affected progress. The hiring of a district executive represents a large investment by the council of time, training and money. It must be understood that every avenue will be explored by council to resolve and correct issues, to see a return on that investment.

The least helpful strategy in situations like this was for other district volunteers to engage in "bashing" of the district executive without citing specific examples, or bypassing the chain of command and going straight to the Scout executive with concerns. The Boy Scouts of America has a comprehensive organizational structure in place, and this protocol must always be followed when addressing concerns. When a district cannot handle a problem within the district structure, concerns must be taken directly to the next level in the chain of command. The Scout executive is only to be contacted in extreme situations requiring immediate action, or for Youth Protection violations, as prescribed by the Boy Scouts of America's national policies. An organizational

chart for the district as well as the Boy Scouts of America is found in the Appendix (see Appendix A and B).

During rough situations between the district volunteers and the professional, the district commissioner's strategy was to conduct oneself professionally, not allowing inclusion in "blanket" emails or phone conversations where volunteers were ranting on behalf of the group. Conversations held with council staff were carefully thought out- a hasty word while trying to work through the issues could have harmed the rebuilding process after all was resolved. The discussions were kept as objective and free of emotion as possible, and focused on the problems in need of resolution. The district, its volunteers and the council was still going to be there when the situation reached a closure, and a firm foundation was needed to begin recovery. Bridge burning is always a poor strategy- especially when the district requires support in the immediate future to right the ship. Though difficult at times, the district commissioner kept envisioning the end result, resolution and business as usual.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Within the district, at the point that the professional elected to leave his position, there was a great deal of anger, frustration, and nearly a complete breakdown in communication and the trusting relationship between the volunteers and professional. The effect that this had on the volunteers was that everyone was mentally and physically exhausted. Roundtables had become a conga line of leaders wanting priorities and needs addressed. Everyone had stepped out beyond their normal responsibilities to keep the units and district moving forward, and now had to find a way to right the ship, while waiting for their new district executive. Immediately afterward, council assigned a staff professional to assist until a new hire was made. From the district

commissioner's standpoint, the course of action was that the needs of the units about to recharter had to be paramount. The district needed something to go the way it was supposed to, to return to a place of normalcy. Priority was placed upon those units who had upcoming recharter, making certain that the council records reflected their charter paperwork and that it matched the current Scouts and leaders in their units. In the months that followed, the course of action involved a complete assessment of the district, its units and leadership, and prioritizing tasks that needed to be undertaken to repair the damages. A few months of work was done to clean up incomplete or missing paperwork, track down 78 missing applications for which there were physical Scouts in units, and correction of unit rosters, but eventually, light appeared at the end of the tunnel. In a way, this action was a blessing for our district- though a good size task, it allowed the district a chance to truly assess every part of the units, their charters and their leadership, and lay a clean foundation for the new professional. Morale building and unit contacts by commissioner staff shifted into high gear. The unit commissioners were out visiting or talking with their units often, to assure them that they were cared about and they had support on the road ahead. The idea was driven home that the past is in the past, and it was time to make a fresh start.

An effort was made to minimize the time spent in roundtables and other meetings talking about the prevalent problems-it was felt that it would lead to an unproductive "gripe session". Any positive news was used as an ending note—we celebrated successes, no matter how small.

The district commissioner's rapport-building cycle ensued again when the new professional was hired. It was anticipated that the new hire would face challenges even before his arrival, as much of the volunteer/professional trust lay broken in the district. Honest sharing

with the new professional, without going into all the ‘gory details’ helped him to understand what was needed to work through the rebuilding process. While it took a little extra time to rebuild the volunteer/professional relationship, it eventually did come around. The district commissioner’s role of serving as the intercessor between the volunteers, commissioner staff and key three members helped the transition go more smoothly. The result of this experience led one to think about ways that many of the issues could have been avoided or minimized. Besides the ongoing strategies to prevent small problems from blowing up into big ones, another possible solution involved the use of an assessment tool to provide benchmarks for how the professional was doing on their path.

The Value of Assessment

Most Scouters who have been active leaders in a unit know the value of assessment. Units may call it ‘Stop, Start, Continue’, or ‘Roses and Thorns’. “ *Assessment allows a much clearer picture of progress when it is offered by others. A 360° assessment allows feedback to come in from all directions- from those all around the assessed subject. This means that feedback is generated from peers, those the person works with and those they work for. These people are referred to as stakeholders. The feedback can then be used as a tool to formulate and reach goals.* “⁶

Just as Scout leaders use assessments to measure the effectiveness of their leadership and the unit programming, assessments can help district executives gauge how well they are reaching the goals for their position-before it becomes a major issue. Without feedback, one is literally walking ‘blind’, having no idea of how effective their performance is. The real key is be sure

⁶ *Self Assessment*, Wood Badge Syllabus 2018. Boy Scouts of America

that the feedback is specific. Telling a district executive that they exceeded their fundraising goal by 18% is much more effective than just saying ‘great job’. They need to know how they’re doing, what is working, and what is not. It is felt that the strategy of using the assessment tool could serve to help point out problem areas or breakdowns in the communication structure. When the 360° assessment is used, feedback is generated from above and below the district executive’s position. There are a number of ways to create an assessment, using ‘Stop, Start, Continue’, or by using headings such as ‘Way To Go and Ways To Grow’, and they can be tailored to meet the corporate and volunteer’s experience. As the professional’s goals change, the goals listed at the top can be revised. Respondents to the survey should only mark the questions for which they have personal knowledge. As the larger segment of stakeholders, the volunteers can offer valuable feedback for a district executive, allowing the professional to see the progress in his or her position.

As any assessment is formulated, the instructions to stakeholders must be clear. It should be easily understood why they are doing this assessment, and what the results will be used for. A facilitator will collect and organize the feedback, and the person being assessed will not see their answers. Any feedback generated from the questions should lead to real changes that will work toward the established goals. A good 360° assessment can help people discover the difference between how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them. The following is a sample 360° volunteers’ assessment tool.

Sample 360° Assessment

I am seeking feedback on my progress toward reaching the below listed goals in my role as a district executive:

- 1) To guide the volunteers in my district, and motivate them to reach our yearly district goals.**
- 2) To complete a successful roundup season with an increase in membership.**
- 3) To serve as a resource of knowledge and assistance in helping the volunteers in my district deliver the Scouting program.**

With the above goals in mind, please provide an assessment of how I am doing. Please answer the below questions for which you have personal knowledge. If your choice is Ways To Grow, please feel free to provide additional comments, suggesting how I might do better in that area. When you have completed the assessment, please send to my facilitator in the enclosed envelope. No one will see your answers except the facilitator. Thank You!

Please mark your choice:

Way To Go!

Ways To Grow

- 1. Produces work on time
- 2. Communicates well with others
- 3. Develops creative solutions to problems
- 4. Creates an environment for progress
- 5. Seeks active collaboration with volunteers
- 6. Attends district meetings and functions
- 7. Encourages diversity at all levels of Scouting
- 8. Timely communication and sharing of information

Any additional feedback:

In Conclusion

Despite our best efforts, things sometimes do go ‘off trail’ in Scouting. The district commissioner’s role is not only to function as a member of the key three and to take care of the commissioner staff, but to act as an advocate for the volunteers, and other members of the key three. As such, when issues do arise, careful listening and discernment is needed. Listen for the purpose of understanding, not merely to respond. The use of the conflict management assessment questions serve to clarify, identify and prioritize the problem, formulate a strategy to solve it, develop a plan of action, and act upon it. The best practice with all of the management strategies is to keep volunteers focused on creative solutions and forward progress- not to wallow in past disappointments and mistakes.

The strategy of rapport building helps to establish a solid base of caring and open communication between the volunteers and professional. The foundation of all the work the district does is based upon open and honest communications. When it is established that the volunteers truly care, personally and professionally, for the district executive, communication and feedback is a much easier and more effective process. Rapport building should never be underestimated in its importance. The efforts the district commissioner made to build rapport with the volunteers as well as the professional fostered the trust and communication that was needed to get through the difficult times. When communication and feedback ceases or breaks down, the machinery of the district quickly grinds to a halt.

Education is an important strategy in helping to avoid conflict, especially in the case of a new hire. Sharing the intricacies of the Scouting program helps the professional understand the importance of all the moving parts in the district, and to see the bigger picture. Additionally,

education in the role each person plays in the district helps everyone to have a clear understanding of each other's responsibilities and how they fit into the program. Many misunderstandings can be avoided by volunteers and professionals by having a working knowledge of everyone's roles, responsibilities and expectations.

When conflicts escalate, maintain a strategy of professionalism, discouraging any gossip, drama or panic, and insist that all parties follow the proper chain of command. In our district, a point in time was reached where the professional behaved apathetically and refused to accept any further assistance to improve his performance in the district. There is not much more that can be done at that stage, other than allowing council to review the professional's performance more closely, and keep the district running as well as possible. At the point that the district commissioner must interact with council staff regarding feedback, one must recognize that the district executive represents a significant council investment of time, training and money. Every effort must be made to talk through any issues, and only relay specific, actionable information. Communications must be kept as constructive as possible, and a willingness must exist to be a positive-thinking force in the resolution process.

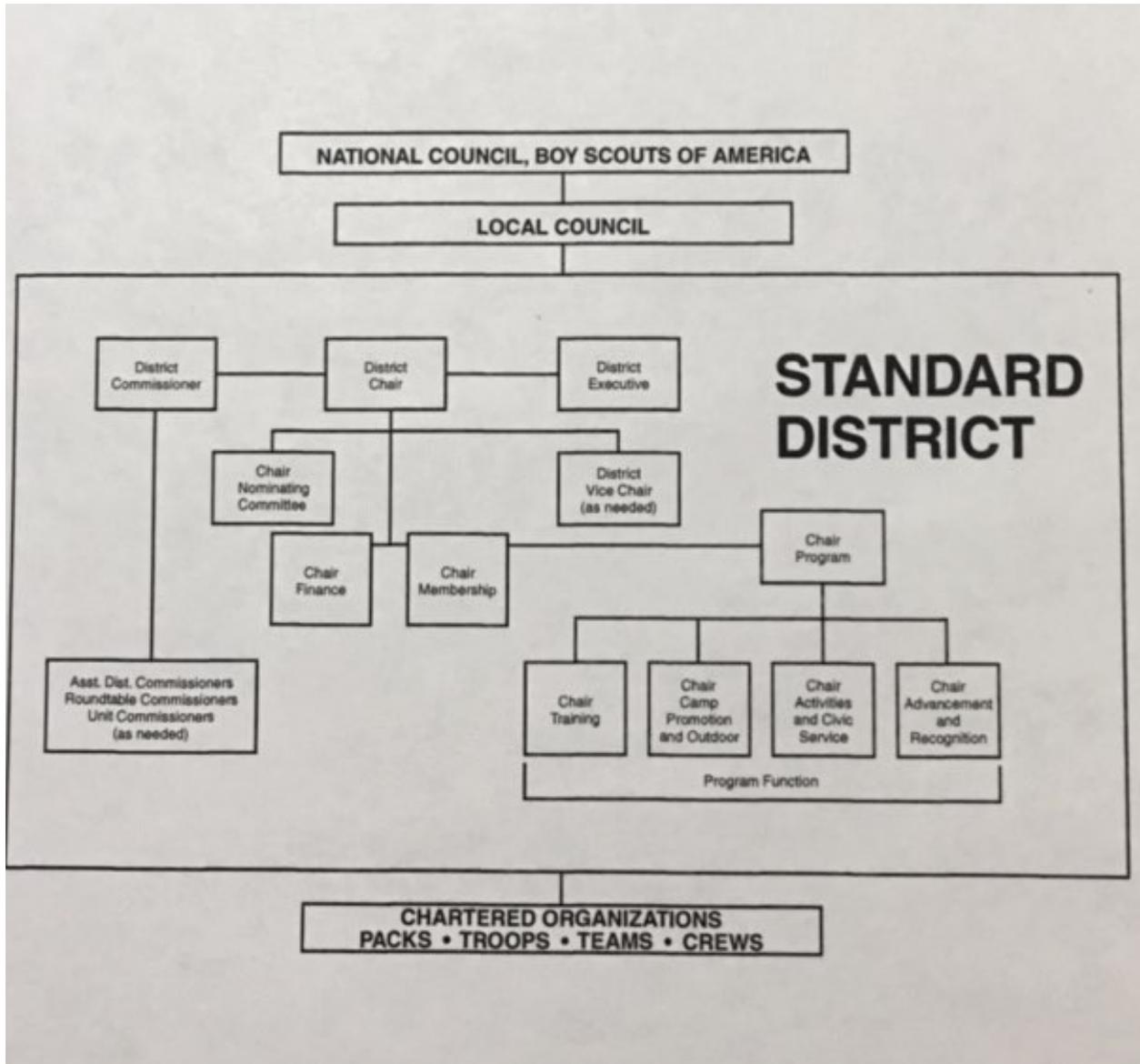
When relations reach a breakdown between the volunteers and professional, the strategy for the district commissioner becomes doing all one can to hold the district together until the issue comes to a resolution. Each individual situation must be assessed and acted upon, to maintain the units' delivery of the Scouting program. Concerns of the unit leaders are eased through accurate, timely advice and information, open communication, and providing guidance and coaching for leadership to continue on and carry out the program. Addressing these issues may require stepping beyond the normal role of a district commissioner temporarily.

The development of an assessment tool for use in the district can help a professional assess how well they are working toward their goals. The volunteers, as a large segment of stakeholders, and can be a valuable source of information and feedback, and can help to head off many problems before they become major issues. The feedback gathered can be a valuable tool for the professional to understand exactly what it is his peers want and need. A timely 360° assessment allows for more specific communication and feedback, to pinpoint many of the burning issues in a district, and to minimize their impact.

While this experience was rather unpleasant while it was happening, the end result allowed us to draw some important conclusions. Our district had a strong group of dedicated, Scout-centered, caring commissioners and leaders who joined forces and helped hold the district together.. We learned to appreciate and utilize those support structures that were present at the district and council level, and the commissioner staff was truly put through its paces to be a friend to their units through difficult times. The district saw the value and advantage in abiding by the principles of the Scout Oath and Law, and keeping a positive outlook as we worked toward a solution. In the end, this experience gave all of us a deeper appreciation for those we work with in Scouting, and the true value of what it is that we do for our youth.

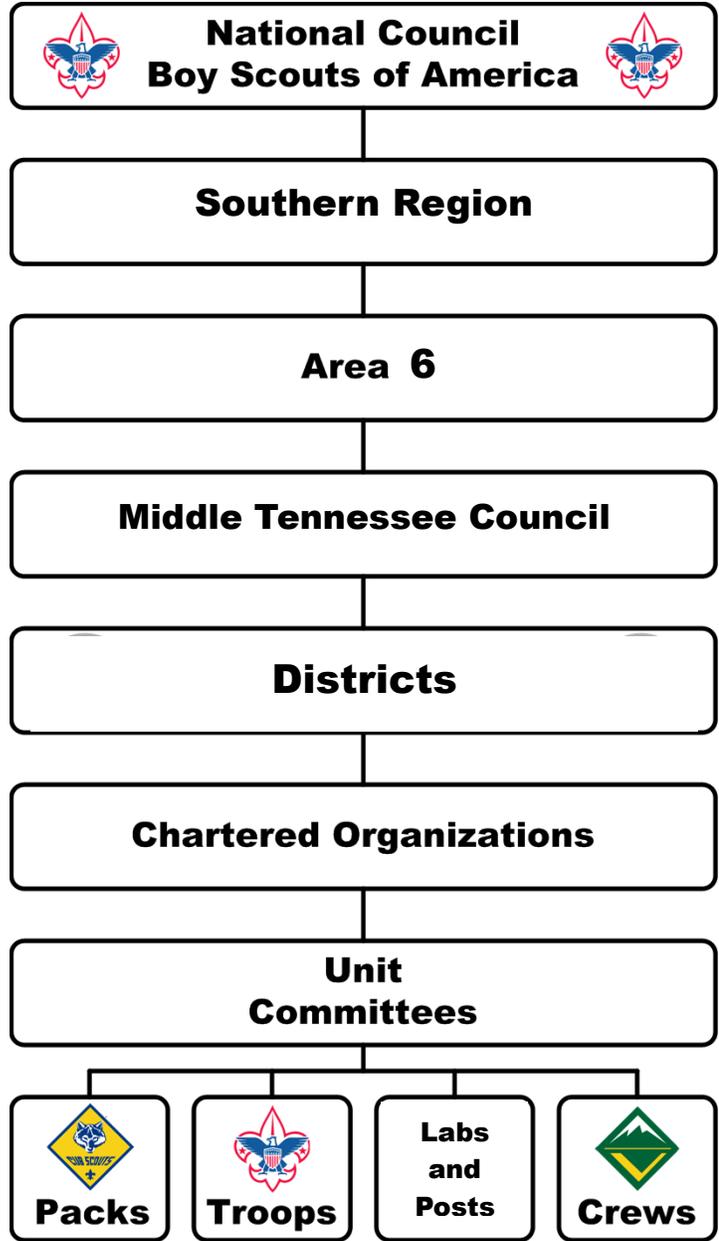
Appendix A

Boy Scouts of America
Standard District Organizational Chart
District Operations Handbook, 2009 ed.



Appendix B

Standard BSA Organizational Chart



Resources and Bibliography

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