

The Necessity of Boy Led Troops

Don Haynes, Unit Commissioner, Hermitage District
Donhaynes263@hotmail.com (615)969-6591

October 30, 2017

Preface

The existence of and issues surrounding the modern epidemic of helicopter parenting are well documented in a range of available literature including academic, professional, and self-help publications. In general, helicopter parenting is viewed negatively in this literature due to its potentially adverse impacts on the development of autonomy, resiliency, leadership potential, or social skills in the impacted youth. As perhaps a natural outgrowth of this broad-based parenting style, there is growth in what can be called Helicopter Scoutmastering. The “symptoms” of Helicopter Scoutmastering are manifold, yet all are based on a concentration of control with the Scoutmaster resulting in the youth being afforded minimal opportunities for growth, leadership, problem solving and other tasks all of which have been historically identified with healthy emotional and physical development in youth. In many units, this leadership approach is quickly entrenched because this concentration of control with the Scoutmaster is viewed by the participating leaders and impacted parents as admirable for any number of reasons such as: a perception of the youth’s inability to successfully lead, protection of the youth from failure, efficiency, program quality or simply the avoidance of chaos.

To the reader familiar with the adult leadership training provided by the BSA it is apparent that this adult leadership style is not in synch with the concepts presented in that training. This paper will draw on published literature in the areas of helicopter

parenting, youth intellectual and emotional development, and BSA guidance to assess the impact of helicopter Scoutmastering on the programs of the BSA. Suggested tools for the unit commissioner to guide a unit program into the intended model of the boy led troop will also be presented.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
THE BOY LED TROOP.....	4
HELICOPTER PARENTING	8
HELICOPTER SCOUTMASTERING	10
THE ROLE OF THE COMMISSIONER	13
SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND THE AUTHOR'S INDULGENCE	16

INTRODUCTION

“Scouting is a game for boys under the leadership of boys under the direction of a man.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

It is the goal of every adult leader in the Scouting program to ensure that the youth in their purview have as good a Scouting experience as can be provided. There is a near universal desire for the youth to experience the outdoors, leadership, camaraderie, and any number of other valuable Scouting activities that support the aims of the BSA. While all are in agreement with the goal, there are many paths to the summit. There is no single best way for a Scoutmaster to lead a troop. When assessing the variety of leadership styles and tools he has available, the age, maturity level, and unit cohesiveness, among other issues, must be assessed. If the troop is newly formed and does not have a range of boy ages and experience levels available, then a more directing, perhaps authoritarian, style is necessary. As the boys gain experience and skills in leadership and decision making, it is appropriate, even necessary, that the Scoutmaster change his style to more that of a coach and mentor. Over time the Scoutmaster’s challenge becomes employing the proper leadership style at the ever-changing individual boy level: directive for the newest Scouts ranging all the way to enabling the oldest and most proficient boys in the troop.

The helicopter problem comes about when the Scoutmaster stagnates into the directive mode. Application of this leadership style to boys that are capable of

independent thought and action results in a program that denies them the opportunity to make decisions and see the result, good or bad. They are denied the chance to put their mark on the program by performing tasks as they see fit. It ensures that the program executed is the Scoutmaster's vision, not that of the boys. The above archaically worded quote succinctly states the appropriate relationship between the Scoutmaster and the boys making up the troop; the boys do, the boys lead, and the adult supports. The adult position, regardless of title is a supporting actor to the boy leaders.

When making decisions as to how a Boy Scout troop should be led, it is advisable to recall the stated purpose and mission of the BSA:

Scouting's purpose for the youth of America is character development, citizenship training, and mental and physical fitness. The mission of the BSA is to prepare young people to make ethical and moral choices over their lifetimes by instilling in them the values of the Scout Oath and Scout Law.

It is necessary that all Scouting activities support some aspect of this Purpose and Mission. This includes both formal training activities, fun and adventure, as well the mundane tasks required for each meeting, outing, or service activity. No action, however small or apparently insignificant, cannot make an impact on the growth of a

boy. This includes any and all leadership opportunities regardless of stature, including denial of the same.

THE BOY LED TROOP

“Training boy leaders to run their troop is the Scoutmaster’s most important job. Train Scouts to do a job, then let them do it. Never do anything a boy can do”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

Based on the above quote from our founder, supporting boys in running their troop is integral to the mission of the Scoutmaster and by extension all adult troop leaders. Note that it does not reference boys watching adults run the troop. While observation is a component of training, it is not its full extent. The second sentence in the above quote says “Train”, a direction to action on the part of the Scoutmaster. So, for a troop to be boy led, firstly they must be trained. It then follows that they must be afforded the opportunity to exercise that training and lead. Perhaps tentatively at first; perhaps with various failures along the way; but always growing their skills.

How does this happen? The BSA offers a range of youth leadership training opportunities and supporting documentation. This continuum begins with Introduction to Leadership Skills for Troops (ILST) which is intended to be offered in the troop on an as-needed basis to train new youth leaders as the youth rotate through the range of troop leadership positions. This troop level training is followed by National Youth Leadership Training (NYLT). This is a more advanced syllabus offered at the council level and for most would be a capstone achievement in leadership training. For those so inclined there is finally the National Advanced Youth Leadership Experience (NAYLE) offered at Philmont and Northern Tier. This program teaches advanced team building,

ethical decision making, and other invaluable leadership skills. Other programs that can be offered at the district or unit level are available. Primary among these is the Kodiak Challenge which offers an outdoor leadership training opportunity during a trek, bike tour, or any other challenging outdoor, multi-day activity.

All that is to say, that outstanding resources are there for the Scoutmaster to use to train his boys in the ways of leadership and unit operations. Next comes leading, the hard part. Hard for both boy and adult. With minimal training, most any boy is capable of planning and running a meeting. At the beginning of his leadership journey, perhaps other meeting responsibilities can be removed. Things such as skill training, leading a game and other agenda items can be delegated to other Scouts all of whom can benefit from these more compact leadership opportunities. Will each meeting establish a new gold standard? No. Will each meeting hit the mark and accomplish all the goals set for it? Again no, which brings us to the overriding commonality found in all boy led troops: **chaos.**

Embrace the chaos by recognizing a few things about it. Chaos is the outward manifestation of the energy of youth and we want them to be energized. The Scouts see chaos, not as disorder, but rather as the normal order. For example, they are accustomed to studying concurrently with music, TV, siblings and pets or in the car on the way to band/soccer/dance or the Boy Scout meeting. What adults see as disorder in a meeting, they see as the adolescent version of multitasking. Chaos is also a valuable

subjective metric for the adults to observe the arc of leadership of the youth running the meeting. If the meeting descends into true chaos as opposed to a high energy though chaotic meeting, there is an opportunity for counseling, after the meeting. Note, after the meeting; avoid undercutting the youth in charge in public. Trust is absolutely necessary in the Scoutmaster/youth relationship.

Of course, there is much more to running a troop than the weekly meetings. The youth leadership training and the adult leader specific training all include modules and assistance for annual planning, program planning, logistics, finances, etc. While it is easily seen as unreasonable to expect a youth to contact a distant campground and reserve a site using a credit card and other generally “adult” tasks, it is easily expected that the youth in the troop can provide vision and goals for the program and plan as much as their life experience allows. There will always be a need for adults to support program, which is in fact the *raison d’etre* of the troop committee.

The boy led troop is thus identified as operating under the vision of the youth, with youth assuming day to day leadership as their skills allow. This is not to say that they must possess skills adequate to ensure continual success without slip ups or backsliding. They must be allowed to actively implement what they have learned from their leadership training. To train a boy and then disallow his using that training will only succeed in demoralizing him and inhibiting his future leadership initiative. It is through this hands-on learning and leading that the BSA can fulfill its aims of: character

development, citizenship training and personal fitness; the latter extending beyond only physical fitness. Additionally, one of the Methods of Scouting is Leadership. What better place to allow leadership practice than a Boy Scout troop, where failure is safe and the safety net is strong?

Having looked at the boy led troop, what are some obstacles to its implementation?

HELICOPTER PARENTING

“Existentially impotent”

Julia Lythcott-Haims Dean of Freshman, Stanford University (Ret)

Helicopter parenting is a well-known and controversial phenomenon. It is typified by what can be considered extreme participation in the life of a child by the parent. Impacted areas can include their studies, dress, decision making, and generally any area of life where the well-intentioned parent feels that the child could benefit from adult intervention. While there may be short term gains related to grades, college acceptance, etc., the long-term losses can be significant, culminating in the quote above. Dr. Lythcott-Haims has written extensively on the impacts of helicopter parenting observed in her freshman students at Stanford. Her coined phrase of “existential impotence” reflects her observation that many students are ill-equipped to deal with the rigors of college and adulthood beyond.

The children of helicopter parents are denied the opportunities to develop decision making skills, to learn how to navigate interpersonal relationships, and to develop the self confidence that arises from increasing levels of responsibility, among a myriad of other life skills. In her book [How to Raise an Adult: Break free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success](#), Ms. Lythcott-Haims asks rhetorically, “Why did parenting change from preparing our kids for life to protecting

them from life, which means that they're not prepared to live life on their own?"¹ While this type of parenting is well intentioned, it inhibits the child's development into a functioning adult and contributing member of society. Current societal infatuation with grades as a metric for academic success combined with fear from a changing economy and its associated economic uncertainty is a prime motivator for helicoptering. The adults in the room feel that the potential for failure on the part of the child is too great of a risk to take. Therefore they, as experienced adults, must prevent failure on the part of the child. This in spite of the fact that failure, until recently, has been an accepted learning method. Getting back in the saddle, the myth of the phoenix, the repeated failures of Thomas Edison and Colonel Sanders are all part of the collective memory that understands and extols recovery from failure. Without failure, helicoptered children do not have the opportunity to learn to recover.

Helicopter parenting, to varying degrees, defines many of the youth and adults entering the Boy Scouts. Each group brings its own baggage, preconceived notions and expectations of the other. As for these adults, Ms. Lythcott-Haims observes "Not only does overparenting hurt our children; it harms us (the parents) too. Parents today are scared, not to mention exhausted, anxious, and depressed."¹ Inevitably, some of these parents become adult leaders. What changes might this mindset bring to the troop?

¹ Lythcott-Haims, Julie. *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2016.

HELICOPTER SCOUTMASTERING

When you want a thing done, "Don't do it yourself" is a good motto for Scoutmasters.

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

It is reasonable to believe that helicopter Scoutmastering is a natural and perhaps unavoidable outgrowth of the helicopter parenting phenomenon. In this context, helicopter Scoutmastering is used to describe helicopter behavior exhibited by any adult leader. To varying degrees, helicopter Scoutmastering consists of a usurpation of leadership and decision-making responsibilities from the boys in the troop. This behavior by the adult leader manifests in a variety of readily observed situations including adult led troop meetings, adult selected program content, adults performing skills training, and the author's personal pet peeve of imposing geometric order on campsite setup. These actions on the part of the adults serve to diminish the purpose and mission intent of the impacted Scouting activities. Simon Sinek, an author on leadership, states in his book Start with Why that "the trick to balance is to not make sacrificing important things become the norm". In the Boy Scout troop, the important thing is the development of the boys, not the efficient operation of the troop. The mission of development of the boys cannot be forgotten or lost in the struggle for efficiency or improvement of the metrics.

The causes of helicopter Scoutmastering are similar to those of helicopter parenting; a desire to avoid youth failure, a desire to ensure timely success, a desire to

ensure high levels of achievement, etc. Given the pervasiveness of helicopter parenting in society, helicopter parents are undoubtedly moving into adult leadership roles in the Scouting program and as adults have for the past 100 plus years, bring their habits and belief systems with them. There is an additional cause, while found among helicopter parents is anecdotally more prevalent among helicopter Scoutmasters and other adult leaders than parents alone, that of vicarious involvement. Vicarious involvement by the adult presents a difficult challenge to optimal BSA program execution. In this instance, rather than rational arguments for or against helicopter behaviors, emotional attachment comes to play. Whether the adult idealizes his youth Scouting experience or wishes for the experience that he did not have, this attachment to executing the boy portion of the program is strong. The problem is the same, however corrective actions may be different and will be discussed in a following section. The arguments against these causes are functionally the same in that they all deny the youth the opportunities to exercise their leadership training, fail to generate the next generation of leaders, and fail to develop life skills in the impacted youth.

Helicopter parents present challenges to the implementation and operation of a boy led troop. Helicopter parents accustomed to their world of adult centric decision making will naturally gravitate to a troop that exhibits their desired characteristics of high metrics, direct adult leadership and low levels of apparent chaos. It follows that if they land in a troop that does not exhibit those “desired” characteristics, they will use

what influence they have to drive unit operations in that direction. This insidious creeping degradation of the optimal unit structure and operation must be guarded against. While it may please some helicopter driven parents, it will dishearten boys accustomed to the boy led scenario.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMISSIONER

Every boy deserves a trained leader

BSA Training Slogan

Given that the goals of parenting and the stated Purpose and Mission of the BSA are not appreciably different, it is easy to objectively see that helicoptering, either by parents or Scoutmasters, is antithetical to the goals of both. If the BSA and parents are to realize their goals in full, helicoptering must cease. If helicoptering is allowed to continue and spread within the ranks of the BSA, the movement will become a shell of its former self and rather than creating the next generations of confident and capable leaders for society, it will simply develop obedient followers incapable of thinking big thoughts or dreaming big dreams. Based on the program's past, the bar is high

As is taught in all the BSA commissioner trainings, the job of the commissioner is that of a coach, mentor or friend, not that of an authoritarian bringer of the truth. As such, approaching the topic of reducing helicoptering in a unit is difficult. At a minimum, the Scoutmaster can become defensive as to his leadership style or it could become much more than defensive if the leader in question has vicarious attachment to the program. Referring to the above quote, the preferred course of action would be to encourage additional training for the adults in the unit. Not simply the ones engaging in the helicopter behavior, but all of them. In that way, peer pressure can be brought to bear. When training is completed, the unit commissioner should celebrate the

achievement, congratulate those involved, and thank them for their continued commitment to the BSA program. Immediately following the training is also an excellent opportunity to discuss specifics of the recently completed training that reference the boy led program and encourage implementation of more of those components in the affected unit. Now, the boy led troop can be discussed in the abstract rather than be presented as a shortcoming of how the troop is currently functioning.

Furthermore, additional youth training is always of value. This is an opportunity for the unit commissioner to get to know the youth in the troop and encourage them, individually, to pursue leadership training. If Introduction to Leadership Skills in Troops (ILST) is executed in the troop, the youth will be exposed to proper boy led troop operations. Additionally, after a youth has participated in National Youth Leadership Training (NYLT) at the council level, he will be a strong voice for furthering youth leadership in his unit. The unit commissioner can play an active role in informing youth of the availability of training and offering support and assistance in identifying and securing these opportunities.

The unit commissioner can also play a role in educating the committee and new parents about the means and methods of Scouting, the purpose of the boy led troop model, and the attributes of that model (chaos, slower paced progress, boy investment in the outcome, etc.). All troops could benefit from a new parent handout that

delineates the differences between Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. This document would discuss things such as boy driven advancement as opposed to the Cub Scout age cohort, boy driven program rather than adult driven program, and the importance of parents backing off to allow their boy to grow and thrive on his own in the program. As the well-used African proverb states, “It takes a village to raise a child.” What better village than a properly functioning Boy Scout troop?

The commissioner’s task with a helicoptered unit will be challenging. The units will likely be high functioning and score well on Journey to Excellence (JTE). Obviously, adults are much more efficient than youth. A Scoutmaster and committee operating from this position of success will most likely not feel the need nor see the value in changing course. “But, the numbers are good.” Such success with the metrics will create a programmatic blind spot in the unit adult leadership. It will take time to turn a unit that is fully entrenched in helicoptering.

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND THE AUTHOR'S INDULGENCE

"Teach Scouts not how to get a living, but how to live."

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

In summary, helicopter parenting has grown in society as the result of many complex socioeconomic influences. A natural offshoot of this phenomenon is the appearance and growth of helicopter Scoutmastering. While we as Scouters and commissioners do not have the ability to dramatically and instantly change society, we can exert some influence on the units that we either control or support. The commissioner's greatest tool is the existing BSA training program for adults and youth. Those trainings reinforce the Purpose and Mission of the BSA and present the means and methods needed to implement a boy led troop. Based on these trainings and the words of our founder, a boy led troop is the best way to instill in the young men of today the mindset and tools necessary to be the leaders we will need tomorrow. Baden-Powell did not teach a trade, neither algebra nor grammar. He taught the skills necessary for a successful life. We, as Scouters, 100 plus years later can, and should, do the same.

A recommendation is to include specific language addressing the helicopter phenomenon in Leader Specific Training, both Scoutmaster and Committee, with additional information in the Woodbadge syllabus. The inclusion of this topic in ILST or NYLT would be of value. Such language would reinforce the need for boys to practice

leadership, not merely study it. The importance of a safe place to try and fail is already covered, but could benefit from additional emphasis. While it could be a source of conflict between a trained youth and a recalcitrant Scoutmaster, that situation is not new. NYLT and its predecessors have created this conflict for years and the program continues.

This discussion has not addressed the recent programmatic changes that welcome girls into the previously single gendered world of Boy Scouts. Drawing on Venturing experience, the author's only concern along the lines of helicoptering related to this program change will be fear based overreaction of some Scoutmasters to protect the "delicate" girls. This only means that they do not know girls. As the new program guidelines are delivered in the coming months it will be interesting to see what guidance is included to ensure equal programmatic treatment of the girls. They can handle it.

"Necessity", as found in the title of this text is defined by Webster as:

ne·ces·si·ty

noun

1. the fact of being required or indispensable.

Much as Thoreau selected the word for his treatise, The Necessity of Civil Disobedience, it follows here that as Thoreau recognized the necessity of civil disobedience in the face of an authoritarian government, we as Scouters must recognize the necessity of the boy led troop in the face of a society bent on quantifiable success rather than the construction of character, on the elimination of failure rather than the fostering of

resilience, and on ease and efficiency rather than mental toughness. It is the purpose of an adult leader in the BSA to “prepare young people to make ethical and moral choices over their lifetimes by instilling in them the values of the Scout Oath and Scout Law.” We cannot achieve that calling if the boys are not allowed to lead, to fail, and to try again. They cannot achieve that standard simply by watching adults run the program.

Warning, opinion follows: Helicopter Scoutmastering presents the greatest internal, existential threat to the BSA movement. At its core, it is an ideology driven by metrics and valuing the achievement of the Eagle rank above all else. Advancement to Eagle Scout is universally presented as the sign that a boy has maximized his experience and education from the Boy Scout program. It is not. The greatest indication that a boy has benefited from his time in the program is his membership card. Four percent or so of boys advance to Eagle leaving ninety-six percent as the primary body of the program. The four percent have demonstrated their ability to stick to a course of action and have learned many skills along the way. Nevertheless the ninety-six percent have experienced the program too. In the ideal program, they have led, they have followed, they have planned, they have failed and gotten back up, and at least once a week they have recited the Oath and Law. In other words, they too have made progress toward fulfilling the mission of the Boy Scouts of America. We owe it to the ninety-six percent to provide a program that lives up to the ideals of Scouting, and primary among those ideals is the boy led troop.