The Scoutmaster Conference

By Mark Ray - Illustration by Tristan Elwell

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An important checkpoint for rank advancement, this boy/leader conversation can counsel, inspire, and motivate.

As the Scoutmaster of a 100-member troop, Larry Ashbacher of El Cajon, Calif., has plenty of tasks on his to-do list. But he knows which job is the most crucial: the Scoutmaster conference.

"It's the most important thing I do," he says. That's why Ashbacher handles almost every Scoutmaster conference in Troop 362 himself.

Although some adults (and Scouts) view the Scoutmaster conference as a speed bump on the road to a board of review, experienced Scouters understand its purpose.

"For me, it's really to get to know the Scout, to set a few personal goals, and to concentrate on what it means to live by the Scout Oath and Law," says Jesse Villafranca, Scoutmaster of Troop 462 in Vancouver, Wash.

By focusing on those three elements, Scoutmasters can turn a cursory review of requirements into a life-affirming—and perhaps life-changing—conversation.

Getting to know the Scout

The Scoutmaster conference lets the Scoutmaster get to know the boys—both as a Scout and as a person. Villafranca asks them what they like about the troop and what they would like to change. "One of my favorite questions is, 'If you could take any trip in Scouting that you haven't done before, what would you do?'"

But the conversation goes beyond Scouting, incorporating questions about family, school, and other activities.

“We’ll talk about sports,” Villafranca says. “If he’s on a sports team, does he do his best? Does he try hard? What kind of a winner is he? What kind of a loser is he?”

Scoutmaster conferences build rapport that can pay off when a Scout needs to talk about struggles at school or at home.

Such in-depth discussions happen because of the trust built up between Scout and Scoutmaster over years of more casual conversations.

Setting personal goals

During each conference, the Scoutmaster should point the Scout toward his next step in Scouting: What leadership position would he like to pursue for Star? Which merit badges does he need for Life? Has he started thinking about his Eagle Scout service project?

Again, the conversation should go beyond Scouting. During his Scoutmaster conferences, Villafranca asks permission to challenge Scouts in some area of life. If a boy is struggling in math, for example, Villafranca will challenge him to improve his grade—and he’ll follow up at the next Scoutmaster conference.

“If you remember and bring it up again, that’s huge,” he says. “It means you care.”

To keep track of such information, Villafranca’s troop uses a two-page worksheet for each rank. Most Scouts fill out this ahead of time; if not, Villafranca fills it in as he and the Scout talk. He then reviews it before the next Scoutmaster conference.

Ashbacher, meanwhile, keeps notes in the TroopMaster software his troop uses to track advancement and in the Scout’s own handbook. For example, if he learns that a Scout going for Star rank is struggling with being trustworthy, he’ll write the word “trustworthy” on the page listing Life requirements—a reminder to bring up that subject at a later session.

Scout Oath and Law

Both Ashbacher and Villafranca reserve the right to sign the Scout spirit requirement for each rank at the Scoutmaster conference. That means they spend a lot of time talking about how the Scout is living the Scout Oath and Scout Law in his everyday life.

“There have been a couple of times when we’ve decided we needed to wait a little bit,” Villafranca says. “The Scoutmaster conference gets signed, but the Scout spirit is unsigned for a little while.”

Ashbacher discusses a different aspect of the Oath and Law at each conference. With the early ranks, he focuses on the Scout Oath (duty to self at Tenderfoot, duty to others at Second Class, duty to God and country at First Class). With Star, Life, and Eagle, he focuses more on the Scout

Law.

“That’s how I remember to talk about all these points along the way for each kid,” he says.

Although the Scoutmaster conference is part of the advancement process, both Ashbacher and Villafranca also hold informal conferences with Scouts who are not advancing. If a Scout doesn’t reach First Class within two years, for example, Ashbacher will pull him aside for a chat. He’ll do the same thing if he hears the Scout is having trouble in the troop or at home.

Good Scoutmasters realize that Scoutmaster conferences are not just about helping Scouts advance. They’re about helping Scouts grow up.

Guiding life choices

A few years ago, an older Scout told Ashbacher that he and his girlfriend were thinking about becoming sexually active. Ashbacher, a pediatrician, helped the Scout think through what could happen, including the health risks and the moral implications.

“A week later he came back and says, ‘I thought about what you said, and we decided not to,’” Ashbacher recalled.

Stories like that are why Scoutmaster conferences are so important to Ashbacher. “I only have one chance as Scoutmaster with each kid,” he says. “I can’t let him down.”

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