

Scoutmaster Conference

First, remember what a Scoutmaster's Conference really is all about. It's your time to get to know and develop a working relationship with that Scout and to gage how good or bad a time he's having being a Scout and a Scout in YOUR TROOP.

I've got to divide how to do this into the "obvious" and the "not-so-obvious" parts, for many Scouters like yourself already know how to do it...the technical parts. What everyone seem to have a problem with is how to start and how to stop and some guidance on how the "middle" should go...

The obvious:

*this should be at a time mutually agreed upon by both you and the Scout. While a "scheduled" Scoutmaster's Conference is okay, try not to plan back-to-back Scoutmaster's Conferences unless you **ABSOLUTELY HAVE TO**. Why? Even though you **WON'T**, one Scout talking with you and then twenty-minutes later another Scout talking with you has this "effect."

*no rushing. Yeah, it's a requirement, but you're doing more than "meeting a requirement" if you do it right...you are getting to know that Scout on more than just a "exterior basis." And he's getting to know you as more than just "the Scoutmaster of my Troop."

*remember youth protection. There are some people that will jump to an opportunity to bash our program because from their vantage point, you're doing something "improper." Don't give them that chance. My **BEST** Scoutmaster Conferences are those in which I meet in grand open places...mall food courts, parks with open field of vision, ball game stands, anywhere where there's more than two or three sets of eyes looking at you. Wear a Scouting hat. "Tell them" that you're a Scouter by your appearance and behavior. And most of all, keep that appropriate distance between you and your Scout.

*think "outside the Troop meeting" for the Scoutmaster's Conference. There's nothing that says you cannot talk with the Scout during a campout, or at summer camp in the dining hall, or on the lakefront. There's nothing that says you two have to be sitting or standing (preferably one or the other, but hey....if you two are bicycling toward a location, that's cool too.) The point is that you're **TALKING** with the Scout...not "interviewing him." You're **COACHING** him, not "instructing him."

*finally, have fun. This is a requirement, yeah, so? So your intent is to learn more about John than you did last month, or the last time you talked with him. And for him to learn more about you than the last time.

Okay. Enough with the obvious stuff. Here's the stuff that's not so obvious:

*The length of the Scoutmaster's Conference should be long enough for you to know three or four more things about him that you didn't know before; and short enough for him to understand the significance of this step toward Eagle. Given those parameters, I can't tell you how **LONG** or **SHORT** a Scoutmaster's Conference should be. A good "rule of thumb" is about 20 minutes...but hey, if the two of you are having a great time talking about the last campout or the Twins...don't let the clock keep you from talking. Likewise, if he's having a time talking with you..and you with him..keep going. If no information is forthcoming...don't prolong the agony more than you two have to! Don't worry...the next time **WILL** get better for both of you!!

The intent of the Scoutmaster's Conference is for YOU to impart some of YOUR PERSONAL CHARACTER TO THAT SCOUT. Your honesty. Your integrity. Your sense of what's right and what's wrong. This is that Scout's chance to see YOUR APPLICATION OF THE SCOUTING IDEALS and to emulate your application through his own personal application.

In other words, its not so much a check on his character as it is yours.

*You can talk about anything under the sun. Not just Scouting...you and he already get enough "talk about Scouting." Talk about your families. Your pets and your siblings. The things you enjoyed about school at his age and the things you hated about school at his age. The TV shows that kids his age would watch (don't know?? ASK!). The movies. Anything that will allow you to use that to compare or matchup to the Scouting ideals. You're trying to get to know this Scout as a PERSON and not just as "Paul, working toward First Class."

*There used to be a set of guidebooks that gave generic questions about that particular rank. Forget that! At each step along the way, you want to ask five key questions (five fingers, five questions):

*Tell me about the best time you've had so far in our Troop

*Tell me about something that made you think about the Scout Law, or the Promise (Oath), or something that had to do with Scouts

*Tell me about something really messed up about our Troop

*Tell me about something that you wished that you could do better -- in or out of Scouting

*Tell me something about yourself that has NOTHING to do with Scouting

Those answers to those leading questions will give you as Scoutmaster or Assistant Scoutmaster some idea of how the ideals of Scouting has "hit home" or not...whether or not the Scout is having fun or not, and most importantly, opens him up to asking followup questions and to carry on a CONVERSATION with the Scout.

*Once again, this is NOT a "question and answer session." Come ready to talk with this Scout (going back to the "don't rush it" part) about life and living...the Scouting way.

*There are some things you DO NOT WANT TO TALK ABOUT. Okay. Let me rephrase that. There are some things you SHOULD NOT WANT TO TALK ABOUT with that Scout, by yourself, during this time. You probably have some idea, but here's the short list and why:

*You don't want to talk about fellow Scouters. This is a conference between YOU and that Scout. If other Scouters come up, try to redirect the conversation back to the two of you by saying something like "Well, Mr. _____ is a good Scouter, and I'm glad to have him here...but I don't think it's fair that we talk about him without him being here...."

Now, if Mr. _____ has done something WRONG (in the eyes of the Scout, not in your eyes or ears!!), let him talk and explain it. Then, you've got some reporting and sharing to do....

*You don't want to talk about politics, nor political figures. Yeah, the President is a BSA member too, but let's try to keep this focused on the SCOUTS' behavior or lack thereof and NOT the President's nor anyone else's behavior. Same goes for celebrities....

*SEX. Man, that's a hot button. As an adult, you have some obligations to share your feelings of what a young man should be all about. But leave the indepth explanation of sexual activity and sexual enjoyment to the Scout's parents or religious leaders.

I had a parent to ask me to explain sexuality to a Scout because they were too ashamed to do so themselves. I refused, explaining that while Scouting encourages a Scout to be aware of his body changes while he is developing from boy to man, that we are NOT in the "sexual instruction and coaching" business. I would suggest the same approach to your Scouts.

In other words...talk about protecting himself, waiting until the right time, and respect for both the girl and himself are fine and are positive messages to any Scout...and works within our Scouting ideals of Trustworthiness, Bravery, and Cleanliness; talk about sexual acts, self-gratification, and "what I saw on TV last night...." are NOT positive messages for a Scout and should be avoided.

I've been caught in the "Hey Mr. (Scoutmaster), you've had sex. What is it like?"-type questions. The best approach there is to be honest but also understanding that such discussions best belong with the parents of that Scout.

"Yeah, I've had sex, Henry...several times. But I really feel that this part of the discussion should be saved for your parents."

"But they aren't as cool as you are when it comes to talking to me..."

"Thanks, but I really don't want to go down that trail. As you'll learn when you get a little older -- if you don't already know it now -- men whom really care about the girls they've been with don't give up details. That's something that stays between the girl they were with and themselves."

Bring it back to the Scouting ideals...redirect it back to WHY YOU TWO ARE THERE.

Questions dealing with race: That's also a careful area to approach, but not because of the obvious. The obvious says "you don't want to express a feeling about race relations." That's true to a point. Instead of talking about your feelings, how about asking the Scout to express HIS own feelings. Those points can be redirected to the idea that Scouting was created for all boys to enjoy; that every Scout has the same standards, and there's no "standards for boys of one" racial or ethnic group as opposed to others.

You SHOULD talk about inequities, and how he as a SCOUT can make those uneven things even as he grows up. He needs to know from you, as an adult, that racism is not a good thing but it's something that he, like you, will have to deal with as you both get older.

What if someone calls you a name?

"Well, Bill, I don't like being called any names... I guess...there's something about being brave that says that no matter what people call you, that you know who and what you are. People whom call others names are looking for a reaction...and when I don't give them the reaction they are looking for, they go away. That's a part of being brave...what happens when someone calls YOU a name?"

*How to close it up. Ask about the Board of Review. How confident are you about this next step? What things you think they'll ask you about? (an especially great question for a Scout or Tenderfoot....they are already scared about this "Review Board" and the stuff that other Scouts (and maybe Scouters) have teased or terrorized them with. This is your chance to confirm that it's NOT a "examination" but rather a review of what you've got out of Scouting.

He'll want to keep going -- and so will you. You can stop by simply saying " I'm glad that we got to talk a bit. Anytime you want to talk again, let me know and I'll set aside some time for you. And good luck on your Board of Review!"

And be sincere about it...your job as Scoutmaster is to BE THERE for your Scout members. Not to be at their beck and call...but to be a resource to help them out as they move down the Scouting trail!

The Scoutmaster's Conference is NOT a "grilling session" in which you have the Scout prove to you that he's met all of the requirements for the rank he's going to be boarded for. This is your time to get to know that Scout for whom he is....if you ask those five leading questions, elements of his work toward that rank will come out and you'll have some idea of what he needs to work further on and what things he's mastered. Also you'll find out more importantly, how well he's mastered the Scouting ideals..which is what the Board is going to ask him about, so you've prepared him for that "meeting." which is the other part of the Conference.

You learn about his mastery or not of his Scouting skills during the Troop meetings and campouts and other activities of the Troop...not during the 20 or so minutes you've spending with him on a park bench or at the shopping center plaza.