
VOLUNTEER-PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

INTRODUCTION

Since the early days of Scouting in the United States, good volunteer-professional relationships have been one of the special hallmarks of the Boy Scouts of America. Today, this special partnership between volunteers and professionals is the core of its success at a council/district level. When the partnership thrives, the Scouting movement thrives. If the partnership is not working well, Scouting suffers.

The BSA trains Scout professionals on their responsibility for developing good working relationships with volunteers. However, both volunteers and professionals share responsibility for building good working relationships in Scouting. No matter what your role in the district or council, skill in working effectively with your professional staff adviser is important.

Both commissioner and professional must work to build the partnership. They both share the wreath of service.

QUALITIES OF A GOOD RELATIONSHIP

Good volunteer -professional relationships are characterized by mutual trust, mutual respect, and mutual recognition of each other's role and competency. When the partnership is working well, both partners are aware of their interdependence, they have complete confidence in each other, and they share the same objectives (to help units better serve more youth through scouting). In Scout districts, for example, mutual dependence results because district executives know they cannot possibly do all the work that needs to be done, and district volunteers know they need the coaching and experience of full-time professionals.

If partners have complete confidence in each other, they will seek each other's counsel. Neither partner has a monopoly on wisdom, judgement, or experience. When the full resources of both parties are applied to decision-making, the combination is unbeatable.

Your professional is a Scouting friend, coach, and counselor. Working together is more effective when volunteers and professionals enjoy each other's company. Professionals do not work for volunteers, but with them as partners on behalf of youth. The unselfish service and common dedication manifested breeds mutual respect and a feeling of kinship. One test of the relationship is whether the two parties think of each other as friends.

Occasionally, a volunteer will say to a professional, “Remember, you get paid for this, and I don’t.” But that is not the significant difference between volunteers and professionals. The significant difference is that volunteers can give only a portion of their time to Scouting, while professionals give their full time, and then some.

This means professionals are dependent upon the Scouting movement for material things of life, but it does not mean professionals look upon Scouting differently than volunteers. Both are dedicated to the same principles, and both are trying to live out those principles in their lives and in their work. Many professionals could pursue careers outside of Scouting and make more money but choose to stay in Scouting because of their commitment to youth and their belief in the program.

The fact that professionals give all their time means their experience is broader and deepens more quickly. Their training is more intensive and continues throughout their professional careers. This makes their coaching more valuable to volunteers. So, seek out the guidance of your professional coach.

TIPS FOR BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

Here are a few tips on how good commissioners work with their professional staff advisers:

- Intentionally begin to build a good relationship with your professional from your very first visit. Be positive. Be enthusiastic. Be well prepared. Think in advance about the impression you want to make as one of the trusted volunteers of the district or council
- Be accessible to your professional adviser. Exchange phone numbers, e-mail addresses, mailing addresses, etc. Avoid the impression that you are too busy or annoyed when he or she calls. Return his or her calls. Set up regularly scheduled visits and/or phone dates. You may need to talk weekly, monthly, or less frequently, depending on your responsibility.
- Create a welcome environment for the new professional and plan ways to incorporate him or her into the team. Remember, it’s easy for a group to turn inward and make newcomers feel awkward or unwelcome. Send a letter of introduction to appropriate volunteers from a person in authority (council president, Scout executive, etc.). This helps a person feel good about joining the district or council. It also helps volunteers get acquainted with the new professional.
- A professional will try to make efficient use of volunteers’ time and, as best they can, plan visits and meetings at times that are best for volunteers. Commissioners and professionals should help make the most efficient use of each other’s Scouting time.
- Commissioners should know that they can turn to their professional for advice or for troubleshooting. Help create the kind of relationship in which you are comfortable asking for help.

- There will inevitably be some professionals you don't like as much as others. That's human nature. However, part of being a good Scouter is working with all kinds of people, even when human chemistry isn't just perfect. Feel free to talk with your professional partner about how you are working together.
- While you obviously want to form a Scouting relationship, it is nevertheless important to get to know your professional as a whole person. Most of us will feel more comfortable working with someone who is interested in other aspects of our lives as well as our Scouting responsibilities. Keep in mind that Scouting is not a person's only priority in life. They will have family priorities and may be active in religious and other activities.
- Let your professional adviser know if you plan to have your spouse, assistant, or work associate assist you with a Scouting task, and how the professional can be helpful to that person.
- Develop good communications in which you and your professional really listen to and understand each other.
- In some instances, the function of guiding other volunteers is shared between you and a professional. For example, both the council commissioner and district executives have a direct working relationship with district commissioners. Unit commissioners work with both their district executive and their ADC. You and the professional should be careful to avoid confusion for volunteers and to ensure that they receive consistent messages and have a compatible relationship with both their volunteer leader and the professional.

Here are just a few examples of the relationship that should prevail:

- Agenda planning. When the council or district commissioner has an agenda to plan, it seems natural to begin with a conversation with the professional adviser. He or she can contribute his knowledge of the total needs of the district. The executive often brings a pencil draft of the agenda, but the final agenda should be the volunteer's.
- Recruiting volunteers. Perhaps the district commissioner wishes to recruit an assistant or a unit commissioner. The district commissioner and district executive together consider the best people available for the position.
- Coaching in committee meetings. The volunteer always presides. The executive is usually seated beside the commissioner leader so they will have easy access to each other.
- Evaluating meetings. After a meeting, the commissioner and the executive usually discuss what happened and the steps needed to follow up.
- Setting goals. The setting of goals results in commitments for both commissioner leaders and the executive, so both participate in the process.
- Helping units. The district executive wants to keep in touch with unit leaders, but commissioners provide unit service. When special problems arise in units, commissioners ask the district executive to help.

- Organizing units. For each new unit, an organizer, trainer and a new-unit commissioner are needed. The district executive gives overall support in this effort.

A CLOSING NOTE

Historically, Scouting's great success has resulted because of volunteer talent and the professionals who guide and support talented volunteers.

The best relationships between professional and volunteer are those that include trust, friendship, mutual respect, recognition of each other's skills, and a further recognition created when those skills are combined.

The continuing greatness of Scouting as a volunteer movement is in your capable hands as you and your volunteer team effectively use the resource of your professional adviser.

RESOURCES