

**THE ROLE OF THE COMMISSIONER IN THE TRANSITION
FROM WEBELOS TO BOY SCOUTS**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Importance of Scouting's History	8
Importance of Basic Scouting Skills	9
Importance of Insignia Control	13
Importance of the Scout Law	14
Importance of the Scout Oath	15
Importance of Knowledge of the District	16
Importance of Knowledge of Cub and Boy Scout Differences	17
Conclusion	21
Bibliography	28

Problem Statement

A meager number of Webelos make the progression into Boy Scouting , or once the transition is made , the Boy Scout program does not retain them . Is this because the Webelos Scouts have not been prepared well enough for their future role as Scouts , or is it a question of poor training of Webelos leaders ? Based on personal experience, this thesis addresses this issue.

Introduction

The transition from Webelos to Boy Scouts is an important part of a boy's Scouting experience. The better prepared a boy is as a Webelos, the better his experience as a Boy Scout. When his preparation and experience mesh properly, the Boy Scout program is able to retain him and give him the full benefit of the program. The Webelos leader is vested with this responsibility, the essentials of which are included in seven crucial steps. The seven steps listed will be examined in their relation to the retention trends that have become evident in the past several years in the Tuckaleechee District of the Great Smoky Mountain Council of the Boy Scouts of America.

Certain key elements should first be imparted to the leaders.

These include the ideas that:

- 1) Scouting history should be taught to all Webelos.
- 2) Webelos preparing for Boy Scouts should possess a thorough, working knowledge of basic Scouting skills.
- 3) Webelos must understand the importance of insignia control.
- 4) Webelos should understand the twelve points of the Scout Law, which set the parameters of what is expected of each Scout.
- 5) Webelos should understand patriotism as it pertains to the Scout Oath.
- 6) Webelos should have a good knowledge of their district.
- 7) Webelos must understand the difference between a Webelos den and a Cub Scout den.

The Tuckaleechee District has the highest percentage of its members consisting of Cub Scouts (including Webelos), but it also has the greatest number of Cub Scouts enrolled of any one of the ten districts in the council. In addition, the district has followed the council and national trends of not retaining a majority of the boys in the Scouting program beyond the Cub Scouting program.

To counter this unproductive series of trends, a change in attitude must occur somewhere in the chain of events. This change should ideally be one that would naturally lead the "graduating" Webelos to choose Boy Scouting as his next step, a step that the boy would make on his own initiative. The change should also effect the boy so that he be ready to make a contribution to the program, but would also give him a sense of accomplishment which, in turn, would aid in the retention of the boy in the program.

Though hyperactive at this age, the Webelos Scout is not in the position to determine the direction he should take in arriving at the desirable outcome of a successful transition and subsequent retention in the Boy Scouting program. He is ready, willing, and able to accede to the stimulus provided by a respected Scouting role model. Most Webelos leaders would fit into this category: that is, they provide the stimuli to the boys, and they automatically serve as role models for them.

It would seem to behoove the Scouting program if these Webelos leaders would take upon themselves the responsibility of providing the opportuniti

for the Webelos boys in their charge to grow through the Webelos program to the point where they (the individual boys) would make knowiedgable commitments to the Boy Scouting program . This can be brought about through proper and effective training .

Historical Background

After field testing these seven, key elements for a number of years as a Webelos leader, I have had extensive feedback from a number of troop leaders responsible for the various troops that my Webelos boys have transferred into. To a man, they have told me that these particular boys not only end up, but start out being the best prepared youngsters in the program. These specific boys have been able to make the transition with ease and with confidence. Their average length of stay within the troops has been just over three and one-half years. Many have gone on to earn the rank of Eagle Scout. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case with the many boys who have completed the Webelos program in the Tuckaleechee District, nor in the Great Smoky Mountain Council, for that matter.

The Tuckaleechee District includes the geographic area known as Blount County, Tennessee, and the section of Loudon County, Tennessee, that lies north of Tellico Lake. For the past five years I have served in the Scouting capacity of Assistant District Commissioner, thus I am familiar with the situations concerning transition from Webelos to Boy Scouting in this district, as well as the overall impact that training has had on the leaders, and, ultimately, on the boys themselves.

As mentioned above, I have had several years experience as a successful Webelos leader. In fact, man and boy, I have contributed over fifty-eight years service to the Boy Scouts of America in councils all over

the world . As a retired military man , I became aware of the efficacy of obedience to the rules concerning the desired outcome in any situation . I have , through gentle coaxing , seen some of my ideas for training Webelos leaders put into practice in my own district .

According to Ron Turpin , Field Director of the Great Smoky Mountain Council , the figures for the past (1991) Scouting Roundup indicated that approximately 37.5 % of the Webelos moved up into the Scouting program (Interview , 20 January 1992). ~~Though~~ though this tallies with the national average , it still leaves much room for improvement . This Council has 8694 currently registered Cub Scouts . Slightly over 25 % of these boys are in the Webelos program . Assuming that half of these Webelos boys are in the second year of their program , some 1090 boys are being prepared to enter the Boy Scouting program . When only 409 boys actually make the progression , something or someone has failed in its / his obligation to both the boys and to the Scouting program . What should be done about the other 681 ? Can training leaders effect a turnaround in this sliding trend ?

Discussion

Key Element # 1 - Scouting History

The element of Scouting history should be ⁷ inculcated early in the second year of the Webelos Scout's experience. There are exciting events in the history of Scouting: from the boyhood of Baden-Powell through his exploits in India and Africa to his founding of the first Scout troop; the woodsman's and naturalist's lore of Dan Beard and Ernest Thompson Seton; the unknown Scout's good turn; Scouts and the war efforts; sensational accomplishments of former Scouts, from polar exploration to space exploration.

Young boys both need and enjoy hearing about "heroes." Scouting has many (Boy Scout Handbook, 10 ed., pp. 579 - 585). A few minutes at each den meeting devoted to Scouting history (rather a " Scoutmaster's Minute ") can create within the boy a desire for emulation as he grows and matures into the Boy Scout program.

The concept of having a sense of the past, too, is sound citizenship preparation. That is, being a member of any organization one must know and understand that organization's history from its beginning to present. Knowing the "stories" gives the Webelos boy a touchstone of common experience and knowledge with other, older boys already in a troop. It ensures a spirit of camaraderie.

Key Element # 2 - Basic Skills

Another "touchstone" between the Webelos Scout and the members of a troop is the Webelos boy's familiarity with some of the basic Scouting skills. No one likes to be completely "out of the know." If the boys know some terminology, some application of a skill, then they have a leg up on the problem of being the new kid on the block. They can begin the process of integration without having to endure a drawn-out period of initiation into the "secret rites" of Scoutcraft. [I am not implying that Scouting has secret rites, but that to the young lad who doesn't know anything about a particular skill, the words "Whatsa matter with you? Everybody knows that!" can certainly dampen his enthusiasm for any further exploration and/or involvement with that particular topic, group, person, etc.] At least certain basic skills should be introduced to the Webelos Scout well before time for his graduation into a Scout troop. These should include basic first aid, camping, and knot tying.

Camping

Since the restrictions have been lifted concerning overnight camping by Webelos Scouts, the opportunities for introduction of the skills to the boys has been immensely facilitated. Not only can the Webelos camp out, they have opportunities to attend summer day

camps , weekends at summer resident camps , camporees -- all the while they are exposed to basic Scouting skills , often taught under the guise of " fun . "

Some of the concepts of the Webelos should learn about camping include necessary (and unnecessary) equipment , site choice , proper dress , and basic survival skills . Much of this is touched on in the Webelos Scout Book (pp. 235 - 245) . The " in the field " experience found at a local camporee can often be the most rewarding . It is there , if proper guidance is given by the boys' leader , that the Webelos Scouts can observe other boys of Scout age setting up their own campsites , doing their own cooking , planning their own activities for the competitive events they plan to engage in (Charlotte Scates and Vickie Johnson , personal interview) . Ideally , the Webelos leader should guide his boys to the campsite of each troop that his boys might " feed " into at the time of their graduation into Scouting . Just as surely as there are different strokes for different folks , the individuality of the Webelos boys is beginning to emerge . What would appeal to one boy about a particular troop , its membership , its activities , its " feel , " might not appeal to all the boys in the Webelos den (Bob Black , personal interview) .

First Aid

That first aid skills should be included in the boys' experience is almost a given in today's latchkey society. The Webelos Handbook includes a section on "hurry cases" that indoctrinates the boy in some basic skills (pp. 257 - 265). These skills can certainly be built upon by exposure to the skills found in the Boy Scout Handbook and the First Aid Merit Badge pamphlet, as well as an American Red Cross Basic First Aid course (which is certainly within the grasp of this age group). The very idea of first aid is a basic tenet of the Scouting program: to be prepared. The boys should know this. The skills should not be taught in isolation. They should be taught, along with tried and true techniques, so that the boy will know when to use them and how to apply them. The urgency of knowing that his own, or another family member's health, well being, and life might depend upon his knowledge and skill will aid in the boy's maturity and judgment.

Knot Tying

Knot tying has not become a lost art. It is alive and well in the Scouting program. When Webelos Scouts truly learn the basic Scout knots "before" their transition into the Boy Scouting program, they have a demonstrable skill that will put them in good stead with future patrol leaders and adult Scouters. Knowledge and confidence

in this area is easily obtained , yet often overlooked as a skill to be acquired .

Adventure

Other Boy Scouting activities that can be introduced to Webelos boys as teasers include the myriad of outdoor activities . One of our district's unit commissioners has a daughter who is a registered merit badge counsellor for reptile study . He often includes her in visits to den and pack meetings when she is home from her university graduate study . The boys love her free and easy way with lizards and snakes . The promise of the seemingly perilous adventures that Boy Scouting holds is certainly a calling card in favor of continuation in the older boys' program (Jerry Truett , personal interview) .

Key Element # 3 - Uniforming

Scouting literature frequently makes mention of the democratic effect of uniforming (Scoutmaster Handbook, p. 76, for example). The Cub Scout program makes much use and emphasis of both temporary and permanent rank insignia. The Webelos should be made aware that there are different rules that govern the wearing of rank insignia within the Boy Scout program. (Very few things cut to the quick any faster than having troop members make fun of the boy in his new uniform that his mom has dutifully sewn all his old Cub Scout badges on.) Proper uniforming creates its own aura of pride. And it builds respect for the members of the unit for each other and for the entire Scouting movement. It should be given that adult Scouters (in both the Cub and Boy Scout programs) know and respect the guidelines of the national policies concerning uniforming and insignia control. There is a proper place for every badge and patch; it just might not always be on the uniform, however.

Key Element # 4 - Moral Philosophy

The underlying significance of both the Cub Scout promise and the Boy Scout oath is derived from the moral philosophy found in the twelve points of Scout Law. Each Webelos should be introduced to the Law in order for him to begin to gain an understanding and appreciation of the parameters which it sets on the expectations of the attitudes and actions of each boy. Each point of the Law should be so presented that the Webelos Scout will understand its meaning as it would apply to his own life and actions. He should be made aware of the absolute quality of that point, but also how that particular point of the Law can take on more significance to the boy as he grows and matures. It goes without saying that each Webelos Scout should memorize the points of the Scout Law to the point where he can repeat them, in proper order, from memory and give a brief explanation of what each point means (Webelos Scout Book, p. 359). Herein lies a case where the Webelos leader should avoid the old cliché of saying, "Do as I say, not as I do." The leader should commit to memory the Law so that he may serve as both an example for the boys and as a means of corrective encouragement to them.

Key Element # 5 - Patriotism

Hand in hand with the Scout Law, the Scout Oath (or Promise) should be a distinct aspect of the Webelos boys' learning . He should be able to repeat it from memory , and he should understand its tenets (Webelos Scout Book , pp. 147 - 148). The gist of this element is that the boy should begin to see for himself the concept of patriotism as it pertains to the Scout Oath . The Oath , itself , would allow him to become aware of his personal responsibility to respect his country and all the symbols relating to his country , e.g.: the National Anthem , the flag , the Pledge of Allegiance , etc . This commitment to his responsibility should lead , naturally , to a commitment to duty to his country , both as a Scout and later in life (in the area of becoming an informed citizen , voting , military service , abiding by the laws , paying taxes , public service , etc .)

Key Element # 6 - Scouting Organization

It has been my experience that the boy members of the Scouting program, whether Webelos or Boy Scouts, tend to relate better to themselves and their units when they have a clear picture of the overall arrangement of the district and their own unit's place in it. They should know the name of their district. This instills pride and a sense of patriotism in the hearts and minds of the boys, especially when their units are engaged in interdistrict competitions, such as council-wide camporees, Scout shows, etc.

It is the task of the Webelos leader to introduce his boys around to the various troop leaders and other officers in the district. A good time to do this is during a district camping event, such as a camporee. It helps the boy to become familiar with the names and faces of these district leaders, because it is usually these leaders who make up the pool of counsellors for merit badges and boards of review. Knowing these men and women in advance takes some of the fear of the unknown away from the boys in a future time of stress.

Key Element # 7 - Unit Organization

Possibly on^e of the most important elements of the boys' transition into Scouting , at least as far as the troop leader is concerned is that the boys should be aware of the fact that there are basic differences between Cub Scout dens , Webelos dens , and Boy Scout patrols . These differences may need to be pointed out to the boys in several ways . It should always be kept in mind that the boys should be made to feel that they are "growing" into a more mature program because of their own evidences of maturity . Never should leaders or boys ridicule or minimize the need or effectiveness of any younger group of boys . This would only defeat one of the primary purposes of the Scouting movement . It could also turn more sensitive boys against any Scouting program what - so - ever .

The boys should be told of their expectations as Webelos Scouts . That they will have to begin to enter into the decision making processes of the activities programs of their particular units should be introduced early to the Webelos boys . As the boys advance in their work within the Webelos den , they should gradually begin to take on more and more responsibility . It is this individual responsibility that is vested in the boy himself that leads him into productive contributions as a future member of a Boy Scouting patrol . It is here that they learn

the concept that it's OK for boys to teach other boys . The Patrol Method , the " backbone " of the entire Scouting program , is first introduced in the Webelos den .

Imparting Key Elements - Training

The impart^c of training on boy retention cannot be over emphasized . It is through the leaders that the boys gain their information about Scouting and thier zeal to continue with the program .

Training of adult leaders to recognize the needs of the Webelos boys and how to meet them in a constructive way is a primary key to solving the dilemma of how to get boys to join troops after their Cub Scout and Webelos experience . This training would also enable the leaders to provide the stability and self assurance the boys must possess if they are to have the staying power that is required for long - term retention in the Boy Scouting program . Webelos leaders not only have the formal training that they need for their positions , but also that they are encouraged in the carrying out of their duties by those who will ultimately benefit from them ; i.e., Scoutmasters and District Committeemen .

The current District Commissioner , Bill Dossett , was a long - time Cub Scouter . He has helped implement both formal and informal training for Webelos leaders . Charlotte Scates is our current Cub Scout Training Commissioner . She has , also , been very amenable to suggestions that could enhance the awareness of the Webelos leaders in their responsibilities toward boy transition into the Scouting program .

Various other Scouters , troop leaders , commissioners , roundtable personnel have all done their part to begin a turnaround in our district . The need for Boy Scout leaders to be actively involved in this cultivation of leaders project has been a long time in coming , however . For a number of years , there was very little emphasis placed on the value of Woodbadge training for our troop leaders . In the past half - dozen years , a sizeable number of Scouters have availed themselves of this excellent training opportunity . The special session on " Transition from Webelos to Scouting , " that is included in all modern Woodbadge courses , has been very helpful in that it focuses attention on the ready made resource of boy power that is out there for the gathering in (Wood Badge Staff Guide , pp. 105 - 106) . In addition to the formal training sessions , actually as a viable part of them , the seven key elements that I mention above should be presented to Webelos leaders as an integral part of the program they should be prepared to present to the boys in their dens .

Conclusion

Minimizing Transitional Trauma

I have focused on Webelos leaders and their need for training in this paper. It has not been my intention to slight the fact that Boy Scout leaders may also need to be boosted into taking a more serious look at what they can do to ease the trauma of transition and the rate of retention of those boys who have been Webelos Scouts (and who are Boy Scouting's best prospects for membership).

Boy Scout Roundtables should be attended by both Boy Scout and Webelos leaders. It is here that ideas are shared, friendships are forged, frustrations aired, etc. The more the leaders of both age groups come to know each other, the easier it is for both of them to understand the ways in which they can help each other. Invitations can be extended from troops to Webelos dens to attend not only regular troop meetings (which are a requirement for Webelos advancement), but also to attend special events, help with special projects, interact more closely on a one to one basis (with the Webelos and Boy Scouts doing most of the interacting).

Basic Leader Training sessions, both indoor and outdoor, are excellent places for experienced leaders to share their expertise with those leaders who are new to the program. Boy Scout leaders

should not consider it demeaning to attend Cub Scout training sessions .
Frequently , Cub leaders do not know what is happening or is supposed
to happen in the Boy Scout program .

The Woodbadge Training sessions that each council stages
periodically are excellent examples of where adult leaders , particularly
from within the same district , can bond for a common cause . (This
cause is initially perceived as "surviving the Woodbadge experience .")
As the training sessions continue , the Woodbadge trainees are gradually
led to the conclusions that mutual sharing of resources , skills , knowledge ,
etc . is a key element to meeting and surmounting any problems that
they could have only faced before with a certain sense of " me against
the world ." Though a bit of bravado is usually necessary in true
leadership qualities , knowing that there's help out there eases the
insecurities that people often face when assuming a leadership role ,
especially when that leadership role envelops the guidance of fourth
through eighth grade boys .

Informal "training " of leaders readily occurs around the late
night coffee pots and cracker barrels at the district " headquarters' tent "
at camporees . It is here that camaraderie is established that carries
over into the week to week interactions between troops and packs .

A recent study by the Denver Area Council has focused
on the problems that all councils face with transition and retention of
Webelos Scouts as they move on into the Boy Scout program (February

Graduation of Second Year Webelos). This study indicates that attendance at resident summer camp is THE key to retaining boys in the program (p. 1). In fact , according to the report , there is better than three to one ^o adds that the former Webelos who attends summer resident camp will remain with the Scouting program over the former Webelos who does not attend summer resident camp (Ibid.). The rationale behind this seems to have been inherent in the Scouting calendar as it has been practiced for generations in this country . That is , we have a tendency to think of ^{the} Scouting year as ending in May (when school is out). ~~At least this way~~ ^{by} many Cub Scouting and Webelos programs are ^{non-} fun . ~~this way~~

People get out of programs and commitments to which they are not fully committed . Cub Scouting and Boy Scouts are not one program in most parents' minds . They are graduating out of one program and " scanning the horizon " for something fun for the summer . If they are not yet comfortable with the Troop , leaders and Troop program , it is easy to not join this new and unfamiliar program with new , unfamiliar leaders .

Recommendations

1) Graduation

If the Webelos den graduates as an entity in February , whether or not all the boys have earned the Arrow of Light Award , then the boys have a common bond of unity ; they are able to remain together with their own Scouting friends (p 2). The new two - year plan for Webelos Scouts has the plan that , if everything goes according to schedule , the boys in the rising fourth grade will begin working together in June (immediately after school is out) toward a completion date of May for the Webelos rank . In June , the rising fifth grade boys will begin working toward a completion date of January for their Arrow of Light Award . This award's presentation can coincide with the pack's Blue and Gold banquet and a Transition Ceremony into the Boy Scouting program (The Cub Scout Cycle , p. 2). This plan gives leaders more time to indoctrinate parents and boys about the importance of continuing the Scouting plan in their lives . It gives the Webelos leaders the opportunity to serve as acting Assistant Scoutmasters for several months while their boys become acclimated to the Boy Scouting program . It allows plenty of time for families to become accustomed to the idea of summer camp attendance (fee collection , etc .) And it gives plenty of time for parents to get to know troop leaders (February Graduation of Second Year Webelos , p. 3) . The end

result , it is suggested , is that more first year Scouts attend summer camp , are more satisfied with the program , and have a much greater tendency to remain actively involved in the program for a sizable length of time .

2) Commissioner Responsibilities

The Commissioner has his job cut out for him . It is his responsibility to see that the various leaders entrusted to his charge are carrying out their duties to their boys (and to their parents AND to the Boy Scouting program as a whole). He is responsible for training on both formal and informal levels . Unit Commissioners should be familiar enough with the units they supervise to recognize whether or not the several key elements noted previously are being carried out . Preparation of the boys themselves is the true test as to whether transition from Webelos to Boy Scouting will take place and whether , once the boys are member of a troop , will they remain active for any length of time .

3) Be Prepared !

Because at the root of many of the Boy Scout program's retention problems lies the fact that many Webelos come into the program ill prepared . A well prepared Webelos will be much readier to take on the Boy Scout program than one who is not . Well trained and knowledgeable boys can begin the Boy Scout program with full confidence of their abilities . Leaders must recognize that Webelos aged boys are at a crucial stage of their lives and will react positively to firm guidance and leadership .

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