



The Scout-Led Troop

Is it **CHAOS** or **CONSTRUCTIVE DISARRAY**? Here's how you can help your troop's youth leaders take charge.

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IF YOU WANT TO KNOW how *not* to create a Scout-led troop, talk to Dale Werts. In the fall of 2012, Werts' unit, Troop 714 in Edgerton, Mo., decided to become completely Scout-led. The adult leaders made the switch quickly — the youth leaders, not so much. Given the chance to sink or swim, the Scouts promptly sank.

"The adults got the message to step back and let the boys lead, but the boys had never done that before; they didn't do it in Cub Scouts, and they hadn't done it in Boy Scouts yet," recalls Werts, an

assistant Scoutmaster. "So when the adults stepped back and the boys didn't immediately start humming like a finely tuned machine, it kind of foundered. Camping suffered; meetings were not organized; fun was not being had."

The failure discouraged the troop's adults, but it didn't deter them. They regrouped and developed a transition plan built around three key strategies: training Scouts, training adults and training parents. In the fall of 2013, they tried their Scout-led experiment again — this time with better results.



“The boys are doing everything,” Werts says. “They’re feeling more empowered, and they’re also feeling more accountable. When something goes wrong, they don’t immediately point to some adult.”

And what about the adults? “The adults say, ‘This is cool. I don’t have to work as hard,’” Werts says.

With a solid plan, you and your fellow Scouters can also discover just how cool Scout-led troops can be. Here are some tips to get you started.

Define Your Terms — and Your Limits

One of the first things you should do is decide just what you mean by “Scout-led troop.” Consider these questions, for example: What is the role of adults in a Scout-led troop? How involved should adults be in troop

meetings and patrol leaders’ council (PLC) meetings? When should the Scoutmaster exercise veto power? Should he or she even have veto power? What happens when the PLC drops the ball?

According to Assistant Scoutmaster Joe Smith from Troop 1002 in Richmond, Texas, many Scouters mistakenly think a troop is either Scout-led or it’s not. Instead, he points out that being Scout-led is “a spectrum, not a condition; the level of independence given to the boys is dependent on the maturity and cultural personality of the troop.”

Moreover, no matter how much authority you give your Scouts, you can never delegate your responsibility as an adult leader. That obviously means stepping in before health and safety are threatened, but it also means

backing your Scouts when their good-faith efforts turn out badly. “Angry parents get to deal with me and not the Scouts,” says Patrick Provart, a pack committee member in Springfield, Ill., who has twice served as Scoutmaster. “Rest assured that the Scouts and I will be talking later.”

Unite Your Adults

If your adult leaders all have different ideas of what it means to be a Scout-led troop, your transition will be rocky at best. Before you make any changes, make sure everyone has the same vision in mind.

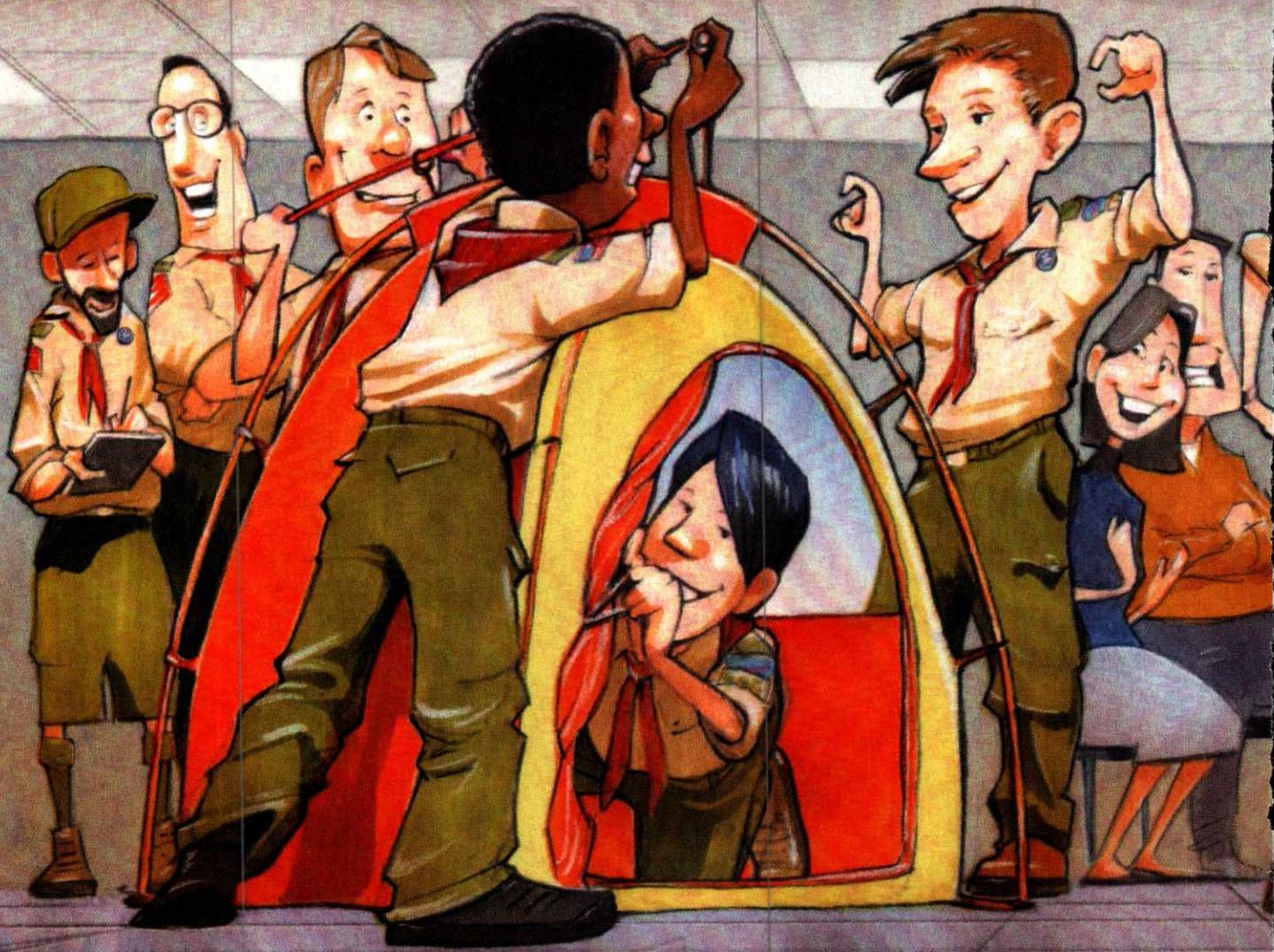
That was especially important when Troop 1882 was founded in Haymarket, Va., in 2012. The troop consisted of 15 graduating Webelos Scouts and their parents (along with one slightly older Scout), so it was important for the adults to make a smooth transition to Boy Scouting.

“We made sure the Scoutmaster and all assistant Scoutmasters were fully trained, and three adults immediately attended Wood Badge,” says Scoutmaster Matt Gallagher. “We felt the adults needed to set the tone and get as much knowledge as we could as to how it ‘should’ be done.”

Two years later, the troop has more than 40 active Scouts — and a group of leaders who continue to share a common vision. “That’s one very good thing we have, from the committee to the assistant Scoutmasters,” Gallagher says. “We all talk about being ‘checks’ on each other to make sure we don’t impose our will on the Scouts.”

Train Your Scouts

While many adults have led groups before, most Scouts haven’t. That’s why it’s important to hold Introduction to Leadership Skills for Troops (ILST) and to get as many Scouts as possible to attend National Youth Leadership Training (NYLT). NYLT has been a top priority for Werts’ troop, which subsidizes the cost



for its Scouts. "This summer, we had two boys on staff and five boys attending as participants," he says. "These boys are all seeing and experiencing how a boy-led troop operates."

Since Gallagher's Scouts have been too young for NYLT, he has made ILST a priority. He emphasizes the importance of running ILST for each group of new leaders. "We didn't do one after the last elections we had, and I'm kind of kicking myself for not pushing that harder," he says. "On our annual plan now, for the weekend after troop elections, there will always be an ILST."

Besides formal training, Troop 158 in Shrewsbury, Mass., held a leadership retreat before it made the transition to youth-led, says Thomas Boddin, who was senior patrol leader at the time. Thomas, his assistant senior patrol leaders, the troop's

patrol leaders and a few adults spent a weekend at a cabin where they discussed the *Patrol Leader Handbook* and *Senior Patrol Leader Handbook*, watched the Scout movie *Follow Me, Boys!* and talked about how they wanted the troop to run.

"That really set the stage for us," Thomas says. "We drew the line and said, 'OK, we're starting boy-led now.' It was definitely a daunting task, but it was definitely successful."

Orient Your Parents

According to Thomas' mother, Erica, it's important to get parents on board. Take the first day of summer camp, for example. "Dads would (previously) help the boys set up their mosquito nets and lay out tarps and things like that," she says. "When our new Scoutmaster took over, we were basically told, 'OK, everybody go home.'

That surprised us old-timers, but he was right."

That doesn't mean newer parents always understand the Scout-led concept. "When their boys were Cubs, the parents called the shots and ran things," Werts says. "When their boys cross over to Boy Scouts, these parents generally need to be taught that Boy Scouts operate differently. This is not self-evident, although a lot of troops think it is and never explain it to the parents."

To educate parents, Werts' troop created Boy-Led Troop 101, an informal training course it offers alongside troop meetings in the fall. "Boy-Led Troop 101 is all about letting parents understand that it's OK to let your kids fail; they learn from that," he says. "Once you explain it, parents will usually make a good effort not to interfere, although they don't always succeed."



STARTING THEM IN CUB SCOUTS

Although Cub Scouting is adult-led, there's plenty of room for Cub Scouts to learn leadership skills. Den leaders and assistant den leaders can lead ceremonies and games, while all boys can learn by watching a den chief, a Boy Scout who assists the den leader.

To help Cub Scouters better understand what boys are capable of, Pat Meadows of Richmond, Va., relies heavily on Boy Scouts during the

OUTDOOR LEADER SKILLS FOR WEBELOS LEADERS courses she runs. "I mentor the boys, and the boys do the leading," she says.

Helping Meadows has let Boy Scouts hone leadership skills they've used back in their home troops and beyond. As the Cub Scout leaders in attendance witness examples of youth leadership, they see the potential for leadership (albeit, in age-appropriate doses) among their own Cub Scouts. "The youth of today will be the governor or president of tomorrow," she says. "We really do need to set the youth up for success."

Support Your Youth Leaders

As you make the transition to a Scout-led troop, you can expect to work harder than ever — at least for a while. Your 11-year-old patrol leaders don't know how to control their peers, and your 13-year-old senior patrol leader might never have run a meeting.

When Shaye Larsen took over as Scoutmaster of Troop 52 in Pleasant View, Utah, seven years ago, he focused on coaching his new senior patrol leader. "It takes a lot of work to make sure he is prepared — meeting with him before meetings, having reflections after meetings, meeting with him and his parents regularly, calling and texting often," Larsen says. "It was a lot of behind-the-scenes work on my part, but it paid off. The SPL started getting more confident and capable, and the troop flourished under his leadership."

Supporting your youth leaders also means giving them space — sometimes literally. Gallagher, for example, leaves the room during PLC meetings. He also gives youth leaders permission to tell him, "We've got this."

"When I see them looking to me more," Gallagher says, "I try to back off and start asking more questions."

Embrace Chaos

Finally, you have to be willing to embrace a little chaos. "That's a natural condition that's going to exist anywhere you have boys in charge of anything," Smith says.

The trick, he says, is knowing when and how to step in (short of obvious health and safety situations). "Ultimately, that chaos is the opportunity for these kids; it's how they're going to learn in a group," he says. "You have to learn to be comfortable

with some of it and to recognize when the chaos has become completely unproductive and is turning some other kids off."

Just remember that when you end the chaos, you end the learning that boys can get only in Scouting. "If you don't go through Scouting, how can you say you were in charge of 40 kids, the budget for a troop, the whens and wheres of everything?" asks Thomas Bodden, a former senior patrol leader. "You can't do that without Scouting. If the troop's not boy-led, the leaders are essentially a damper on this experience. They're not giving the kids the full opportunity that Baden-Powell intended." ♣



SHARE YOUR TIPS for boosting boys' leadership skills in a troop setting at scoutingmagazine.org/scoutledtroop