

Let's Focus on What Really Matters

By Scott Sorrels, National Commissioner Service Chairman

Sometimes it is easy to miss the forest for the trees. As Scouters, we love trees. But it seems we already have more numbers and reports that we can practically use, and sometimes we focus on ratios rather than results. If we are going to give our time and treasure to America's youth, we need to stay focused on results.

Unit Visits Are What Matter

One example where we might refocus our efforts is how we use the three units to one commissioner ratio (3-to-1). The 3-to-1 has long been a hallmark of how we are performing as a commissioner corps, and seldom do you hear a report about commissioner service without hearing about 3-to-1. We were recently asked if we could empirically demonstrate that councils with a 3-to-1 or better ratio were more effective in supporting councils than their peers with higher ratios. That may well be true, but it is the wrong question. The reality is that 3-to-1 focuses on the total resources available, but it ignores the impact of those resources. If a council has a 2-to-1 ratio but those unit commissioners fail to visit those units on a regular basis, then everything else that we do is just misdirected energy. That is why you will start to see us moving away from an emphasis on the 3-to-1 ratio and instead emphasize unit visits. We are starting to track improvements in unit visits as our data baseline as the new Unit Visit Tracking System (UVTS 2.0) is established. UVTS 2.0 is an important resource in moving the commissioner corps in the right direction, and we encourage you to utilize this improved system to record your activity.

You may be thinking that measuring unit visits is just another statistic. That is why we are designing standards that measure what really matters, and that is retention. **Our national commissioner, Tico Perez, has challenged the commissioner corps to take ownership of their unit retention. We accept that challenge.** All of our efforts are designed to move the needle toward that goal. A group of key volunteers is currently developing new standards for how we measure what it means to be a successful commissioner, and the primary focus will be our actual impact on retention. These standards will become how we judge whether a commissioner is effectively rendering quality service to our units—the most fundamental element of why we wear the wreath of service.

Thank You for Your Service

As a commissioner corps, we are celebrating 100 years of service to the Boy Scouts of America. That is a proud legacy. Our predecessors traveled the United States organizing councils and bringing Scouting to thousands of youth. Together, we are building a foundation that will allow the commissioner corps to have a similar impact on the next century of Scouting. Thank you for the important role that you are playing in our second century.

10 Best Practices for Unit Commissioners

A commissioner's primary mission is "to help all units succeed." This mission statement is purposefully rather vague, because the needs of each unit we serve are different and unique to their situation. Unit commissioners need to be competent in almost every aspect of Scouting, and be able to adjust our approach to best serve the units. To draw a rough parallel to the medical field, I like to think of unit commissioners as "general practitioners" rather than "specialists." Remember this—being a commissioner has more to do with relationships than anything else. I'd like to present 10 best practices designed to improve those relationships. These practices were all discussed during this summer's Unit Commissioners' Conference held at Philmont Training Center (PTC).

Best Practice No. 1: Get Connected

"To help all units succeed" is a statement that bears repeating. The commissioner service cannot help units if we do not visit regularly. Obviously the best method is to physically visit a unit during unit meetings, unit activities, and also during unit leadership meetings. Sometimes geography is a challenge, so in those cases, a phone call or e-mail can connect the commissioner with a unit. Why not do both? I have a 75-minute commute. This makes a great time to place a phone call (hands-free, of course) to the unit leaders that I know have similar commutes. No cell phone? No problem—a land line at home or during your lunch break still works, even in the 21st century!

Best Practice No. 2: Know Your Stuff

Have a fully-stocked, fully-read, current Scouting library. People know when they are speaking with an informed, educated commissioner. It can do more damage to a relationship if the commissioner shoots from the hip instead of admitting they don't know an answer and following up later. When a commissioner has read the proper manual, most answers are easily provided. Scouting literature is not typically free of charge, but they are critical to possess if you want to be an effective commissioner. Table 1 at the end of this article provides a list of the basic manuals that every commissioner should own. Depending on the units you serve, the list will be different. Virtually all unit-level issues can be resolved by simply turning to the correct manual or book. There is never any need to "interpret" or try and remember any BSA policy, because they are all written down. You can purchase all these manuals at your local Scout shop or directly from the National Supply Group through their website at www.scoutstuff.org.

Best Practice No. 3: Be a Trained Commissioner

Attend as many training classes as a trainee as possible. Scouting has changed considerably since the beginning; entire parts of the Scouting movement have been discontinued and completely new parts have been added over the last 100 years, with many big changes in the past 25 years. A commissioner absolutely must not rely strictly on their memories of "when I was a youth," and must be aware and knowledgeable of the latest

changes to the program and policies. Training classes are offered district-wide, council-wide, and also through the National Council. I recommend attending a council-level commissioners' college as soon as possible, and if you can take a week off, attendance at a PTC or Sea Base commissioners' conference should be done as early in your commissioner career as possible. Do not wait to attend advanced training. Commissioners with 30 years experience as well as commissioners with one year of experience benefit, and ultimately the units we serve will benefit from advanced training. Other local council courses to attend include Wood Badge and the Trainers' EDGE. Here's a quick checklist for commissioner training:

- Youth Protection training
- Fast Start training
- Basic Training
- College of Commissioner Science
 - Bachelor's Degree
 - Master's Degree (Arrowhead Honor and bachelors prerequisites)
 - Doctorate of Commissioner Science (masters prerequisite)
- Commissioners Conference (no prerequisites)
 - Philmont Training Center
 - Sea Base Training Center

Best Practice No. 4: Fill Your Toolkit

Commissioners need a full “toolkit” to effectively function as a unit commissioner, because sometimes talking won't cut it— you might need some paperwork. You might want a briefcase or book bag to contain your “toolkit.” *The Commissioner Fieldbook for Unit Service* (No. 33621) is our basic manual and should be carried with you at all times. You can purchase a loose-leaf copy for your three-ring binder, or you can download a copy of the *Fieldbook*. The download is around 15 MB, and it should still be printed out for your toolkit. Along with your *Fieldbook*, you should have these other items with you during visits:

- ***Commissioner Helps for Packs, Troops, and Crews (No. 33618A)***
- Scouting forms
- Map of the district
- Council and district calendar
- Your personal calendar, notebook, and contact list

Best Practice No. 5: Customize the Annual Service Plan

Our mission “to help all units succeed” cannot be fulfilled willy-nilly. We need a plan. If you turn to page 17

of the *Fieldbook*, you will find the annual service plan described using a matrix of tasks and months. The matrix is good, but consider expanding it according to your local units and charter cycle. One great approach I've seen and have implemented is shown in Figure 1 (page 6). This tool lays out specific tasks that unit commissioners should do to fulfill our mission. You may need a unique plan for each unit you provide service for, so don't be surprised if you end up with several of these plans. Once the plan is mapped out, determine the actual dates and transfer them into your calendar. I try to do this in July, so when I attend each unit's annual planning meeting in August, I can help shape the year by providing the unit leaders my annual schedule. Have you ever tried to set up a last-minute unit assessment meeting in the same month as pinewood derby? The units' programs must come before our commissioners' plans.

Best Practice No. 6: Get Organized

Not only will you need to organize your "toolkit," but also your schedule and contacts. Commissioners who serve three (3) units could potentially have to keep track of the phone numbers and e-mail addresses of nine (9) people: a chartered organization representative, unit leader, and committee chair for each unit. You'll also need to know when and where they meet, and have a good idea of their scheduled activities. Along with unit information, you'll need to be current on district and council events as well. Get a school-year calendar. My personal favorite is the *Boys' Life* commissioner notebook. This is a pocket-sized notebook with special pages for you to fill in critical contact information, a 12-month calendar that starts in September, and several reproduction forms and information in the back. Your district commissioner will be able to secure these for you through the local council.

Best Practice No. 7: Be a Commissioner of the 21st Century

I'd like to reinforce the concept of "commissioners of the 21st century." This is a term that I have heard spoken during a national commissioner's podcast. A podcast is like a prerecorded radio talk show that is available 24 hours a day for us to listen to at our convenience. Not all commissioners are ready (or have any desire) to merge onto the information super highway, and that's OK. We just need to be aware that chances are, the newest unit leaders are speeding along that highway at break-neck speeds. Good unit commissioner and unit leader matches need to be made so they both communicate in the same manner, or else no communication at all will take place. Also, commissioners need to be aware that there are parts of America that are still only on dial-up Internet, so know your audience before sending massive e-mail attachments. E-mail and the Internet have become indispensable tools for thousands of commissioners.

Take the time to complete your contacts list in your e-mail program. Be sure to ask the unit leaders for all their contact information—e-mail address, home phone, mobile phone, and work phone. Don't forget to ask for the unit's website address. Your calendar and notebook in your toolkit should have all this information. Cell phones are getting smaller and more powerful every day. Take some time to read the manual, or ask for some help. Get those numbers and e-mail addresses into your cell phone. Learn how to "text." "Texting," or the mobile phone version of e-mailing, is quickly becoming a huge part of our lives. That brand new, 21-year-old Tiger den leader

has been texting and e-mailing her entire life, assuming she started e-mailing when she was 6 years old ... in 1995.

Nothing says “commissioner of the 21st century” like the online Unit Visit Tracking System, or UVTS. UVTS should be used by all commissioners, in conjunction with the paper worksheets (No. 34125C, 34126A, and 33660B). UVTS helps keep your thoughts and goals organized, and helps to convey to the district commissioner the needs of all the units.

Best Practice No. 8: Be the BSA

For many new leaders (and some experienced leaders) who may not have been Scouts themselves, the Boy Scouts of America can be a very overwhelming concept. This movement is literally steeped in tradition; we have our own language, and we have probably the most unique professional and volunteer structure known to man. The whole concept of a chartered organization agreement can be very difficult to understand for even the most experienced unit leader. A commissioner guides a unit leader through the details of the Boy Scouts of America. Part of “being the BSA” includes wearing your complete uniform, and it should be properly set-up. What does “properly set-up” mean? This means that the uniform has only approved insignia, pins, and devices. Part of your “toolkit” is the *Insignia Guide* (No. 33066). There is also a watered-down version of the *Insignia Guide* online at www.bsa.scouting.org/scoutsource/Media/InsigniaGuide. Commissioners truly are the ambassadors of the BSA, and we must always remember this as we interact with unit leaders, parents, and the public.

Best Practice No. 9: Be a Commissioner

This seems like an odd practice, so let me explain;

A commissioner’s primary focus should be commissioner service. Please consider being solely registered as a commissioner, and do not “dual-register” as a Scouter in another capacity. For example, if you “dual” as an ASM with a unit (certainly not a unit that you provide commissioner service for, right?), your resources will be reduced and you will not be as effective a commissioner as you could be. Of course, there are times when there are no alternatives, and commissioners must dual or else the unit will fail. This is understandable, but dual-registration should be considered a temporary solution, and part of your efforts should be devoted to recruiting and training your replacement at the unit level, so that you can return to the commissioner service in a 100 percent capacity. So although it is not technically prohibited, please consider single registration as a unit commissioner. The same policy should be used when the district committee is looking for volunteers for activities or leadership. Unit commissioners are “district” volunteers, but don’t fall into the position of being everything for everyone.

Best Practice No. 10: Have Fun

Any job can become drudgery if you let it. Being a unit commissioner is a tough job, and if you want to be effective, it will take a considerable amount of effort on your part. So don’t forget to have fun with it every now and then. Once you have a good relationship with your units, ask if you can visit during a pinewood derby, or

during the Klondike derby, or during a district camporee. You're not going to do the job of an ASM or a pack leader, but you can still go and have a good time. Trust me, the first time a unit leader seeks you out for advice or counsel, the smile on your face will suddenly make all that hard work worth it.

Figure 1 Example Custom Annual Service Plan (Best Practice No. 5)

Unit	Example Pack 1111	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Visit unit committees (four times per year, one time per quarter)													
	For their annual recharter preparation and Quality Unit										X		
	At their annual program planning session and/or round-up								X				
	To train all Fast Start-untrained adults			X									
	To help identify next summer's and fall's leadership,				X								
Visit youth meetings (four times per year, one time per quarter)													
	Fall											X	
	Winter		X										
	Spring						X						
	On an outing or at camp							X					
Visit with unit leaders away from meetings (three times per year)													
	GOAL: 100 percent transition for second-year Webelos into										X		
	WLs and SMs meeting to finalize Webelos February/March	X											
	One-on-one relationship building, coaching, and problem solving with CMs and SMs, and discussion of possible WL role with troop as ASM or member of									X			
Chartered partner recognition and relationship building													
Assist committees in charter presentations to chartered partner						X							