

Good Volunteer-Professional Relationships: A Strategic Issue for Professionals



BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA®



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Scouting's special partnership between volunteers and professionals is the core of its success and the key to what we do. When the partnership thrives, the Scouting movement thrives. If the partnership is not working well, Scouting suffers.

For us to prosper in the 21st century—perhaps for our children to survive in the 21st century—we must remaster and use our human social skills. We need to sharpen skills in:

- Positive ethical values and how to transmit them to the next generation.
- Communications in which people really understand each other.
- Political science and international relations.
- Good citizenship—how to act responsibly from the family to the new global village.

And that brings us to the volunteer movement of Scouting and to Scouting professionals. Scouting is in the people business—the business of values and effective communication and good citizenship and enlightened human relationships.

Scout professionals succeed because they have great ability and work exceedingly hard at developing strong volunteer relationships. Your greatest single professional achievement is the effective involvement of volunteers in carrying out the mission of the district and council.

No matter what your job or task in the profession, the skill in working effectively with volunteers is central. Whether it's a finance campaign, organizing units, effective commissioner operation, or planning the annual Scout show, recruiting, guiding, and skillfully relating to volunteers will bring you success.

High Tech/High Touch

John Naisbitt, shrewd observer of change in America, has long pointed out that **the more people's lives are impacted by new technology, the more they crave**

meaningful human interaction. The more "high tech," the more we need "high touch."

With increasing levels of technology in society and in the BSA as well, the importance of good personal interaction between a volunteer and a professional only intensifies. Because good volunteer-professional relationships meet needs of volunteers, volunteers will be more likely to stay longer and provide valuable service to the district and council.

New technology brings new power and efficiency to Scouting operations, yet at the same time fuels an increased demand for enhanced face-to-face encounters that humanize and personalize district and council operations.

Many volunteers yearn for more meaningful human contacts. Some may even join Scouting in search of more humanized activity. Scout professionals must give their highest priority to developing effective people skills.



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**A PROFESSIONAL
RESPONSIBILITY**

As a professional, always accept responsibility for developing good relationships with volunteers. It is part of the specialized knowledge and standards expected of Scouting professionals.

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 succeed in providing a quality program for youth). In Scout districts, 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, judgment, or

experience. When the full resources of both parties are applied to decision making, the combination is unbeatable.

The district executive is a Scouting friend and counselor for every district volunteer. Working together is more effective when volunteers and professionals enjoy each other's company. Volunteers do not work for district executives, but with them as partners on behalf of youth. The unselfish service they both render and their common dedication breeds mutual respect. One test of the relationship is whether the two parties think of each other as friends.

As a professional, think of yourself as a coach, not a boss. It's a partnership, not a hierarchy. **Avoid saying you "use" (or even "utilize") volunteers. We use tools and things, but not people. Get in the habit of saying that you "involve" volunteers, "rely on" volunteers, "empower" volunteers, or "enable" volunteers.**

Here's a really interesting thing about good district executives: They know when to be a "mirror" and when to be a "candle." Usually they're a mirror—always reflecting the light of district actions back to volunteers. They respect volunteer decisions.

And every now and then, he or she's a candle—for example, selling the district commissioner, then helping him personally challenge the entire commissioner staff to a no-drop pledge in the district. They start with the very first month and intensify the pledge each month. As a DE, you need to be a great coach, but remember, *volunteers* are carrying the ball.

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 are able to 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 movement for the 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.

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.



Here are some tips on how good professionals work with district volunteers:

1. Intentionally begin to build your relationship with each volunteer from your very first visit. Be positive. Be enthusiastic. Be well prepared. Think in advance about the impression you want to make as their district executive, Scout executive, or staff adviser.

2. Be accessible to your volunteers. Exchange phone numbers, e-mail addresses, mailing addresses, etc. Avoid the impression that you are too busy or annoyed when a volunteer calls. Return their calls.

Set up regularly scheduled visits and/or phone dates with key volunteers. Some people you need to talk with weekly, others monthly or even less frequently. Once a month, place in your schedule a few minutes to review a list of others who you do not need to meet with regularly but whom you have not seen at a meeting or talked with for some time. Find a good excuse for a short phone call.

3. Names are important. Know the names of volunteers; pronounce them correctly and, if in doubt, check the proper spelling. It's OK to ask people how they would like to be addressed and how to pronounce their name.

4. Create a welcome environment for new Scouters and plan ways to incorporate them into the team—a new board member, a new unit

commissioner, the new district chair for FOS. Remember, it's easy for a group to turn inward and make newcomers feel awkward or unwelcome. A volunteer who feels like an outsider is not likely to come back. See that a new Scouter receives a letter of welcome from an appropriate person in authority (district chair, council president, Scout executive, or committee chair). This helps a person feel good about joining the organization and conveys that we are well organized and truly need their services.

5. Make efficient use of volunteers' time. Don't waste it. As best you can, plan visits and meetings at times that are best for your volunteers. Be on time for appointments. Come well prepared. Help volunteers make the most efficient use of their Scouting time. For example, a field director arranges to pick up the council commissioner near the close of the business day, makes a recruiting call at 4:30 P.M., and conducts Scouting business over dinner, en route to a key evening meeting. The commissioner is saved a commute and a lot of Scouting business is accomplished in a condensed period of time.

6. Your district and council Scouters should know that they can turn to you for advice or troubleshooting. You, however, must create the kind of non-judgmental relationship in

which they are comfortable to ask for help. Promptness in responding to their needs and questions demonstrates that you care and that their service is valued. Keep your commitments—big or little.

7. Sometimes professionals think they need only work with a couple of people at the top of the district structure. But a good executive probably needs to meet regularly on an individual basis with at least 12 to 15 district leaders to help them plan and prepare for success. Other volunteers also need to know you are available. Build the structure, but don't blindly rely on it. The more volunteer management layers that are superimposed on top of each other, the more the professional needs to help facilitate good communication and working relationships between people in the different layers.

8. There will inevitably be some volunteers that you don't like as much as others. That's human nature. However, part of being a professional is being objective and being impartial. Your reputation and credibility rest, in part, on your fairness.

9. While you obviously want to form a Scouting relationship, it is nevertheless important to get to know each volunteer as a whole person. Most volunteers will feel



more comfortable working with a professional who is interested in the rest of their lives as well as their Scouting responsibilities.

Keep in mind that Scouting is not a person's only priority in life. They will have family priorities and employment obligations, and may be active in religious and other activities.

Write down personal information volunteers share with you and refer to it later. ("Did your daughter get into the college she applied to?" or "How was the week you and your family spent at the lake?") As you believe appropriate, send birthday cards, attend funerals, weddings, etc.

10. Convey a cordial and positive attitude to a volunteer's assistant,

family member, work associate, or anyone else who answers their phone. Let the Scouter's assistant know you are interested in being helpful and conserving the volunteer's time. If a Scouter has asked his or her assistant to help with a Scouting task, you may need to be helpful to the assistant, an action which will not go unnoticed by the volunteer, and will turn that assistant into a friend and supporter.

11. Be sure staff employees in the council office are alert and sensitive to volunteer needs. Help them recognize how important their communication with volunteers is to the success of Scouting (the way the phone is answered, messages taken, a smile conveyed, a sincere interest in volunteer requests). Office support staff should make volunteers feel that someone has listened, heard, and really understood their question, request, or concern.

A well-trained office worker will also keep an ear out for issues that need an immediate or priority professional response. Support staff can indeed help build or damage a good volunteer-professional relationship.

In a challenging low-income urban district, a playground-director Cubmaster spent countless hours collecting the fees and signatures to renew his pack's charter. When he proudly took the papers and fees to the council office, a stern-faced registrar promptly pointed out numerous errors or omissions on the paperwork, which was interpreted as a rejection of both the man and the pack. The Cubmaster was so upset and confused that he returned all the registration fees and the pack never had another meeting. Office staffs do make a difference.

12. Next consider this: The further up the corporate ladder a volunteer is, the more they may expect from

you as a professional and the greater the energy you may need to give to meet that volunteer's expectations. That can be very demanding, *but* it will also have a big payoff as you and that volunteer move your district and council ahead in serving young people.

An exceptional volunteer will have exceptionally high expectations of the professional. That exceptional volunteer will expect:

- Thoroughness of your preparation.
- Accuracy in the details of everything you do.

Praise motivates, reinforces, and inspires.

Make it a part of your relationship with everyone on your council and district team.



- Immediacy of your response to their requests.
- Highest quality of your work to gain their trust.
- That you respect and use their time wisely.

13. Always involve appropriate volunteers in setting goals and planning projects. Neither dictate to nor ignore volunteers. You will seldom move forward by trying to shove an idea down the throats of volunteers. Give them credit for a good idea even if it came from you. If volunteers feel a part of the planning process, they are far more likely to feel responsibility for the end result. The more power you share, the more powerful you become.

14. Project a clean and orderly appearance. Without becoming preachy here, let's just say that a volunteer's perception of you in part mirrors your cleanliness and appearance!

Your car—If you must move a bunch of materials before a volunteer can get in your back seat, that's awkward.

Your office work area—If there's anything on your guest chair, clutter on the floor, or stacks of stuff on your desk, that's an embarrassment.

Your person—If you are not well groomed, neatly dressed, or clean, that's an embarrassment.

15. Then there is "PLT." You know what PLT is? It stands for the "piddly little things."

- Returning phone calls promptly
- A warm welcome when they visit you at the council office
- A concern about their sick child
- An article you've clipped and sent about their hobby or accomplishment
- Helping new volunteers feel like insiders by giving them a short glossary of Scouting lingo

PLT—piddly little things; they are important!

16. In some instances the function of guiding volunteers is shared. A district executive works with operating committee chairs who also look to the district chair for guidance. Both the council camping committee chair and the director of camping have a direct working relationship with members of the council camping committee. Unit commissioners work with both their district executive and their ADC.

The professional is careful to avoid confusion for volunteers and tries to ensure that they receive consistent messages and have a compatible relationship with both their volunteer leader and the professional.

17. Here's an important thought: Be sensitive to the individual differences of each of your key people. They won't all succeed in the same way; you need to know that their working styles are different. Some may move forward without your suggestions,

while others will rely on your specific plans and guidance to accomplish what needs to be done.

Adjust your style to the temperament, age, experience, and cultural background of each volunteer. They are all unique individuals. Needs for guidance will vary even among those engaged in the same task at the same time. Each volunteer will function and use their time differently. *You need to adapt.*

It may seem quite appropriate for a council or district to develop a highly structured and precise support system for volunteers. That system, however, may be quite inappropriate for some volunteers or committees of volunteers (remote rural or low-income urban areas for example). We may become so acclimated to our own setting, background, and structures that we do not notice those Scouting methods or structures that may be awkward, uncomfortable, or inappropriate for others.

The professional uses his/her judgement about each person and each community to provide the flexibility that enables many different people to contribute to Scouting. The ability to adopt Scouting methods and their own professional style to the uniqueness of each individual and each situation is what often distinguishes a great professional from a mediocre professional.



Good Relationships and Six Major Tasks for Volunteer Success

A good volunteer-professional relationship is essential for the success of each task.

The Boy Scouts of America has defined Six Major Tasks for Volunteer Success—six major tasks to make a volunteer system work at the district or council level.

1. Define responsibilities, 2. select and recruit, 3. orient and train, 4. coach volunteers, 5. recognize achievement, and 6. evaluate performance.

A good volunteer-professional relationship is essential for the success of each task. On the other hand, if you design inappropriate responsibilities, recruit inappropriate volunteers, fail to train or recognize achievement, all the great relationships in the world won't get the job done.

1. Define Responsibilities.

Volunteers must know what is expected for them to be successful. Carefully define, in writing, the responsibilities for each position. Be honest; don't minimize the commitment.

Some people are hunting for a responsibility that requires a long-term commitment. Other people, because of lifestyle or sound-bite mentalities, are far more comfortable when given a bite-sized, short-term project or responsibility. Use your professional judgment to design both.

2. Select and Recruit.

You must have a complete team to play the game—no holes in the “line”; no holes in the “backfield.” You use your relationships with volunteers to recruit key people who are, in turn, good recruiters and who attract to other people. It’s like compound interest on your investments! Then you use your relationship with these new people to enlarge or complete your team.

To demonstrate one reason this is important, let’s introduce the “fishbowl analogy” and how membership growth really works. Each particular group of district volunteers has a capacity for a set number of units and youth members. If you want your membership to grow, one of the big things you must do is increase the size of the district volunteer team and its capacity to serve more units—**you must increase**

the size of your fishbowl. Otherwise, any growth in units will be very short-lived.

Fit the right person to the job. Consider each prospect’s skills, interests, and other relevant factors. Consider the variety of motivating factors for people getting involved in Scouting. Use all the prescribed steps in recruiting district volunteers and use the recruiting resources of the BSA.

3. Orient and Train.

Provide each person with prompt orientation on the individual assignment and with adequate training to be successful. The key is to give a person enough information to quickly begin their new task. Don’t overload them with too many books, too many forms, or too much information. The new district chair doesn’t need to know how to run the annual recognition banquet, yet—but rather what key vacancies need to be filled and what to emphasize at the next district meeting.

Much of the training of district and council volunteers is done through defined training courses. However, important informal training occurs through the relationship and

contacts with the professional. Give some thought before each volunteer contact as to what learning might take place. Have a simple learning plan you will carry out in the weeks and months ahead.

4. Coach Volunteers.

Your coaching will take many forms on many topics—all of it directed to a single objective: enabling each volunteer to be successful in their Scouting responsibilities.

Sometimes it will involve removing roadblocks to success; sometimes it’s more serious counseling; sometimes just serving as a sounding board or reassuring volunteers about the great things they’re doing.

Often professional coaching involves helping each volunteer to understand the way in which his/her task connects to the tasks of others. This will help volunteers pull together when facing difficult challenges. It will also help each person appreciate the value of their tasks and the consequences to others if they do a bad job. Encourage every volunteer to personally get to know others in the district or council

structure. Coaching is ongoing. It helps volunteers succeed. It also builds a volunteer's confidence.

5. Recognize Achievement.

Prompt volunteer recognition has an important impact on the tenure and quality of volunteer service in the district or council. Recognition must be sincere, timely,

and earned. Use the great variety of formal BSA recognition items, but also be creative with frequent locally devised thank-yous. Even more effective is the personal "pat on the back" for a job well done. Recognize volunteers on a face-to-face basis, from a person of status, and preferably in front of the volunteer's peers. That may be more effective than an overuse of plaques, patches, and mugs.

All volunteers need praise and recognition. Coaching of new volunteers must especially be mixed with praise so they don't become discouraged. If you are generous with your praise, it will be much easier later when you must discuss a volunteer's shortcomings.

Be specific in your praise. Not, "You're a great trainer," but, "Heard how great you were in counseling with the Scoutmaster of Troop 10



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after the training course last weekend.” Always say, “Thank you.”

The most effective recognition is to increase the impact and effectiveness of a volunteer’s effort and then communicating a high respect for their contribution.

Praise motivates, reinforces, and inspires. Make it a part of your relationship with everyone on your council and district team. And here’s a special thought: Professionals must learn to receive personal recognition vicariously through the success of their volunteers.

6. Evaluate Performance.

Help volunteers regularly evaluate how they’re doing. Use the Self-Evaluation for Unit Commissioners; Appendix E in *Administration of Commissioner Service*, No. 34501; A Self-Evaluation Guide for Successful District Operation, No. 34207; and the “How Will You Know You Have Done a Good Job?” section in *A Handbook for District Operations*, No. 34739.

Self-evaluation is probably the least threatening, especially if it is focused on the end result in the

Scouting program. This minimizes the possibility of destructive judgment and criticism.

Evaluation must also be a part of your discussions with a volunteer. It helps keep some things going well and identifies things that need to be done better. Failure to evaluate implies you don’t really care about what the volunteer does.

When discussing things that are not going as well as they should, remember these guidelines:

- Use the statement of job responsibilities to review expected achievements.

- Be critical of the activity outcome, not the person.
- Be quick to listen, slow to speak.
- Your role is to reflect on what took place, not to punish the volunteers and make them feel bad.
- Always begin with what went well; ask the volunteer to evaluate his own performance; and end on a positive note, thanking them for all they do.
- Always remain supportive and concerned about the volunteer.



Failure to evaluate implies you don't really care about what the volunteer does.



Some Things You Do

In your relationship *with* volunteers, you may play many roles to help *them* succeed. Consider these ways:

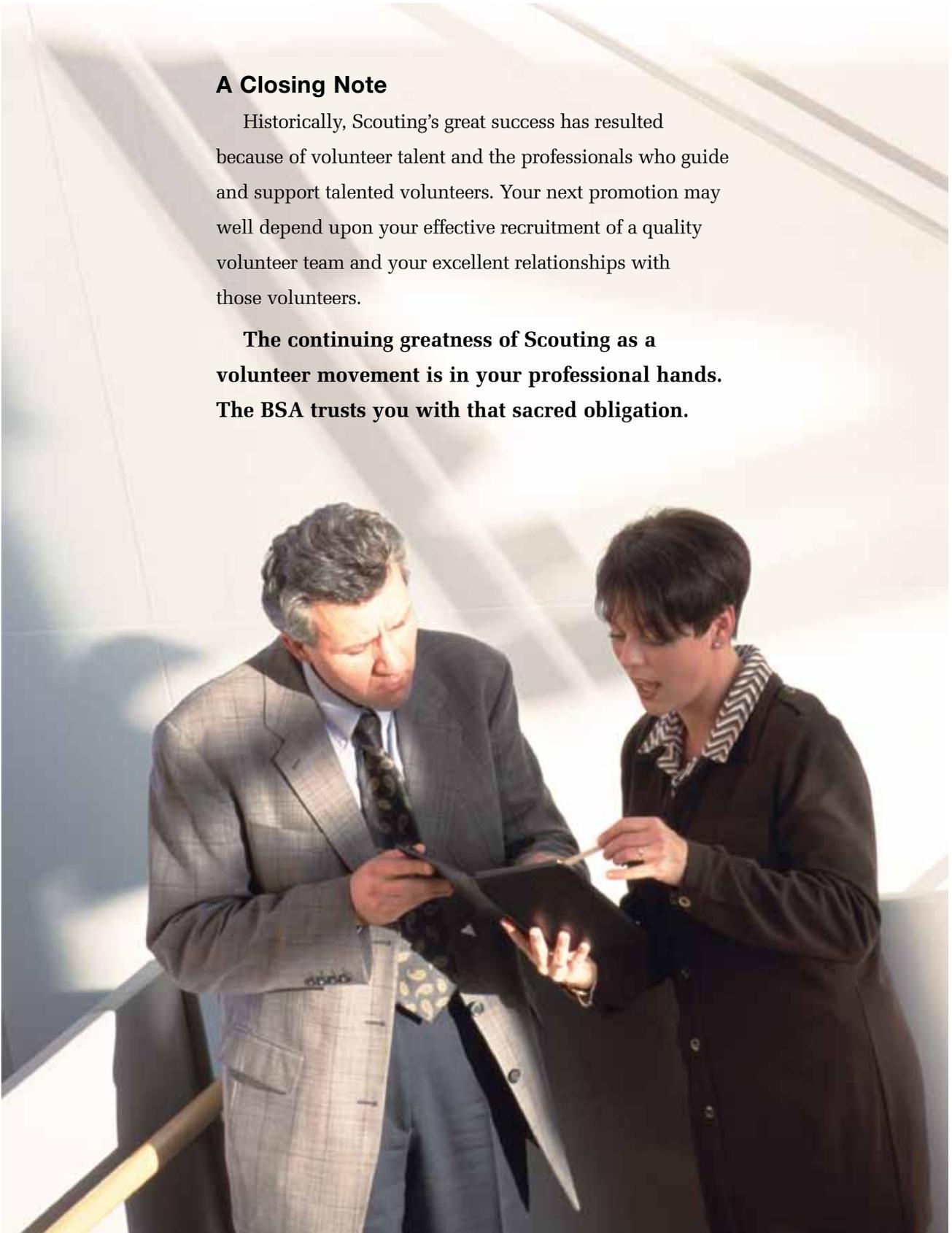
- Answer questions.
- Facilitate communication.
- Offer praise.
- Keep things running smoothly.
- Prepare work schedules.
- Consult/provide Scouting expertise.
- Ensure compliance with policies and procedures.
- Promote team spirit.
- Elicit volunteer ideas.
- See the big picture.
- Eliminate obstacles.
- Counsel.
- Serve as a role model.
- Reflect a caring attitude.
- Provide consistency.
- Share information.
- Provide feedback.
- Plan and strategize

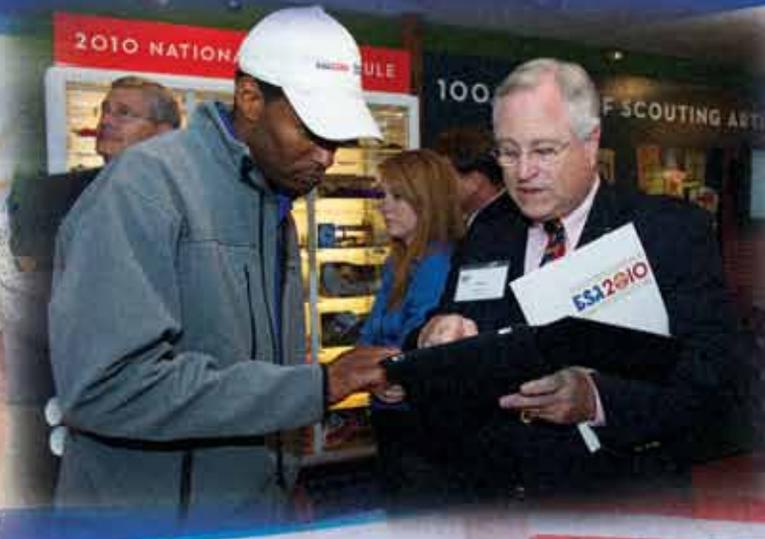


A Closing Note

Historically, Scouting's great success has resulted because of volunteer talent and the professionals who guide and support talented volunteers. Your next promotion may well depend upon your effective recruitment of a quality volunteer team and your excellent relationships with those volunteers.

The continuing greatness of Scouting as a volunteer movement is in your professional hands. The BSA trusts you with that sacred obligation.





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