Teaching the Patrol Method in the Troop

The Patrol Method

In a nutshell, the Patrol Method is the arrangement of Scouts in Patrols of six to eight boys led by a Patrol Leader who with the help of the Jr. Leadership of the Troop leads his Patrol of Scouts on hikes, campouts and at meetings. He is responsible for every aspect of the development of the Scouts in his Patrol; including the learning of skills and advancement. This is a way to accomplish the Program Aims of fostering good citizenship, character and fitness while teaching Scouts leadership. Leadership is taught by doing. Everything happens through the Patrol Leader. The Senior Patrol Leader leads the troop, via the Patrol Leaders at troop meetings and on troop activities. He is running the activities THROUGH the Patrol Leaders, not around them. Troop activities are structured not only to advance the Troop but also to as much as possible, enable the Patrols to succeed. Patrol Leaders, on their part, understand that their Patrol is not a stand alone unit, and that they are part of a greater whole that they must be loyal to, the Troop.

Who Teaches the Patrol Leader?

OK, so who teaches the Patrol Leader to be this marvelous leader of his band of six to eight boys? That would be the responsibility of you the Scoutmaster and through you, if delegated, the Asst. Scoutmaster, Jr. Asst. Scoutmaster or possibly even a Troop Guide. What is important to remember is that this method requires that the training in leadership happens by the boy actually leading his Patrol. And it doesn't happen if he isn't doing this important job. If you don't have functioning patrols, you don't have boys learning to lead utilizing the Patrol Method. Small troops can still run with one patrol using this method.

So where do you begin? Begin by reading the Patrol Leader's Handbook. Then read Chapter 7 of the Scoutmasters Handbook which contains detailed information on teaching your Junior Leadership. Study them both. In them you will find out what the job of the Patrol Leader is and you will find that there are three courses that are provided by the Boy Scouts of America to help adult leaders present to the Junior Leaders what is expected of them as well as give the young men some managerial tools and motivation. These are excellent courses and come highly recommended.

The first is Introduction to Leadership Skills for Troops (ILST). It is taught by the Scoutmaster and Senior Patrol Leader, is a course for all Scouts who have just received a Jr. Leadership position in the troop. At the end of Troop Leadership Training, the troop leaders will understand what is expected of them in their new leadership position. They will also better understand the roles of each member of the leadership team (at the patrol and troop levels) and will learn to work toward a common vision of future success. They will learn that putting others first as a leadership style builds a strong and effective team. ALL Boy Scout troops should conduct the ILST course with every leadership shift—whether it is when the youth get a new troop position or a patrol leadership role. The course has three modules that can be presented as individual sessions or as a combined one day course is available online at www.scouting.org/training/youth . Make sure during the Introduction to Leadership Skills for Troops that a Patrol Leaders Handbook is handed out to every Patrol Leader and you go through what is in it and how they can utilize it to assist them in leading and teaching their Patrol members.

National Youth Leadership Training (NYLT), led and taught by other Scouts, is a week long course taught at the Council level that presents a number of leadership, training, team building, and motivational activities. Patrol Leaders and other Jr. Leaders coming out of this course will be highly motivated to achieve success at not only the Patrol Level, but also at the Troop Level. This is a great training ground for your future troop leaders.

The National Advanced Youth Leadership Experience (NAYLE) is offered at Philmont. Scouts will live in a patrol setting at Rocky Mountain Scout Camp where they will use leadership skills to resolve exciting and challenging backcountry situations. NAYLE will equip youth leaders to be better Troop Leaders. It will help guide a Scouts' journey in leadership service to others, able to develop all members of whichever team they lead.

Other in troop training opportunities are available at www.scouting.org. The essential course is the ILST course that you facilitate. That is the one you NEED to put on every time your Jr. Leadership changes.

OK, so that's the Patrol Method, right? You as a Scoutmaster follow the Introduction to Leadership Skills for Troops syllabus and they are all trained leaders, right? Well, no, that isn't what happens. The Patrol Leaders WILL NOT learn how to lead unless you let them lead. It doesn't come from the classroom; it comes slowly from the toils and tribulations of leading a gang of six to eight adolescent boys in Scoutcraft, on hikes, on campouts for weeks and months. Your job is to give them the opportunities, freedom, support and encouragement to lead. Be there when they need your advice, and they will learn, slowly, to lead.

[1] Handbook for Scoutmasters; by William Hillcourt; Boy Scouts of America; 1936

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Let ALL troop activities function through the Patrols. Everything the troop does should support the Patrol Leaders and help foster the Patrol Method. Make sure there are meaningful Patrol meetings occurring during the troop meetings and encourage Patrol meetings outside troop meetings. Encourage Patrol activities outside of Troop activities and reward such behavior. Don't be tempted for expedience sake to take control of any activity or to take the power away from the Patrol Leaders and centralize it or give it to an adult. The more you allow the Patrols to function as boy lead units, the more experience the Patrol Leaders will receive and the more the young men will grow as leaders. That, after all, is one of the primary purposes of the patrol method. Also the more you allow the Patrols to function, the stronger the Patrols and Troop will become and the more other Scouts will want to be Patrol Leaders. Allow the boys to fail, and use those failures as teaching opportunities. This isn't an adult led program. This is a Youth led program. As Bill Hillcourt said seventy-five years ago; "So again, 'Train 'em, trust 'em, and let 'em lead!' And remember that that last point is of tremendous importance. Let them lead in practically everything. Let them work out their own problems, interfere as little as possible—but be ever ready to give wise guidance—not when you think they need it, but when they seek it or when safety requires it. Keep in mind that unwarranted, ill-advised interference discourages leadership and that those boy leaders of yours are 'learning by doing.' "[1]

Adolescent Boys Want to Lead

Adolescent boys want to lead. When on their own, they will naturally form groups and select leaders. However, every adolescent boy has had over a decade of experience in allowing adults to take control of what he does. As soon as you start to do anything they should be doing, or controlling anything that they should be controlling, you will quickly see them back off from any leadership position and let you take over. Don't blame them; it is by now an ingrained habit. YOU CANNOT ALLOW THAT TO HAPPEN! You must stand aside and let them lead, otherwise they will never learn to lead. Sometimes that is a lot easier said than done, and if you fail, you must get up again and step away. A note of caution here: don't throw so much at them before they are able to handle it, for it will set them up for failure. But let them lead! You will probably be surprised at how much they can accomplish on their own.

Scoutmaster Conferences and PLC Campouts

As the weeks go by and as the boys grow, the Patrol Leaders will want further guidance either as individuals or as a group. Have a Scoutmaster Conference with each Patrol Leader once a month or so to follow up on the progress towards the goals he set during the Introduction to Leadership Skills for Troops and see if he needs any particular guidance. Take the Patrol Leaders Council out at least once a quarter on campouts, hikes or other activities of their own. This not only can be used to reward them for good work, but also as an opportunity to teach or refresh their Scoutcraft and leadership skills (remember, they will be the ones teaching Scouts in their Patrols.) The ILST training fits well into a campout setting.

PLC Meetings and PLC Half Meetings

Although the PLC meetings are run by the Senior Patrol Leader, reserve 15-20 minutes at the end of each monthly meeting for review, discussing troop and patrol problems and issues that can be discussed publicly. This is also an opportune time for additional short instruction, review of different sections of the Patrol Leader Handbook or a short Scoutmaster motivational talk.

Remember to keep the PLC after every Troop meeting for a 15 minute review of what occurred at the meeting, what can be improved upon and to review the agenda and Patrol assignments in the next meeting or outing. This not only facilitates the smoother operation of troop meetings, but also gives the PLC an opportunity to ask for advice concerning certain current problems and issues. Consider this part of your in troop ongoing Jr. Leader training. This short meeting is discussed in the Scoutmaster Handbook.

Patrol Meetings & Traditions

Patrols should meet at least twice a month separately from the troop. These meetings can be scheduled by the Patrol Leader at a time convenient to his Patrol. Patrol Meetings, run by the Patrol Leader, and absent of direct adult participation, are about one hour long. Patrol Meetings are described in the Patrol Leader Handbook and sample agendas can be found there.

Encourage Patrol identity and traditions. To build that up, don't neglect the positive effect of athletic or skills competition between patrols as a means of building a Patrol esprit de corps.

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