

This Is Not a Test

By Mark Ray

Illustration by Tristan Elwell

A board of review should gauge the quality of a Scout's troop experience and encourage future advancement, not ask him to pass rank requirements – again.

In the classic Disney movie *Follow Me Boys*, Fred MacMurray plays a small-town Scoutmaster. When his troop gets caught up in a war game, MacMurray becomes a POW. To prove he really is a Scoutmaster, not an enemy spy, MacMurray is challenged to tie a sheepshank — the one knot he's never mastered.

Unfortunately, that comic scene is repeated in not-so-comic ways each time a board of review member tosses a rope on a table and asks a Scout to tie a knot. In these moments, the board of review becomes a board of retesting, and the troop misses out on an opportunity to grow along with the Scout.

According to *The Scoutmaster Handbook*, the purpose of the board of review is “not to retest a Scout, but rather to ensure that he has completed all of the requirements, to determine the quality of his troop experience, and to encourage him to advance toward the next rank. Each review should also include a discussion of ways in which the Scout sees himself living up to the Scout Oath and Law in his everyday life.”

Now let's take a moment to look at each of those elements.

Checking requirements

By the time a Scout reaches the board of review, he has completed all of the requirements for his next rank (including the Scoutmaster conference). All the board needs to do is make sure that nothing has been overlooked.

Board members can use this records check as an opportunity to learn more about the boy's experience in Scouting, according to Dan DiBiase, committee chairman for Troop 888 in Dayton, N.J.

“We'll talk to him about some of the merit badges: What was the most difficult one? What was the simplest one? Why?” DiBiase says.

Boards focus on different topics depending on the rank in question. “Tenderfoot, Second Class, and First Class are primarily concerned with requirements and Scout skills,” DiBiase says. “As they get older, you're doing less of that and talking more about leadership.”

Board sessions also get longer as Scouts advance in rank. A Tenderfoot board should take about 15 minutes, while an Eagle board might last 30 minutes or more.

Review experiences

Next comes what DiBiase considers the most important aspect of the board of review: assessing the quality of the Scout's experience in the troop.

“I like to ask, ‘If you were Scoutmaster for a day, what one thing would you change about the troop?’” he says. Since the board consists of troop committee members — not assistant Scoutmasters — Scouts are often more willing to speak openly.

Taking action on any problems is essential, according to Barry Bingham, a Life-to-Eagle coordinator with Troop 677 in Ellisville, Mo. “Sometimes the troop meetings get called out as an issue, and we’ll jump on that,” Bingham says.

DiBiase notes that the key is to make sure any feedback (positive or negative) represents the views of most Scouts.

“We try to look at trends,” he says. “You could have three Scouts say A, and a fourth Scout say not A but B.”

Encourage advancement

Every board of review should point toward the next rank. At a First Class board, it’s helpful to talk about positions of responsibility and merit badges, which are key requirements for Star. At a Life board, potential Eagle Scout service projects are an ideal topic.

The board can also discuss other Scouting opportunities. Bingham’s troop promotes its Venturing crew at boards of review.

“As a Scout gets to his 14th birthday, he is clearly aware of that Venturing crew and what it is doing,” Bingham says.

Discuss everyday life

Much like the Scoutmaster conference, the board of review is a great chance to draw connections between Scouting and everyday life.

“There are a million and eight things you can talk about that have nothing to do with Scouting,” DiBiase says. “It’s important that you get to know the boys a little bit — not just the Scouting stuff.”

Recruit board members

While it might seem hard to recruit nonuniformed adults to serve on boards of review, Bingham’s troop finds them simply by being observant.

“When adults are standing around, that’s a clue to put them to work,” he says. “A great way to put them to work is to send them to where the boards are meeting.”

Since board members don’t need to know a lot about Scouting, on-the-job training is often sufficient for new volunteers. DiBiase does encourage all his troop committee members to complete the Troop Committee Challenge (available through the Online Learning Center at www.scouting.org). He also has occasionally distributed sets of suggested board of review questions.

In the end, however, the board of review is not about the questions. It’s about the Scout and his growth through Scouting’s advancement program — sheepshanks notwithstanding.

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