

THE ROLE OF THE UNIT SERVICE COMMISSIONER IN ACHIEVING 100% UNIT LEADER
ATTENDANCE AT THE DISTRICT LEADERS' ROUNDTABLE

By Tim Varney

The District Leaders' Roundtable could be the most important event on the Council's monthly Scouting calendar. Why? Because it is at the Roundtable that the Unit Leaders in each District come together to learn about District and Council activities, get updated on National Council policies, receive training and experience Scout fellowship. The positive results of consistent attendance by Unit Leaders will be better delivery of quality programs to units, the consistent advancement of unit youth members and high levels of participation by units in District and Council events.

If Unit Leaders are not attending the District Leaders Roundtable, all elements of the Scouting program suffer. It is imperative that all units are represented at the Roundtable each month, but is this true in the Mid-America Council? Are Districts realizing increasing or decreasing attendance at Roundtable? Can 100% Unit Leader representation at Roundtable be a goal for the Districts? The purpose, then, of this thesis paper is to analyze the attendance situation and present a plan for how the Unit Service Commissioner can have a substantial role in its implementation.

The Lewis & Clark District studied this concern in 2002 and the results of the January and February actual unit attendance count at those Roundtables confirms that there is a significant problem to confront. For example, there were 140 registered units in the Lewis & Clark District during January and February of 2002; 67 Cub Packs, 53 Scout Troops, 1 Team and 19 Crews. By actual count taken from the sign-in sheets at the January Roundtable, 18 Cub Packs, 8 Scout Troops and 1 Crew were represented. In February 25 Cub Packs, 20 Scout Troops, 1 Team and 1 Crew were represented.

It is significant to note that the increase in February's attendance count was probably due to two factors: the 'holiday hangover' that always seems to affect Roundtable attendance in January and a campaign launched in February to rejuvenate the attendance at the District's Order of the Arrow Chapter meeting, which is held at the same time and in the same place as the District Leaders Roundtable. Troop leaders were challenged to bring the Troop's Order of the Arrow Representative with them to Roundtable. In addition to the extra youth members attending because of the Order of the Arrow meeting, some Troop leaders who weren't otherwise expected to come to Roundtable or had not been coming for a long time, but

who were active in the Council Lodge's activities started to come solely to attend the Order of the Arrow Chapter meeting. How this benefited the District from a Roundtable attendance increase was that these leaders stayed on for the Troop Leader Breakout Session after the general assembly had adjourned.

The Lewis & Clark District, in the opinion of the author of this thesis paper, can be considered to be the flagship District of the Mid-America Council. It contains within its boundaries the downtown of Omaha, the major city in the Council, which is the center of commerce, health services, education, entertainment and transportation for the population of Northeast Nebraska, Southeastern South Dakota and Western Iowa. Given that there is major support by the business and professional community in the Lewis & Clark District, with outstanding facilities available for holding the District Leaders Roundtable in a central location, and including an urban/suburban mixture of membership, then it would seem that the attendance at the monthly Roundtable would be much higher. So why isn't it? What is causing the problem? Whose problem is it? Is it a valid problem to address?

The problem of poor District Leaders Roundtable attendance is one that has to be confronted if the Scouting program in the Mid-America Council is going to thrive. Units wither away when Unit Leaders aren't faithful when it comes to Roundtable attendance. So why don't they all come to Roundtable?

There are many reasons that Unit Leaders are not coming to Roundtable on a consistent basis. The most likely reason is that it may be that the unit is going through leader transition and it is unclear who is responsible for attending Roundtable. This is common among Districts in the Council, as there are usually several units which are weak and having trouble existing at the same time during the year. However, most of the units in each District are active and functioning, so if there is a cadre of leadership currently running the unit, and the leadership is not consistently attending Roundtable, the reason that is most often cited is the lack of Unit Leader motivation to attend because of the investment of personal time.

Leaders can frequently be heard to say, "Who needs another meeting? I'm already devoting more than enough of my time to Scouting." Among these leaders is a feeling that attending the monthly Pack meeting or weekly Troop meeting is enough. "After all", they usually go on, "I was a leader before I took over the unit, so I know what to do." This sort of thinking is afflicted with a large dose of

shortsightedness of the worst kind and it only seems to get worse as we delve further into the matter of reasons causing poor attendance.

Throughout the over twenty years of my tenure as a volunteer in Scouting in the Mid-America Council, I have attended countless Unit, District and Council events which have brought me into close contact with Unit Leaders who have taken me into their confidence or have inadvertently expressed aloud the following reasons for not attending Roundtable regularly. They are:

My unit meets on the same night as Roundtable.

I have to work evenings.

My work frequently takes me out of town overnight.

I can't go and none of my registered leaders can either.

The program isn't worthwhile.

I rely on the Unit Commissioner to cover for me.

The location is inconvenient for me.

I don't like the District Executive.

I don't feel comfortable being around those assertive Scout Leaders who always seems to be speaking to the general session or running the breakout sessions, and who always have more than enough to say about every subject known to Scouting. They bore me.

I don't like making too many commitments of my time and resources.

I'm fearful of getting cornered into having to volunteer for a short or long term District event or project.

My unit is doing just fine without Roundtable.

I don't need Roundtable to do my job as Unit Leader.

Is it fair to blame the absentee leaders entirely for less than 100% attendance at the District Leaders Roundtable? Someone close to the situation such as the Roundtable Commissioner, who has invested his or her time in preparing each month's program, would probably say "Yes!" After all there is such a thing as personal responsibility among adults that one should be able to count on in any event involving volunteers. But is that the right conclusion? Is that just covering one's own shortcomings as a facilitator?

In studying this problem, it is equally important to look at the Roundtable program itself to see if it is worthy of consistent 100% Unit Leader attendance. The monthly Roundtable should be a live production of the District's section in the Council's monthly newsletter. If it is not, the Roundtable Commissioner and his or her staff have only given lip service to whoever attends. The Unit Leader who doesn't come to Roundtable because of the poor program is not to blame for being part of the overall problem.

The District Scouters who either volunteer for or are asked to take on the position of Roundtable Commissioner are generally outgoing, imaginative personality types who really do want to produce a quality Roundtable program. The highly motivated Roundtable Commissioners get trained for this endeavor and try their best to put on a consistently interesting, informative and inspirational program month after month. However, this sometimes is not the case.

It is not unusual for Roundtable Commissioners to be the sort of Scouter who always volunteers, is interested in anything and everything about Scouting, but who may not have the best communication or organizational skills to bring the message to the Roundtable attendees. Consequently, the attendees can become disillusioned with the Roundtable programs and either stop coming, come only when the big events are forthcoming; such as District Camporees, Council events, the Fall Program Kickoff which is timed to start with the new school year, or just come for the announcements and fellowship. So, what can the Unit Service Commissioner do about this situation?

Before answering the question at the end of the previous paragraph, let's look at what appears to be the major concern when contemplating why all units are not represented at Roundtable all of the time. It is the Roundtable program.

To get perspective on this concern, two Districts in the Mid-America Council were chosen for personal interviews with a Roundtable Commissioner and a District Executive, for insight into the problems confronted by both parties in the quest for 100% unit attendance at the monthly Roundtable. The Districts were Lewis & Clark, since it is the typical urban-suburban, metropolitan District, and the Owahnasee District, a rural District in Southwest Iowa.

The Lewis & District Roundtable Commissioner is Vicki Benes. Vicki is an experienced, enthusiastic, trained group facilitator, who is committed to the achievement of 100% unit attendance.

The District Executive is Wayne Pantini. He is just as interested as Vicki and I are in solving this attendance problem. When asked for his opinions for this thesis paper, he expressed excitement at the prospect of having the thesis as a resource in achieving the desired result.

It is interesting to note that both parties expressed the same goal, that being to conduct a Roundtable that is so much fun to attend that Unit Leaders will flock to the program and all units will be represented. And how will they use the Unit Service Commissioner to achieve this goal? Both would do the same thing. They would concentrate on developing great programs and then ask the Unit Service Commissioners to communicate this to the Unit Leaders by phone, e-mail or personal contact.

The Roundtable Commissioner plans to concentrate on increasing attendance by Cub Pack leaders. The expected result for this plan is to make the Roundtable informational and inspirational for the Cub Leader, and is intended to definitely be 'hands on'.

District Executive Wayne Pantini wants to recruit and employ "...energetic Roundtable Commissioners." Quoting him further, he said, "They (Roundtable Commissioners) set the pace of a roundtable, if they are excited and energetic the Unit leaders will be too and the end result is they will come back and bring more leaders with them." This is a good hypothesis. Can it really work? Will the Unit Service Commissioner have a role in its implementation? Just what are the expectations and responsibilities that the Unit Service Commissioner will be performing in this plan?

The primary expectation for the Unit Service Commissioner's contribution to this plan is keep the District Commissioner fully aware of why the Roundtable is an impediment to 100% unit attendance at each monthly District Leaders' Roundtable.

The Unit Service Commissioner who is outwardly fulfilling his or her position responsibilities as mandated by National policies and communicated through Council and District training, but who does not bring to the attention of the District Commissioner that the Roundtable is not serving the needs of the Unit Leaders is just not doing his or her job. This critical assessment does not mean that the Unit Service Commissioner is a District spy and is tattling on the Roundtable Commissioners.

When the Unit Service Commissioner senses that Unit Leaders are less than enthusiastic about the Roundtable program, or find themselves not able to promote attendance because of obvious program

shortcomings, being critical will have to be conducted in a constructive manner. After all, all Commissioners are on the same team and should be pursuing the same objectives.

The Unit Commissioners constructive criticism should be brought to the attention of the District Commissioner at the monthly Commissioner gathering in open session so the Roundtable Commissioners who are in attendance can hear it firsthand. Through open and friendly discussion, dialogue can be established with the intent of determining the best possible resolution of the perceived problem.

Once the attendance problem is out in the open and subject to consideration by the District Commissioner, it must be brought to the attention of the District Committee. All District operating committees have a stake in this situation and their chairpersons must be included in the program to increase attendance to achieve the 100% goal.

Several steps must be taken to get at the root cause of the attendance problem. This will take time and will not be achieved quickly. There will have to be many meetings to discuss each aspect of the problem area. So, where does the District leadership start?

The District Commissioner will ask the Roundtable Commissioners to review the section of the Commissioner Administration of Unit Service publication WW34128D that applies to the conduct of the Roundtable. This step is essential because the mantle of Roundtable Commissioner often passes from one willing Scouter to another because of friendship or some other subjective reason, such as moving the responsibility to someone who always seems to get things done. Unfortunately, there is not always training or familiarization using the available resources.

Having the Roundtable Commissioners use all available resources will assure that there is continuity of compliance with national standards for the planning and conducting of Roundtables that serve the needs of the unit leaders.

The District Commissioner and District Committee may want to study the feasibility of moving the location of the monthly Roundtable. It may be necessary to have the Roundtable be held at several different sites during the school year. This can defuse the issue of seemingly preferential treatment for certain areas of the District by it's leadership.

The District Commissioner must also know where his Unit Service Commissioners stand as far as their knowledge of assigned units, with regard to the responsibility to assess the general health of each unit. Having each Unit Service Commissioner complete the self-evaluation form No. 4424B does this. By conducting this exercise, both the District Commissioner and the Unit Service Commissioners will benefit by becoming more aware of the quality or lack thereof, of the service to each Unit. If Units are not coming to Roundtable, this exercise will probably uncover the method of confirming the deficiency.

Accessing the various Boy Scout Internet websites and reviewing back issues of Scouting Magazine for practical information volunteered by fellow Scouters from around the nation can also be helpful. All available program helps must be utilized

The District Commissioner must review with Roundtable Commissioners the event planning to make sure it is meaningful to each attendee. Roundtable Commissioners might even want to attend other District Roundtables and compare their own programs to others being conducted across the Council.

Upon completion of the assessment of the attendance problem, the following steps should be taken immediately by the Unit Service Commissioners to increase attendance at the next Roundtable:

- Meet with or telephone each Cubmaster or Scoutmaster to extend a personal invitation to attend the next Roundtable.
- It may be necessary to offer transportation.
- It will be essential to describe the positive aspects of attendance at Roundtable.
- It is absolutely essential that this be done prior to the August Roundtable to assure attendance of all units at this most important of all Roundtables. The new Scouting Year will be launched at the August Roundtable.
- If the Cubmaster or Scoutmaster can't attend the next Roundtable, then a substitute has to be identified and contacted so the unit will be represented.

It is possible that the personal contact method will succeed. That will be true only if each Unit Commissioner is able and willing to conduct the phone or personal contact exercise each month before Roundtable. In the real world, this is probably not realistic. Therefore, it will most likely be necessary to explore novel and innovative ideas for increasing attendance. This can be done at the District

Commissioner monthly staff meeting, but will most likely be more productive by seeking ideas from the staff through the use of e-mail, surveys or focus groups of key Scouters.

Scout leaders love competition. This personality characteristic can be taken advantage of by conducting attendance contests to encourage attendance. The use of a traveling trophy, which recognizes perfect attendance for long periods of time, should be put into use as soon as possible, if it is not already being used to encourage attendance. The Unit Commissioner could take this trophy to Unit Committee meetings and use it as a promotion device.

Another method of rewarding constant attendance would be to present ribbons or proclamations to units for consecutive months' attendance. This would be done each month. The best starting point for this technique would be at the August Roundtable. The Unit Commissioner should be suggesting to the Unit Committee at its next meeting that a second recognition be done at the next following Pack Meeting or Troop Court of Honor.

Individual attendance should also be recognized. A unit leader sacrifices his or her most valuable possession, which is his or her personal time, to come to the monthly Roundtable. The Roundtable Commissioners must keep records of the individuals signing in at each Roundtable and check these month-by-month for repeat attendance. Each Leader who qualifies for repeat attendance recognition for an extended period of time would be presented with some sort of Scout oriented prize, such as a mug or B.S.A. Activity Shirt. There are many such objects available at the Scout Service Center, which can be used for attendance awards. Enterprising Commissioners can also seek donations from local merchants to be given away.

As with Unit recognition, the Unit Commissioner must not fail to follow up with the Unit Committee to make sure the Individual or individuals from the Unit who have been recognized at the District level are also recognized at the Unit level at the very next opportunity.

An additional resource for constructive input on this matter was discovered at the Lewis & Clark District Basic Commissioner Training event held on August 17, 2002. During a roundtable discussion of the various roles that Unit Service Commissioners have on District problems, it was revealed to this paper's author that in 2001 the Goldenrod District had embarked on a quest for each unit to have attended

at least one Roundtable for the 2001-2002. According to Dan Hunt, an Assistant Council Commissioner from Blair, Nebraska, who is in the Goldenrod District, all District Scouters joined in the project.

However, it's success came down to one thing being accomplished, and that was for the Unit Service and Roundtable Commissioners to successfully carry out a "Why to go" to Roundtable program. In designing that message, three elements were emphasized:

- Go for the program.
- Go for the information.
- Go for the fellowship.

It would seem that if a rural District could achieve a goal of getting every unit to attend at least one District Leaders Roundtable during the year, this success could spread to all Districts. The following description, therefore, is the Plan.

Under the Plan the Council Commissioner signs on for the goal of 100% unit attendance in each District. An Assistant Council Commissioner is assigned the responsibility to form a focus group from the Districts to work out the details on a "Why To Go" program for unit attendance at each monthly District Leaders Roundtable across the Council. The focus group would be assembled from the following:

- District and Assistant District Commissioners.
- Roundtable Commissioners.
- Council professionals
- Key Scouters from District Committees who can be expected to contribute innovative and practical suggestions for establishment and implementation of the "Why to Go" program.

The "Why to Go" program will succeed if all potential contributors give it their full support and attention. Great benefits will come to the Council, Districts and Unit Leaders. It's a "Win, win" kind of thing that Scouters like to do.

It would be very easy to be drawn into a state of mind that gives comfort to the resolution of the problem of less than 100% attendance at the monthly District Leaders Roundtable as being one of using enticements and creative programs to get the unit leaders to come every month so each unit will benefit from this important event in the Scouting Year. Whereas creativity and innovation are much admired in

Scouting circles, and as the old saying goes, "We all get paid the same in Scouting." "Kudos" are nice, but there must be something more substantial to resolving the problem.

Success in achieving the goal stated in this thesis paper still depends on following the aims and methods of Scouting. In Scouting, Scouters must continue to 'do it by the book' if the achievement of any goal is going to contribute to the advancing the program so that it brings the positive benefits of Scouting to the most youth and adults possible. The 'Book' says this: the Unit Service Commissioner has the responsibility to make sure that the leadership members of all of the units which are his or her responsibility are regularly coming to the monthly District Leaders Roundtable by using the aims and methods of unit service which the Commissioner learns about through training, experience mixed in with a large dose of common sense.

If it accepted that the role of the Unit Service Commissioner in accomplishing the goal set forth in this thesis paper is a one of significance, the Unit Service Commissioner must be able to count on the Council, the District Committee, the District Commissioner, the Assistant District Commissioners and the Roundtable Commissioners to deliver the support to make the Roundtable an event that the unit leaders want to attend. In other words, the "Why To Go" concept. Then, and only then, will there be 100% unit attendance at each month's District Leaders' Roundtable.

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