

Evolution of the Overland Trails Council's Roundtables During the 2020 Pandemic

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A dissertation submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Commissioner Science

presented to:
MAC-Husker-Trails College of Commissioner Science

3/25/2023

Abstract

In the first quarter of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world, changing how routine activities were performed. The United States enacted, among other restrictions, a curtailing of all in person gatherings. As a result, nearly all activities ceased to occur.

Roundtables are an important, integral part of the Scouting program that serve to meet 4 goals: Provide information, capture information, offer current program training and provide networking opportunities.

This purpose of the dissertation is to describe how the Commissioner Service of the Overland Trails Council transitioned it's traditional in person roundtables to remote access roundtables. Examined are the planning and implementation steps we took. In addition, discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of remote access roundtables, safety while using remote access roundtables and how future roundtables might be conducted, are presented.

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Chapter 1: Background and History

Overland Trails.

The Overland Trails council occupies the middle portion of Nebraska, consisting of 44 of the State's 93 counties and covering 42,132 square miles. The council lies in two time zones. Currently, there are 830 traditional youth members comprising 30 Cub Scout packs, 41 Scouts BSA troops and 1 Exploring post.

The council is composed of 3 districts with Grand Island and Hastings being the primary cities in the eastern district, Kearney being the primary city in the middle district and North Platte being the primary city in the western district.

District Roundtables Prior to 2020.

Prior to 2020, each district ran their own monthly roundtable. These were typically low to moderately attended with about 25% of units in each district represented. I attribute the low attendance percentage to the distances needed to drive in order to attend the in-person meetings, with 40 to more than 90 miles (one way) not being uncommon.

My roundtable experience was limited to those of the Covered Wagon district. These monthly meetings usually started with a general meeting, followed by separate break out rooms for Cub Scouts and Scouts BSA. A small time to network usually followed the roundtable. Prior to the roundtable meeting, the district committee would hold their monthly meeting. My understanding is that the other two districts held similarly structured roundtable meetings.

Because of the chronic low attendance at our roundtables, we attempted using teleconferencing where leaders could phone into the meetings. This was met with marginal success due principally to hardware issues and the inability of those calling in to really feel that they were interacting with those attending in person.

Chapter 2: Planning and Considerations for Remote Access Roundtables

Selecting A Platform.

Following March 2020, all roundtables were halted due to pandemic restrictions and the safety of all in person gatherings. As a result, the Commissioner Service and Council Executives began discussions on how to provide continuing support to the Units. Following examples used in other sectors, we began to look at ways to use videoconferencing for not only roundtables but also as a way Units could continue to "meet", a way Commissioners could use to provide unit service and as a means of advancement. In other words, to keep the Scouting program going for our Council.

A small group composed of the council commissioner, the three district commissioners and the three district executives began meeting to find a solution. Our goals were to find a multi-platform program that would allow easy access to the roundtables, be user friendly, be inexpensive, and secure enough for youth to use. At that time, there was limited software that could meet these initial requirements. Some examples that were ruled out by us were Skype¹,

and offerings from Google and Apple. One program that did meet the requirements was a relatively new (at least to us) program called Zoom². This software could be used on PC's, Mac's, iOS devices and Android devices. There were various levels of cost, including a free level with up to 100 persons participating and up to 40 minutes of conferencing. This level of service could allow units to meet while keeping costs to a minimum. Zoom also offered the ability to hold break out rooms as well as enhanced security methods that would allow restricted access to uninvited attendees. Another benefit Zoom offered was an extensive training library of videos designed to help maximize use of the software. During our investigations, the National BSA office selected Zoom to be their videoconferencing software of choice, further supporting our choice to use Zoom for future roundtables.

Selecting An Agenda.

Our small group next considered how we were going to use Zoom to bring back roundtables. Our first decision was to switch from having district roundtables to have a single, council wide roundtable. It was felt that this switch would allow for more exciting, informative, and consistent roundtable experiences to a larger group of attendees. We would try to keep a similar format as the in-person roundtables with a general session at the beginning, including opening ceremony, hot topics and safety moment, followed by separate break out rooms for Cub Scouts and Scouts BSA training and a closing portion to tie things together and final announcements. The main meeting was to last no more than 60 minutes. Ten minutes or so were added after the main meeting for socializing and networking. This portion of the roundtable would be optional. Because we would be using the Council's Zoom account, we were not limited to 40 minutes.

Manpower.

It was decided that one of the District Executives would act as administrator for the Zoom roundtable sessions for several reasons. These included the following: The Zoom account we would be using was the Council's account, that the District Executive would be able to incorporate protocol's given from National in a more timely fashion and that if problems or concerns arose, the DE would be able to address them more efficiently. However, several other members of the small committee also undertook the training to administer, host and train participants, so that there was redundancy in process. This worked out well for handling issues that did occur when the roundtables went live.

Chapter 3: Implementation

Training Participants.

Scout leaders throughout the Council were noticed by both post cards and emails that roundtables were to change from district centered meetings to council wide meetings. While signing up for a Zoom account was not necessary to participate in the videoconference roundtables, it was encouraged they do so. With their own accounts, leaders would be able to administer/host meeting within their own Units.

Assigning Responsibilities.

At one of the small group meetings, we prepared a six-month calendar of roundtables, identifying persons responsible for opening ceremonies, hot topics, safety moments, and break out room leaders/trainers for both Cub Scouts and Scouts BSA. Topics for both break out rooms were decided. For some months, no breakout rooms were conducted because the topic for that month pertained equally to both groups. The majority of the opening ceremonies, hot topics, safety moments and closing portions were conducted by the Commissioner Service. Backup people were also assigned for each of these responsibilities. Roundtable Commissioners were responsible for the breakout rooms, either conducting those sessions or helping to arrange speakers for them. By switching to remote access roundtables, we were able to utilize the best trainers not only within our Council, but also expert trainers from outside the Council.

Follow-up And review of Roundtable Meetings.

One week following the remote access roundtables, the small group met to review how the previous roundtable went and to prepare for the next the month's roundtable. A "start, stop, continue" approach was used to evaluate the previous meeting and to help improve the next roundtable.

In early September 2020, announcements for the Council wide roundtable were sent to all Unit leaders. The first council wide roundtable videoconference was conducted October 6, 2020.

Chapter 4: Advantages and disadvantages of Remote Access Roundtables.

With the pandemic, all in person meetings were prohibited. This resulted in nearly all activities related to Scouting coming to a halt. Relatively few numbers of options were initially available to continue operation. One option was remote access meetings using equipment with both video and audio capabilities in real time.

The advantage of using such equipment is that activities as school, work, and roundtables can continue to function in a near normal manner. It allows people to both see and hear others, participate in conversations and ask questions. In the case of roundtables, it allows people to attend meetings that they would not otherwise be able to because of distance or time. Having a single, council wide roundtable allows for more consistency in communicating information and for improved quality of the program. Greater flexibility and efficiency are also possible with the remote access roundtables.

Remote access roundtables also have disadvantages. These can be separated into several categories. The first is the need for adequate equipment, internet access and appropriate band width. While Zoom offers a solution for multiple types of devices, these devices need to have the necessary components to meet Zoom's requirements. In addition, access and enough band width were required to transmit and receive the data. For some, this was difficult to accomplish. Secondly, learning to use software that was new to most people required a learning curve. That learning curve also depended on a person's familiarity and comfort with the device they were using. Thirdly, distractions from noise, people and pets are possible. A

fourth disadvantage is security. While this may not usually be a problem with roundtables, security is of greater importance with Scouting meetings, where either sensitive information is involved or where youth may be participating. Improper meeting setup or ignoring suggested protocols can significantly reduce remote access security. Finally, while remote access roundtables do offer good, live interactions with both visual and audio cues, there was still an in-person component that is missing.

Chapter 5. Safety When Using Videoconferencing.

The safety of all participants in the BSA program is of utmost importance. This includes the use of videoconferencing while conducting activities related to the program. Since 2020, a great deal of thought and effort has been done at local and national levels to achieve maximal safety and security while using videoconferencing for scouting activities. For those Units that use this technology, the Commissioner Service can play integral role in making sure good safety practices are being used.

There is an abundance of information on the best ways to use videoconferencing in the roundtable section of the Commissioner’s section on the National BSA website³. This is a good resource for the most up to date information from National. In addition to digital safety, there are topics for virtual tools, Zoom, Zoom backgrounds and roundtable webinar recordings.

As with every Scouting activity, including videoconferencing, all youth protection policies still apply. Two deep leadership is always required. There needs to be no one-on-one contact between an adult leader and youth in all interactions. This includes in person, online, web conferences, on the phone and texting. As is true for all Scouting activities, parental observation and participation is encouraged, including online activities and meetings.

Using a business-oriented videoconferencing platform, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams⁴ or Webex⁵, that include strong safety and security features is preferred. The using of platforms intended for other activities, such as gaming or social media, should be avoided because of a lack of security options. Prior to using any platform, be sure to review the terms of service, safety and privacy features and their data collection policies. Also, review the BSA’s Digital Privacy⁶ and Social Media Guidelines⁷.

Constantly review and update your chosen platform’s security features. In addition, use unique meeting identification numbers for each session, use password features for all meetings, send private invitations to participants and remind them not to pass the invitation along. Use “waiting rooms” to make sure only those invited to a meeting are actually admitted into the meeting. Finally, disable features that you will not need, i.e. screen-sharing by those not hosting, private chats and whiteboards.

Do not record online activities/meetings that include youth participants. Recording of videoconferencing that only involve adults is subject to local council legal review and approval.

Safeguard personal information. If collection of personal information is done online, a notice disclosing how the information will be used should be stated at the point of the collection. Meeting collectors must keep such information private, particularly youth information. Sharing youth information must be restricted to parents or guardians or the unit leader responsible for tracking advancements.

Finally, collecting personal information directly from youth under 13 years of age **is prohibited** due to the parental notice and consent requirements under the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)⁸, a federal trade commission act.

Chapter 6. Considerations of Future Roundtables

Currently, with the restrictions of in person meetings having been mostly lifted, roundtables have continued to evolve. Many Councils have returned to having in person meetings in one form or another. In the two Councils I have been associated with since the pandemic began, both have continued to offer Council wide roundtables using Zoom. One Council (Overland Trails) continues to offer only remote access for Council wide roundtables, while in the second Council (Gamehaven), one of the Council's three districts is still 100% remote access, while other two of the districts meet in person to participate remotely as a group in Council wide roundtables.

Hybrid roundtables, where a combination of both in person and remote access attendance is available, may prove to be the "best of both worlds". This method of presenting roundtables, both virtually and in person, allows those who are closer to the roundtable meeting site to participate in person while those who might not be able to participate because of distance or other reasons, are able to participate remotely. With the comfort of use and the availability of the videoconferencing technology since the pandemic, this type of roundtable may prove to be the preferred way to conduct them.

Another type of hybrid roundtable might involve holding remote access roundtables monthly, with in person roundtables occurring quarterly. This could be done as either district wide or council wide roundtables.

By adapting either of two hybrid formats mentioned above, greater attendance, better consistency, increased flexibility and efficiency and more convenience may be achieved.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Prior to the 2020 pandemic, the Overland Trails Council conducted in person roundtables at the district level. These were typically attended by those living close to the roundtable site resulting in only fair attendance to these meetings.

Following mandated in person group meeting restrictions, numerous Scouting related activities, including roundtables, ceased to occur. The Commissioner Service along with the Executive Service sought to find ways to provide Unit service in order to help them to continue

functioning. One of the methods to accomplish this goal was to use videoconferencing to conduct roundtables.

A small group consisting of council and district commissioners and district executives began meeting remotely to find solutions. The most promising solution at the time appeared to be software produced by Zoom. This platform was compatible with a majority of devices, easy to learn and use, provided security measures and had several levels of service, including a free version. In addition, Zoom was the chosen platform for the National BSA.

On October 6, 2020, the first council wide, remoted accessed roundtable was conducted. The roundtable was considered a success. A week later, the small group met again to review the quality of the roundtable and to prepare for the next month's roundtable. This approach was taken for all subsequent roundtables.

With the switch to council wide remote access roundtables, several advantages were achieved. Attendance increased, consistency and quality improved and efficiency increased. The disadvantages experienced included adequate equipment, internet access and a reduction in the social and networking aspects of in person roundtables.

Safety in all Scouting activities is paramount and appropriate precautions while videoconferencing must be followed. Included is adherence to youth protection policies, security of the meetings and security of personal information.

While the restrictions of in person meetings have been lifted, many councils still continue to offer remote access roundtables, either as the sole platform or as a hybrid platform.

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