

Doctoral Thesis  
College of Commissioner Science  
Sam Houston Area Council  
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## **Commissioner 'Best Practices'**

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By

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Lastly I wish to recognize my Scoutmaster Tom Anders where the Commissioner seed was first planted. He had a white arrowhead patch on his sleeve; I wanted one too and asked what it was. He explained it and all these many years later I proudly wear one – the rest is history.

# Table of Contents

Introduction	4
People: They come in all kinds	6
Knowledge: Seek it out and keep it close	8
Attitude: Have on and use it wisely	10
Recruiting: Back to the Basics	11
Perspective: A fly on the wall	13
A personal experience using all these: A true story	14
Unit Visit Tracking System (UVTS): document, document, document ...	16
Personal Methodology: What is it that <i>I</i> do?	17
Summary	19

## Introduction

I've always felt that in order to understand where you are going, you must first know where you have been. The role of commissioner has been a part of Boy Scouts since 1908 when the first volunteer commissioners were appointed by Baden-Powell, who deemed that to serve in this prestigious role, one had to 'qualify as a gentleman'. The role of Commissioner today is held not only by 'gentlemen' but by 'gentlewomen' as well. Over the last 100 years there have been 47 different Commissioner titles/positions. To serve as a Commissioner in the Boy Scouts is not only an honor but a privilege. So what does a 'Scouting Commissioner' do?

*"Commissioners are district and council leaders who help Scout units succeed. They coach and consult with adult leaders of Cub Scout packs, Boy Scout troops, and Venturing crews. Commissioners help maintain the standards of the Boy Scouts of America. They also oversee the unit charter renewal plan so that each unit reregisters on time with an optimum number of youth and adult members".*

In other words, a Commissioner's role is to guide, lead, teach, listen and support.

**Reference: Commissioner Fieldbook for Unit Service**

## **Commissioner 'Best Practices'**

One of the most important qualifications of a good Commissioner is strong people skills. As a Commissioner you work with adults and scouts and the age range of these two groups can span decades. The ability to be a friend, co-worker, leader, and advisor is essential to building a strong rapport among your peers.

Some other helpful traits to have as a Commissioner are personal skills, individual attitude, a knowledge of BSA Rules and Policies, and the need to document your work and the special situations you may be called upon to assist. Additionally one of the most difficult but very important capabilities required is the unique ability to remove one's self from given situations to ensure correctness and fairness when you are called upon to make difficult decisions.

This paper expands on each of these traits and adds some personal insight and 'war stories'.

## **People: They come in all kinds.**

First let's look at and discuss *people* and the things to give consideration to. It goes without saying that we all differ from each other on so many different levels it's a difficult decision on where to start first. The challenge of personality differences would have to be the greatest to successfully manage.

I believe the trick here is balance of those personalities and getting them to work in harmony or in concert towards common goals. You will surely come across individuals where personality conflicts can be minor and easily handled by finding mutual ground through civil discussion and reasoning. Hopefully you never get into a situation where the personality conflict is so volatile that recognized methods of mediation or counseling you may try do not work.

In such situations you must bring to bear every resource at your disposal. You should use your Commissioner Fieldbook as a resource of reference. Over time during your tenure as a Commissioner you should take courses at Commissioner College that lend themselves to developing these 'people skills' such as Commissioner Style, Commissioner Priorities, Commissioner and Professional Relationships, Commissioner and Diversity and especially Counseling Skills for the most unique of situations. Time spent taking these classes can pay huge dividends with not only Scouting situations but in your everyday life situations too. If all else fails, you may consider bringing in religious conviction and sense of 'right' to guide you through overly difficult 'people' situations.

You must be conscious of how you present yourself when working and dealing with people and their personalities. You must set a good example in word and deed. You are a representative of your District and possibly in some cases of the Council. You are by no means expected to be a

model of perfection and 'all knowing of all things' but you are expected to follow the Scout motto of Do Your Best. No one is perfect and no one knows it all and doing your best goes a long way!

Be wary and conscious that many situations will present themselves from a person's emotions as the driving factor and you must be sympathetic to those. Try to defuse or remove those emotions from the equation. It will not be easy but the facts and trying to bring the situation to a basic 'one way or the other' could bring clearer understanding of the situation. Once again, not the easiest thing to facilitate and achieve.

Typically with *Scouts* you can get them together, listen to their conflict, tell them to say they're sorry, shake hands and then go on about their business and it will normally go just that way. If only adult leaders would take that lesson from their youth, life for us Commissioners would be oh so much easier. Unfortunately some adults hold grudges and others may go so far as to be vengeful. Even at my age, I've never seen adults on occasion act so poorly and set bad examples to our youth as they do. It never ceases to amaze me that you can see in adults such complete opposite spectrums of adult/childish behavior. What I do understand though is that most adverse behavior is out of protection, defense and desire for the best for their children. It doesn't make the things some may do correct, but as I say, I do recognize and understand it and I've seen emotions run so high that adults have threatened bodily harm and even to kill another over what started out as nothing more than a minor disagreement. It is very sad to see this and this kind of situation can call on your very best Commissioner skills of working with personalities and in the end you may be forced to involve your District Executive (Professional). He will need to at least be informed.

## **Knowledge: Seek it out and keep it close.**

This comes to us in several forms and from a wealth of places. Many say ‘Knowledge is Power’ and for Commissioners that primarily comes from your ability to draw from your resources and wisely make decisions based on solid information and good judgment. Your training and subject matter documentation should always be your first point of reference. Commissioner Basic training is the foundation for your Commissioner repertoire of knowledge. Your Commissioner Field Manual is your first point of written reference in that same repertoire.

Over time Commissioner College serves as the pathway to extending your Commissioner Skills and knowledge. A wide variety of subject specific classes are offered annually not only in our Council but other Councils if you wish to attend. Additionally the University of Scouting further provides a number of select Commissioner Classes along with the extended curriculum offered to all Scouters and Scouts annually, too. Take advantage.

Fellow Commissioners are your next best source of knowledge. Long tenured Commissioners potentially have a wealth of experience that many times classes and publications cannot match. Take the time to meet and talk to these individuals and exchange contact information for the future. One never knows when a unique situation may come up and you’ll need that sounding board to bounce off your situation and seek options you may not have thought of on your own. These are the times when your Commissioner friends can be most handy and hopefully helpful. Never be afraid to ask advice or for help from any Commissioner and you should specifically look to your Division Commissioner or Assistant Council Commissioners for that same wealth of knowledge and wisdom you may need. Your goal should be to always help and do your best to assist. Others can help you accomplish exactly that!

The next source of knowledge would be Web sites and the Internet but be cautious and guarded on these as anyone can post and publish anything they wish. Some suggestions from unfamiliar web sources may not be applicable, well thought-out, factual, or even the least bit reliable. That said, the Internet – used wisely – is a great repository of publications to use as reference and learning.

One of your last resources of knowledge, particularly and sometimes specifically related to BSA policy will be your District Executive (DE) or Field Director. I've had to use both and I can assure you it was worth the time to take full advantage of all these resources. Do not be afraid to consult with them, but be aware that most times they will want you to make every effort to resolve issues within your own Units and/or District. I stay in contact with my DE all the time if for no other reason to keep him aware of things that are going on that he may not be aware of and to keep myself updated on what he's doing. Many times it works out to be nothing more than a friendly conversation. I consider communication between myself and my DE one of my greatest assets and such a simple thing to do. They are always just a phone call away and mine is always glad to offer advice and suggestions.

I have in the past consulted and sought an outside opinion or different perspective from the 'Ask Andy' web site. I find he has some pretty good stuff and great perspective advice. He can put a different spin on some things and I read intently but always take some of his writings with a grain of salt. Not all things will work for those from a very large Council such as ours.

## **Attitude: Have a good one and use it wisely!**

How you present yourself, how you project and display body language or demeanor are important. Being friendly, pleasant, and positive are all qualities to project. If you work to put these things out front as much as possible, you gain a positive edge and command a level of respect as a Commissioner. The work you do is extremely important to many people. Your attitude over time can and will be tested, and practicing these traits may be just the thing that sets you apart and a step ahead in the right direction.

Wear your uniform correctly and proudly because this sets a good example to all and reflects good Scout Spirit. Our Field Director at the time of my selection to fill the District Commissioner position told me quite matter of factly that the way I wore my uniform was what first brought me to his attention, so it pays to uniform yourself properly and take that quick glance in the mirror on your way out the door! On the other end of that spectrum I struggle with adult leaders who loosely interpret proper uniform standards, an action which in my eyes sets a poor example for our Scouts. A basketball short with a uniform shirt does not cut it for me and I remind offenders of this. I guess I'm a bit old school on this.

I'm still at a loss at those that won't wear award knots on their shirts. To me this offers the opportunity to identify a possible resource of knowledge or assistance if needed. If I see someone with a number of Cub leader knots I feel like I can rely on that person should I want to discuss an issue and get a practical point of view from their past experience.

## **Recruiting: Back to the Basics**

The greatest part of recruiting takes place in local schools or churches and traditionally during the fall and even sometimes in the spring. During this time Cub Scouting is Number One! There is a lot to do and much goes into proper recruiting. Working with the school districts and the schools themselves offer different challenges as they all have different rules, regulations and standards when it comes to allowing Scout Recruiting on their grounds and in their facilities. A good relationship, aggressive scheduling and someone skilled at 'Boy Talks' can make this time of year in Scouting a great success for a Cub Pack. I have three Commissioners skilled at recruiting and five Veteran Commissioners that are 'Boy Talk' champions. This can also be a tricky time and experience with something as simple as recruitment promotion in your area. Another of my challenges is one of the school districts with a single school in Raven District has two Cub Packs that are in contention for new Cubs so much so that one recruits outside the standards laid out by Council. One group makes their own signs and puts them up (not within guidelines) and don't work well with school administrators. Another group moves the Council provided signage into a City Right of Way area and then calls city officials to report it as an infraction whereby crews are immediately dispatched to remove and dispose of the 'proper' signage. This selfish and unnecessary behavior left a bad taste in the School Districts' mouth for our Scouting program and everyone loses. This had gone on for the last three years for these two groups and was something new every year. This is a good example of when the correct action was to 'kick this up' to the DE to resolve – we let him do the interactions, and took direction from him as to what to do. We do our best to keep the peace but both these Units never fail to challenge us all. We all closely watch this play out each year and prepare for whatever they do next and we stay on our toes!

While on the subject of recruiting, let me touch briefly on recruiting Commissioners. If there is an art or science to this I can't say so let me just give you this. I ALWAYS keep my eyes open and awareness heightened for prospective Commissioners. I look for volunteers that stand out to me through regular involvement and I look for enthusiasm, concern and those that give extra effort to the Scouting program. Bearing in mind that not everyone that displays these traits would actually make a good Commissioner or even be willing to take on the Commissioner responsibilities, I remain optimistic. I also encourage my Commissioners to do the same as I do and bring prospective volunteers to my attention so I can contact and evaluate those individuals. Keeping your Commissioner team together and growing is, like anything else in Scouting, an ongoing process.

## **Perspective: The fly on the wall.**

I would hope that these types of situations are far and few between, but there may be times when an issue within your District and the people involved could be ‘close to home’. Friends, family, and those you know very little about could all be principals in disagreements or conflict. You could be called upon to mediate or guide the resolution process to conclusion. You must be able to mentally remove yourself from personal attachment or involvement in order to be fair, objective and impartial. This may not be easy or even possible for you so you in such a case you could enlist the assistance of another Commissioner. The two of you together could resolve the issue with a more objective approach.

I recall an experience where a Chartered Organization Representative (COR) requested my presence along with their Unit Commissioner at a Committee meeting where he intended to replace the Scoutmaster and the Committee Finance Chairman. As the meeting progressed I sat quietly in the back of the room. The business of the replacement of the Scoutmaster became heated and as it turned argumentative the Unit Commissioner stepped in to mediate and deflect the escalating irritation of the parents and Committee members alike. He performed magnificently and I couldn’t have been prouder to see how his training and cool persuasive demeanor paid off in defusing the situation and helping the COR move forward in as positive a manner as possible given the situation. Then to my shock, two Committee members began to verbally attack *me* for sitting and doing nothing while their fine Scoutmaster was being ‘railroaded’. Apparently I was expected to defend the Scoutmaster and I ended up as the bad guy along with the COR — go figure! Afterwards as we discussed among ourselves we all agreed that was something none of us could have seen coming.

**A personal experience using all these:  
A true story or 'One Commissioners Nightmare'.**

One of my Units, formed by two families out of homeschooled kids, became involved with a number of serious allegations leveled by the two families at each other within six months of chartering. The accusers were both female leaders, one from one of the District's favorite families and the other basically little known up to this point. One family accused the other of financial misappropriation of property and monies out of a Unit fundraiser project (a ham sale) and the other accused the male of ongoing inappropriate behavior towards female adult leaders of two separate Units. One individual from one family held the Institutional Head position along with the Chartered Organization Representative (COR) position (not the best setup) and the other family held the other two primary positions, one as the Committee Chairman and the other as the Scoutmaster. There was money missing, hams missing, verbal assaults flying, threats of impending arrests and it goes on. I was advised of the conflict details and I engaged the Unit Commissioner (UC) (a long time seasoned Scouter) to mediate and resolve the issue. Two meetings later as I observed great efforts made to resolve the situation, there was total impasse, even after using every method described here previously and a couple not mentioned here for privacy reasons. I indicated to all parties involved that I would facilitate a third and last effort to resolve this issue and I would conclude this conflict one way or another. I advised my Division Commissioner of the situation at hand and of my plan to engage our Field Director as a BSA policy advisor. Our District had no District Executive at that point in time. In the next meeting we experienced a basic repeat of the first two. We failed to get true evidence of any of the allegations other than "he said, she said". No records or receipts could be produced though they all agreed there was missing money or property. No female leaders were willing to go on record

with allegations of improper behavior by the male leader or give specifics. We reserved final judgment to the following weeks to let cooler heads prevail and allow some outside investigation on our own. The Field Director, the Unit Commissioner and I began to get phone calls of concern and displeasure of how the Troop meetings were now being run by the Chairman in the Scoutmaster's absence due to work schedules. Meetings were run like military classrooms or formal adult style meetings with little Scouting method or subject matter. We spoke to several Scouts and concluded the boys were now confused by the two totally different leadership and meeting styles, along with not getting needed Program. After discussion with the UC and Field Director I concluded the best option for the youth involved was to dissolve the Unit. This was done following BSA policy with objections but agreement by all adult leadership. All this took place over an eight week period of time. The unfortunate fallout was the boys being split apart to two different Units, the loss of a Unit, the loss of a Popcorn Chairman and loss of two Unit Commissioners through resignations. Over time the boys' Scout careers flourished at their new Units with two becoming Eagles so far. The one family hurt the worse out of the episode has returned to even more meaningful Unit and District leadership positions while the other family has continued to house contempt and has been found to have been further involved with other questionable financial dealings within Scouting. This event happened within my first year as District Commissioner and many hard lessons were learned – mostly that nothing comes without a price, and this one was high for me and the District at the time. We survived it and all was better in the end. I wouldn't wish this type of thing on any Commissioner and I'm glad it was me making the decisions rather than another. Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately!) this kind of situation is rare enough that it would be hard to draw some 'best practice' out of the experience.

## **Unit Visit Tracking System (UVTS): Document, document, document**

The best rule of thumb here is ‘if it’s not logged or documented somewhere, it didn’t happen.’

Our Unit Visit Tracking System is designed for us to do exactly that – log things you do or are involved in from a Commissioner perspective. Unit visits are not the only things you should make log entries for in the UVTS system. Leader meetings, visits to Unit activities, phone calls to Unit Leadership, email communications to Unit leadership and Committees, any and all Commissioner-type efforts should be logged into the system. Even failures or unfavorable entries of concern logging are also important and should be documented in our UVTS. I have particularly struggled with visits and communication with LDS (Mormon) Units and their leadership and nearly all my logging related to those has been, from my perspective, failures to achieve what my Commissioner responsibilities were. Each was different and most were unfavorable on my part.

UVTS entries are used by Council and National to track and gather statistics about Units, Commissioners, Districts and Councils. Remember, the Commissioner Corps is the most direct link to our Professional Executives and they depend on us for accuracy and diligence. From the statistics and details, reports are generated to measure trends and activity, to identify patterns among Units, and verify cycles of Unit growth and decline. UVTS logging is the easiest thing commissioners can do but often the most neglected of our responsibilities.

I keep current with UVTS logging and entries mostly on Sunday afternoons while watching TV. I find that NASCAR races offer a great amount of time to make as many entries as I could possibly need to. I accomplish a lot on the My Scouting web site and keep my training up to date also, all while the race cars go round and round. If something exciting happens it is replayed and I never miss a thing!

## **Personal Methodology: What is it that I do?**

Quite simply, as District Commissioner I do all that I have written up to this point with one exception. Unit Commissioner responsibilities are designated, by structure and design with assigned Units, we use mostly for issue handling, monitoring and requested assistance. In my District, logistics is the enemy. Our district is thirty miles long and nearly the same at its widest point, narrowing as you get closer to downtown. Add to that the geographical challenge that ‘a river runs through it’ (not a movie reference) – the San Jacinto river divides the District in half. Incorporated within are five municipalities and six separate school systems. A secondary challenge in my district is that our district is part urban and part rural plus, by and large, a lower income area, which offers its own set of unique obstacles to boot. Now, couple all that with the fact that over the last five years the population demographic has changed so that now my District is predominantly Hispanic. The language barrier has added yet another piece to the puzzle of keeping Raven District Scouting up to the quality of program our youth deserve. We utilize all Commissioners to do Commissioner work for all units as availability, schedules and opportunities present themselves or dictate. I think this might best be described as a Commissioner Cross-over model with built-in flexibility – our Commissioners are not delegated or restricted to only their assigned Units. I’m fortunate in that I’ve managed to recruit several Spanish speaking Commissioners over the last three years to assist with the rising transition of our Hispanic population. I saw this change coming early enough and quickly made my Division Commissioner aware of our need to expedite required Spanish language training materials and classes to be made available to us. Additionally when we were required to identify a Hispanic Assistant District Commissioner (ADC), I had a person in place – we just had to give that individual the title. It is very hard to make regular Unit visits, so for some of these reasons along with others,

we are as opportunistic as possible when attending District and Council events. We take full advantage of having a number of Units in one location to make as many contacts, interactions and observations as possible on those occasions. We talk to leaders in attendance, present committee members, parents and the Scouts themselves to get as much insight as possible on how the Unit is doing and how its program is going. We take notes for logging later. Over time we collectively make UVTS log entries for these. Some Unit Commissioners are much better at this than others – a situation that is not so uncommon among Districts, as I’m told. For those less diligent, computer challenged or language challenged of my Commissioners, we have an agreement that they will convey to me their information and I log it for them. Not to be forgotten is the Commissioner’s responsibility to promote Unit Service logging and to be there and ready to assist with Unit chartering questions. Some of my Commissioners I consider SME’s or Subject Matter Experts and I utilize them when specific knowledge of a subject is required to fit the need or question.

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## Summary

In conclusion this document should not be considered a manual or guide. We have many of these available to us from numerous sources more learned and experienced than myself. This should be used or referenced as more of a methodology which not only fits my particular situation but the basics I have tried to express here could be realistically applied most anywhere.

I feel you must not only *Do Your Best* but to be fearless and willing to take on all aspects of Commissioner roles. Clearly no one person can 'do it all' and surely would never be expected to, but, if *all* commissioners had that attitude, internal drive, initiative and absolute willingness, I believe our Commissioner Corps would be even greater than it has already has become over the last few years. We have some of the finest Commissioners to be found anywhere and as our Council Commissioner says, "we can never have too many"!