

Scoutmaster conferences: Tips, guidelines and 20 questions to consider asking

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Barry Walsh asks the Scout to imagine they have a magic wand and can change anything about the troop.

Quynh-Thi Vidal's preferred line of questioning starts with, "What was your biggest hurdle to get here? And how can I help you overcome it next time?"

And Ray Lightner's favorite question is simple but informative: "Are you having fun?"

The Scoutmaster conference — a once-per-rank conversation between the Scoutmaster and the Scout — can serve as both an important check-in and a rare chance to get direct feedback from Scouts about what's keeping them engaged in the troop and what elements aren't resonating.

But which ranks require them? When should they be conducted within a Scout's journey to the next rank? What should be discussed? And must a Scoutmaster conference be conducted by the Scoutmaster, as the name implies?

Here's what you need to know.

Basics about the Scoutmaster conference

The Scoutmaster conference requirement was announced in 1963 and became mandatory in 1965. It has been a requirement ever since.

- **Which ranks require them?** A Scoutmaster conference is required for every rank in Scouts BSA — from Scout to Eagle and even the Eagle Palms.
- **What should be discussed?** There are no required topics of discussion for the Scoutmaster conference.
- **When should they be held?** At any time that's suitable to the Scoutmaster and Scout, though many units find it makes sense to hold the Scoutmaster conference after other requirements for a rank are met. But again, it's not required that the conference be the last step before the board of review.
- **Who can conduct the Scoutmaster conference?** Typically the Scoutmaster, but if there are extenuating circumstances that prevent the Scoutmaster from holding the conference themselves, an assistant Scoutmaster (21 or older) can be designated to conduct the conference.
- **What about virtual Scoutmaster conferences?** Virtual conferences are allowed but should only be held when circumstances preclude a more personal approach.
- **How long should a Scoutmaster conference last?** According to [this article](#) from *Scouting* magazine, "conferences should last 10 to 15 minutes, although those for Eagle Scouts might last 30 minutes or more."
- **Is a Scoutmaster conference a test?** No. It's not a time to quiz a Scout or "check" whether they know certain things. A Scout must participate in a Scoutmaster conference, but the requirements do not say the Scout must "pass" that conference.
- **Do Youth Protection rules apply?** Yes, Youth Protection rules forbidding one-on-one contact apply to Scoutmaster conferences. While parents or guardians and other Scouts within hearing range of the conversation may influence the Scout's participation, the conversation should be held in full view of other adult leaders.
- **What about Venturing and Sea Scouts?** These same guidelines apply to all unit leader conferences, including Venturing Advisor conferences and Sea Scout Skipper conferences.

Tips for your next Scoutmaster conference

The best advice might be this line in the *Guide to Advancement*: The Scoutmaster conference "is a forum for discussing topics such as ambitions, life purpose, and goals for future achievement, for counseling, and also for obtaining feedback on the unit's program."

At first, you might think of a Scoutmaster conference as similar to the annual performance review you'd have at your workplace. But that's not a perfect comparison, because a Scoutmaster isn't the boss of a Scout but is instead a mentor and positive role model.

Still, there are parallels between the Scoutmaster conference and the performance review.

A performance review shouldn't be the first time an employee or manager hears of an employee's concern. Ideally, they've been checking in regularly, observing the employee's progress, and both seeking and offering regular feedback.

Similarly, a Scoutmaster conference shouldn't be the first time a Scout or Scoutmaster discusses suggestions for improvement.

Communication works best when it's open and ongoing.

20 questions to consider asking at your next Scoutmaster conference

We asked those who follow [Scouting magazine's Facebook page](#) to share what questions they like asking at a Scoutmaster conference. Here are some of our favorites:

1. If you were Scoutmaster, what would you change about the troop?

— *Walter Underwood*

2. What was your biggest hurdle to get here? And how can I help you overcome it next time?

— *Quynh-Thi Vidal*

3. What advice would you give the new/incoming Scouts about their experience in Scouting?

— *Wendy Barnabo*

4. How can I help?

It always comes around to that question. I ask how school, family life, friends, hobbies, sports, church, and Scouting are going. I ask what their goals and aspirations are for the near and long term in any/all those areas and what they are doing to achieve those goals. And that's how it always comes back to "how can I help?"

— *Bryan Blair*

5. Which patch are you most proud to wear on your uniform? Why?

— *Kathryn Eager*

6. Which parts of the Scout Law have you implemented into your everyday life, and how?

— *Travis Willhite*

7. Are you having fun? And is there something we didn't do or could have done?

— *Ray Lightner*

8. How have you demonstrated Scout Spirit this week?

— *Cindy Thorne*

9. We ask what point of the Scout Law they could improve on and write it in their book to ask them about at their next conference.

— *Michael Martin*

10. I always ask about leadership positions. Either "what did you learn from being [your current position]?" or "what leadership position are you considering and why do you think you're suited for it?"

— *Steven Boell*

11. Who do you consider to be your hero, and why? If the answer is a close family member, I ask if the Scout has ever told that person how they felt.

— *Mark Liekhus Sr.*

12. I like to ask where they think the troop could improve and then ask who and how questions until they realize that they can lead the change they desire. "You think we need more merit badges in our program? Who do you think would be a good person to help lead that? How could they get started?"

— *Joel Gleason*

13. What was the best part of your last badge? Does anything about the next badge look scary or daunting?

— *Michael Polkinghorn*

14. If you had a magic wand, and could change anything in the troop, what would you change?

— *Barry Walsh*

15. I always ask about Scout-related travel. Where would you like to go? (A great camp, a high-adventure base, NOAC, Kandersteg) I want them to know there is Scouting beyond our council.

— *Linda Cooper*

16. Do you think that there is something special about being a Scout? If so, what?

— *Paul Napoli*

17. Which of the 12 points of the Scout Law do you struggle with living up to most? (I always say, “besides clean.”)

— *Larry Steagall*

18. Do you plan on staying with the unit after Eagle to mentor those coming up? There is no wrong answer — I just plant the thought that they can be vital to the next group of youth.

— *Wendy Hampton-Kennedy*

19. What are your career aspirations? Has Scouting helped you define them? How?

— *Mike Binnix*

20. I ask, “What was the most fun you have had as a Scout?” I then follow with: “What was the least fun? Was there ever a point when you questioned if you wanted to continue on as a Scout?”

This always gets a strange look followed by interesting results. Often they say, “There have been no times I didn’t have fun.”

I usually am able to see through the answers that are given simply because they think it’s the answer I am looking for.

Some have legitimately been cheerful. Others will be honest and tell some story involving a long hike, a leaky tent and a forgotten can opener.

But I then follow up by explaining that sometimes the things worth doing are not always fun. Scouting is worth doing, thus sometimes hard and thus not always fun.

— *Barry Blumenkemper*



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What the *Guide to Advancement* says

We've covered the basics above, but some readers prefer to get their information from the *Guide to Advancement* itself. This is from section 4.2.3.5 of the *Guide*.

The unit leader (Scoutmaster) conference, regardless of the rank or program, is conducted according to the guidelines in the Troop Leader Guidebook (volume 1). Note that a Scout must

participate or take part in one; it is not a “test.” Requirements do not say the Scout must “pass” a conference. While it makes sense to hold one after other requirements for a rank are met, it is not required that it be the last step before the board of review. This is an important consideration for Scouts on a tight schedule to meet requirements before age 18. Last-minute work can sometimes make it impossible to fit the conference in before that time. Scheduling it earlier can avoid unnecessary extension requests.

The conference is not a retest of the requirements upon which a Scout has been signed off. It is a forum for discussing topics such as ambitions, life purpose, and goals for future achievement, for counseling, and also for obtaining feedback on the unit’s program. In some cases, work left to be completed — and perhaps why it has not been completed — may be discussed just as easily as that which is finished. Ultimately, conference timing is up to the unit. Some leaders hold more than one along the way, and the Scout must be allowed to count any of them toward the requirement.

Scoutmaster conferences should be held with a level of privacy acceptable under the BSA’s rules regarding Youth Protection. Parents or guardians and other Scouts within hearing range of the conversation may influence the Scout’s participation. Since conferences relate not only to the Scouting method of advancement, but also to that of adult association, they are meant to be face-to-face, personal, and individual experiences. Though virtual conferences are allowed they should only be held when circumstances preclude a more personal approach.

While it is intended that the conference be conducted between the unit leader and the Scout, it may sometimes be necessary for the unit leader to designate an assistant unit leader to conduct the conference. For example, if the Scoutmaster is unavailable for an extended period of time or in larger troops where a Scout’s advancement would be delayed unnecessarily, then it would be appropriate for an assistant Scoutmaster (21 years old or older) to be designated to conduct the conference.

Unit leaders do not have the authority to deny a Scout a timely conference when one is required for a rank. Unit leaders must not require the Eagle Scout Service Project Workbook, the Eagle Scout Rank Application, statement of ambitions and life purpose, or list of positions, honors, and awards as a prerequisite to holding a unit leader conference for the Eagle Scout rank. If a unit leader conference is denied, a Scout who believes all the other requirements have been completed may still request a board of review. See “Boards of Review Must Be Granted When Requirements Are Met,” 8.0.0.2. If an Eagle Scout candidate is denied a conference, it may become grounds for a board of review under disputed circumstances. See “Initiating Eagle Scout Board of Review Under Disputed Circumstances,” 8.0.3.2.