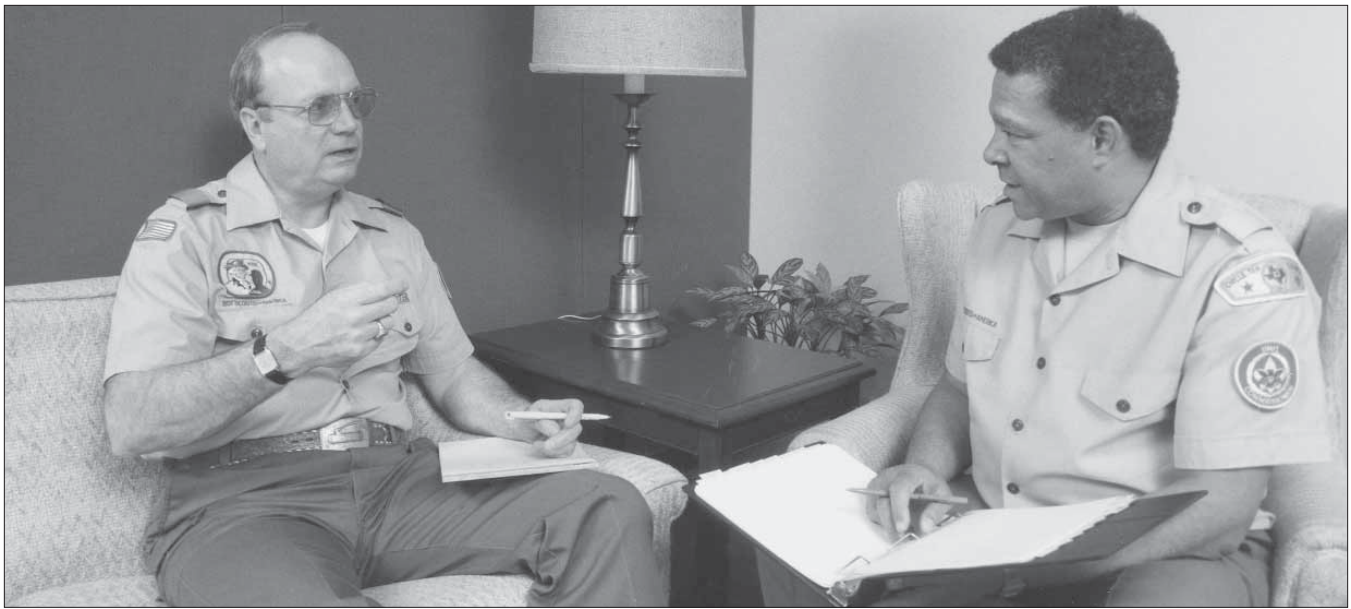


10—COUNSELING



The best way to strengthen a unit is to strengthen its leadership. Counseling is an effective method of helping unit leaders develop their potential. Even the leader who has completed formal training and has years of experience can benefit from counseling. Where the need for an answer or a solution is not immediate, counseling is preferred over teaching. As a commissioner, you should develop your ability as a good counselor.

In fact, coaching a leader through a difficult problem and arriving cooperatively at a solution is one of the most rewarding moments for a commissioner.

Counseling is the ability to listen and react in a way that will help others solve their own problems and attain their potential. Counseling is the art of helping others arrive at the right answer by their own analysis of the situation and the facts. When it is done skillfully, they may not even know that they have been guided. You should counsel whenever someone needs

- Help to solve a problem,
- Encouragement in a difficult task,
- Help interpreting facts,
- Assistance to resolve indecision or confusion.

Here are some points that will help you become an effective counselor.

1. Carefully select a time and place where there will be few interruptions. Provide a *relaxed atmosphere*. The midst of a unit meeting is obviously not such a time.
2. *Listen* more than you speak. Remember the old Vermont proverb “Don’t talk unless you can improve the silence.” Listen for hidden meaning and watch body language.

3. Try to *understand* what a leader tells you. The commissioner first tries to understand before he or she tries to be understood. You may need to check out your understanding with the other person (“Bill, are you saying that . . . ?” or “Bill, is . . . how you really feel?”)
4. Let the leader know that you *really hear* what they are saying. Acknowledge with brief verbal or nonverbal cues what the leader is saying so they know they are not talking to dead air.
5. *Do not give quick, easy advice*. Guide leaders as they find ways to solve their own problems. Sometimes people just need friendly, nonjudgmental ears or sounding boards. Talking it out can help them clarify the solutions and learn to trust their instincts—with your help.
6. *Summarize* the problem and help them organize their thoughts.
7. *Support their thinking with further information* and data. You may suggest several possibilities, but let the leader select the one he or she thinks might work. *Provide facts*. Know the difference between information and advice.
8. *Encourage* them to review verbally several possible solutions to the problem.
9. *Be supportive*. Talk through the person’s problem with them. Even if it seems small to you, it may be big to them, so don’t minimize their challenge.
10. *Reflect feelings*. Restating feelings indicated by the leader helps to clarify his or her meanings and to show sympathy for his or her point of view.
11. *Use positive body language*. Leaning forward, good eye contact, and hand gestures indicate interest. (How would you feel if the listener’s eyes were closed?)

12. *Be aware of your biases.* Commissioners are likely to have conversations that test their own prejudices. Try to remain open in a conversation where biases might make you a poor counselor.
13. *Avoid making judgments.* A warm, sympathetic listener creates a spirit of openness—especially for emotions. If the commissioner criticizes each statement and each feeling expressed, the leader will likely clam up.
14. *Avoid anger.* Some leaders can be very trying. They may accuse or criticize the commissioner, or use ethnic or sexual insults. Anger is the worst defense. Remain cool and professional.

Let your unit Scouters know that what is important to them is also important to you.

Making Suggestions

Often it's better to offer a suggestion in the form of a question. Sometimes they are more acceptable when they come as questions. For example, perhaps a unit leader will tell you he is not getting any help from his unit committee. Here are some questions that might help:

“Do you make a report to the troop committee at each of its meetings?”

“Have you thought about ending your report with the specific help you need next month?”

“Could you have an understanding with your chairman that at the close of your report, he will take the needs for the unit and assign them to the members of the committee?”

Leadership Styles

If you are to counsel people in leadership effectively, you must know something of leadership styles. Three styles of leadership are often identified:

1. Autocratic—The leader runs the show. Members do not make decisions.
2. Democratic—The leader advises members who make the decisions.
3. Laissez-faire—The leader lets the group make all the decisions without any direction from the leader.

Good leaders will use each of these styles. They will choose the one that is best for each given situation. For example:

1. Leaders supervising unit swims where there are possible dangers give orders and expect obedience (autocratic).
2. Pack leaders are planning a Cub Scout bus trip. The activity chairman explains financing and available tours, and lets the group decide (democratic).
3. A number of weekend activities have been suggested by members of the patrol leaders' council. The leader sits back and lets them discuss and decide (laissez-faire).

Each leadership style expects a certain response:

1. Autocratic—obedience
2. Democratic—cooperation
3. Laissez-faire—initiative

However, if only one leadership style is used constantly, the reaction is likely to be:

1. Autocratic—defiance
2. Democratic—inaction
3. Laissez-faire—chaos

Decision Making

Unit leaders and committee members make many decisions that affect the welfare of the unit. Since the commissioner has a major concern for the health of the unit, the best possible decisions are desired. For a commissioner to effectively counsel leaders and committee members, the decision-making process must be understood.

There are five basic steps that will help make a decision that leads to action:

1. Determine the real problem.
2. Examine the facts.
3. Consider possible solutions.
4. Reach a decision on the best solutions.
5. Move toward action.

Additional Counseling Tips

- Allow at least 30 to 40 minutes to discuss a major issue.
- Don't try to cover more than two key issues in a single session.
- Rehearse the session in your mind before the visit.
- Try to spend two-thirds of your time in supportive behavior and one-third of your time in solving problems.
- State things in a gentle, non-aggressive, and non-threatening way.
- Convey a “let's solve this together” attitude.
- Don't get frustrated—change often takes time.
- Unless a commissioner has demonstrated helpfulness to unit leadership, that commissioner hasn't earned the right to offer more direct guidance and may have difficulty developing a meaningful relationship with unit people.