Implementing the BSA Scoutmaster Training Model as Designed: A Fidelity Assessment

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About the Institute for Research on Youth Thriving & Evaluation (RYTE)
The Institute for Research on Youth Thriving and Evaluation (RYTE Institute) explores questions related to youth thriving, developmental science, and program evaluation and planning from a systems science perspective.

The RYTE Institute is co-directed by Dr. Jennifer Brown Urban and Dr. Miriam Linver, both Professors of Family Science and Human Development at Montclair State University. Post-doctoral fellows, research scientists, research associates, and graduate and undergraduate research assistants in the RYTE Institute come from a variety of departments and disciplines including human development, psychology, counseling, sociology, education, family science, and economics.

All of the projects in the RYTE Institute fall under the umbrella of developmental systems science including both theoretical approaches and methodologies. We apply a relational developmental systems meta-theoretical lens to our work. All our projects are organized into three inter-related strands:

Systems Evaluation Research: the development, testing, and implementation of a systems science approach to program evaluation and planning to enhance internal evaluation capacity particularly for youth program practitioners and evaluators;

Advancing Developmental Systems Science: developing and promoting a social justice perspective, the use of innovative methods, and professional development resources;

Building the Evidence-Base in Developmental Science: specifically to determine the key features of character development programs that promote positive youth development; and advance the application of character science in multiple contexts (e.g., family, school, peers, neighborhood) to enhance human flourishing across the life span.

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Introduction: Cultivating Adult Leadership in BSA

Evidence shows that BSA has helped develop young scouts into strong leaders. But does it do the same for adult volunteers?

This is just one of the questions asked by researchers in the **BEST** Study, a first-of-its-kind national study. Researchers tried to answer this specific question by focusing on the Scoutmaster Position Specific training for BSA troop leaders, who are critical to BSA's success.

Through a collaboration between Montclair State University's RYTE Institute, American Institute for Research (AIR) and BSA, the **BEST** Study has three objectives: 1) Understand how adult leaders' training and Scouting experiences relate to positive youth outcomes; 2) Identify how adult leadership and training impact youth development; and 3) Improve the Scouts BSA program.

The investigation reported herein is a small segment of the larger **BEST** Study, which was conducted by the RYTE Institute. Researchers hope the findings can help BSA and volunteer leaders deliver a consistent program to promote positive development in youth. In addition, the findings could help advance the youth character field overall, which has little research about adult leadership in youth programs.

BSA's model aims to offer well-attended in-person Scoutmaster trainings led by facilitators who use the official BSA syllabus to provide content through specific delivery methods and share particular resources to support Scoutmasters.

The current report examines how much that model is being implemented as designed, and identifies variations from the official syllabus currently in the field.

Methodology

Before they could determine the *impact* of BSA on adult leaders, *BEST* researchers had to understand the *model* through which adult leadership is taught in BSA's Scoutmaster training. To do so, the research team created a tailored template for the project to aid in qualitative data collection. The 3-step process is described below.

CREATE

Creating a Template
First, researchers read through the current Scoutmaster syllabus and completed the online version of Scoutmaster training. This allowed researchers to gain fundamental knowledge of BSA overall, the structure of the Scoutmaster training, and the key points that trainers are expected to communicate. Additionally, two senior researchers attended and took notes at three SM-specific trainings that were geographically close to the RYTE Institute. The experiences and notes from these visits were used to design a standardized template for use in the fidelity assessment. The template was designed to promote consistent note-taking from the observation team addressing: training attendance, trainer information, syllabus alignment and inconsistencies, and inductive observations.

TEST

Testing the Tool and Training the Team
After the creation of this template, the research team tested it in the field. Two senior researchers attended another SM-specific training with an additional two junior members of the research team. The team took notes according to the template. Senior researchers provided feedback to these junior researchers for improvement. Newer members of the team were paired with one of the original project researchers the first time they collected data using the template.

USE

Using the Tool
The tool was used at four in-person SM-specific trainings between September and November of 2018 as part of the larger *BEST* Study. Three trainings occurred in the Northeast (in three different states) and one training took place in the Western region; they ranged from 2.25 hours to 4 hours. Each training was attended by two researchers, both of whom independently recorded their observations, first in the form of handwritten jottings and later in detailed, typed field notes that followed the template.

Data Coding & Analytical Approach

Using the template, the research team recorded more than 100 pages of observation notes focused on **4 domains** of leadership transmission:

Training Attendance

*Adherence to BSA Materials

Adherence to BSA Methods

*Sharing Key Resources

BSA's model aims to offer well-attended in-person Scoutmaster trainings led by facilitators who use the official BSA syllabus to provide content through specific delivery methods and share particular resources to support Scoutmasters.

To assess these areas of interest, researchers used different coding approaches. First, to examine **training attendance**, the team kept a spreadsheet with scheduled trainings, registered and final attendee numbers, and cancellations. Second, to examine **adherence to BSA materials**, the team created a checklist to determine if the 7 BSA required core components from the official syllabus were present at each training observed. Special attention was paid to ensure that the *Patrol Method*, a central part of the required training, was taught in alignment with the core components. Through this approach, 5-8 youth of similar ages are grouped into a "patrol" that works together. The Patrol periodically joins a troop game, adventure, learn new skill, and complete requirement.

7 Core Components of Scoutmaster Training

Aims & Methods of Scouting
Role of the Scoutmaster
The Patrol Method
The Troop Meeting
Advancement
The Support Team
Annual Planning

"The Patrol Method is not <u>a</u> way to operate a BSA troop. It is the <u>only</u> way."

-Robert Baden-Powell, BSA founder

To assess **adherence to BSA methods,** a checklist of the key delivery methods of the Scoutmaster training was used. Group discussions were used for multiple core components such that the total number of methods totaled 14. Again, special focus was paid to determine how frequently the Patrol Method was modelled for Scoutmasters. Finally, to assess the **sharing of key resources,** researchers noted the mention of resources that the syllabus specified should be referenced or provided at the training. In other words, the syllabus notes that training leaders should distribute and/or reference the Troop Program Resources material at training but whether that happened in practice was an open question. Based on the resources mentioned in the syllabus, a list of 21 resources was developed (see below).

Key Delivery Methods of Scoutmaster Training

Gathering activity game
Patrol method modeled
Advancement simulation
Model opening ceremony
Brainstorming as troop
Small group discussion
Game & guided discussion
Guided discussion
Large-group presentation
Guided discussion
Small group discussion
Model closing ceremony

Resources to be Shared at the Scoutmaster Training

Troop Program Resources
Troop Leader Guidebook
Guide to Safe Scouting
Boy Scout Outdoor Program
Troop Meeting Plan
Program Features for Troops, Teams, and Crews
Scoutmaster Conference Handout
Boy Scout Handout
Guide to Advancement
Boy Scout Requirements

Fieldbook
Boys' Life
Roundtable
University of Scouting
Introduction to Outdoor Leadership Skills
Troop Committee Guidebook
Local Training Opportunities
BSA Organizational Structure
Wood Badge
Supplemental Training
Unit Commissioner

Successes to Maintain

Of the 4 domains of the BSA Scoutmaster training model, 2 (**Adherence to BSA Materials** & **Sharing Key Resources**) were present at strong levels.

Adherence to BSA Materials

All observed trainings included modules on the official BSA syllabus' 7 core components. Facilitators developed a learning culture by teaching critical Scoutmaster skills. The team found great consistency across trainings in terms of the presence of required components. Put another way, all components were present in each of the four trainings observed.

Sharing Key Resources

All observed trainings shared BSA required resources to some extent. However, which resources and sources of support were named varied by training. Of the 21 resources, 5 were not shared at all, 4 were shared at 25% of trainings, 3 were shared at 50% of trainings, 2 were shared at 75%, and 1 was shared at 100%. *Notably, in only one case was a resource described at 100% of the observed trainings: the BSA organizational structure. In contrast, there were* **no observed instances** *of trainers referring to the Scoutmaster Conference Handout or the Troop Committee Guidebook.* An additional finding from the coding is that trainings offered support and resources not listed in the syllabus. In 3 instances, trainers directed participants to **Youth Protection Training**. Other additional resources included a printout of slides and recommendations for online support such as Bryan's Blog and Scouting Wire. These might be useful official additions.

25%
Troop Program Resources
Troop Leader Guidebook
Program Features for Troops, Teams, and Crews
Boys' Life
University of Scouting

50%
Roundtable
Guide to Advancement
Local training opportunities
Supplemental training
Unit commissioner

75%
Guide to Safe Scouting
Troop Meeting Plan
Introduction to Outdoor Leadership Skills
Wood Badge

Opportunities for Improvement

In 2 domains of the BSA Scoutmaster training model, there is opportunity to improve fidelity:

Training Attendance

Many in-person trainings had low attendance or high cancellation rates. Though the core components were delivered at all trainings, few Scoutmasters received them at the in-person trainings. 40% of trainings during the study period were cancelled due to lack of registrants, and 100% had 6 or fewer attendees. Future focus should examine if the low in-person attendance is related to greater online training participation.

Adherence to BSA Methods

Many BSA required delivery methods were not used at trainings. While the core material outlined in the syllabus was present across the board at observed trainings, much more variation existed with regards to the delivery methods outlined by the syllabus. The research team frequently observed that sessions were presented in a way other than the suggested format specified in the syllabus. BSA expects training content to be reinforced through 14 specific games, activities, simulations, discussions and demonstrations, of which 8 were absent from all observed trainings, 4 were only present at 25% of trainings, and 1 was present at 50% of trainings.

0%
Gathering Activity Game
Patrol Method Modeled
Patrol Method Game
Patrol Method Guided Dis.
The Support Team Guided Dis.
Annual Planning Small Group Dis.
Advancement Simulation
Advancement Guided Dis.

25%
Model Opening Ceremony
Role of Scoutmaster Small
   Group Dis.
Troop Meeting Guided Dis.
Advancement Presentation
Model Closing Ceremony

50%
Aims & Methods
Brainstorming

The Patrol Method

Notably, ***there were no instances of the Patrol Method being modelled, discussed in groups, or reinforced through the required game,*** which may have implications for Scouts.

Of note, researchers found that though it is addressed in alignment with the core components, there were zero instances of the Patrol Method being reinforced through the delivery methods in the Scoutmaster syllabus. In addition, the Advancement Simulation was also absent from the observed trainings. These factors may impact both Scoutmaster and Scout experiences in their troops. Future research should focus on this question.

Conclusions: Core Components Are Being Implemented

Overall the investigation found that in terms of Scoutmaster training model fidelity, there were some implementation successes and some opportunities for improvement. At all of the observed trainings, all 7 core components were implemented, indicating that core syllabus content is being delivered. However, very few of the required delivery methods were used, particularly for the Patrol Method—a cornerstone of the Scouting experience--which may have some implications for both Scoutmaster effectiveness and Scout experiences. Future investigations can help examine this possibility. Moreover, since there were high rates of cancellations for in-person trainings, and few attendees at each of the observed trainings, other questions are raised. For instance, are fewer Scoutmasters receiving training overall, or is the online training option serving more Scoutmasters than in-person trainings? Future studies should examine this question to better direct potential changes. Finally, the required resources were shared at high rates in observed trainings, as were additional resources that may meet emergent needs in the field.

Next Steps

Future BSA ***BEST* Study** questions can help identify areas of BSA to: celebrate and showcase in practice and research and improve BSA programming to best foster character and leadership in youth and adults. For more, go to bsabeststudy.org.

Appendix

The Analytical Approach. As a group, three researchers on the observation team systematically read through both sets of field notes for a given observed training. Individually, each coded whether a session had been present and whether the prescribed methods of delivery had been followed. At team meetings, researchers shared their coding with one another. Any inconsistency in the coding amongst the researchers was resolved by consensus. The strength of this approach is that it included both field workers who were present at a specific observed training, as well as those who had only read field notes.

The presence or absence of a core component was coded in a generous manner. That is, researchers agreed that trainers did not need to label each session as having begun or ended. Rather, the team agreed that any substantial discussion of the topic outlined in the BSA core components counted as it having occurred. In a similar manner, researchers also coded the methods of delivery fairly generously. Differences of opinions were discussed as a group until a consensus was reached. Likewise, researchers first independently marked down what additional resources or support were noted in the training. They then compared lists with one another and rechecked the field notes until consensus was established.

ON MY HONOR
I WILL DO MY BEST
TO DO MY DUTY
TO GOD AND MY COUNTRY
AND TO OBEY THE SCOUT LAW
TO HELP OTHER PEOPLE
AT ALL TIMES
TO KEEP MYSELF
PHYSICALLY STRONG
MENTALLY AWAKE
AND MORALLY STRAIGHT

Once all data were coded, the final analysis was conducted. Accordingly, the data were grouped into the 4 domains to determine how well each element of model fidelity was met. Research shows that understanding the degree of implementation with model fidelity and capturing implementation variations are key aspects of discerning and sustaining program impacts. It is important to note that implementation variations can have various implications for programs. For instance, if central parts of the model are not implemented in the field, program quality may suffer. However, non-model adjustments made in the field might be addressing an emergent program need, and may potentially improve the model.