

VENTURING MAGAZINE

The “Let the Youth Do It” Dilemma by Joe Garrett

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Anyone who has volunteered in Scouting for any length of time has heard the phrase "Let the Youth Do It". Sometimes the sentiment is expressed more darkly as "Let the youth fail; they'll learn from the experience". This idea is actively promoted in the Boy Scouting Program, which targets a slightly younger audience than Venturing. In formal training for Scoutmasters, this idea is presented as a way to promote learning, growth, and evolving leadership skills. When I was a Scoutmaster, I could never literally "let the kids fail", but I would often let situations deteriorate until it was obvious that the boys needed help. One of the hardest things for a young leader to deal with is too much help too soon. A good Scoutmaster walks a fine line between helping too much and not helping enough. This is also true of a good Venturing Crew Advisor.

Our traditions come from Boy Scouting



Boy Scouting is significantly different from Venturing and the issues are much more complex. In a Scout Troop, the adult leadership is provided with a menu and a cookbook for the Troop program. The program is all set out in the Scout Handbook, there are Program Helps, and there are even suggested annual calendars of events; the local Districts and Councils conduct Camporees, Scout Camps, Merit Badge Fairs and service opportunities. Recruiting is generally a sponsored event, and the bulk of new members come from Webelos Dens of affiliated Cub Scout Packs.

Running a Boy Scout Troop is analogous to going to a restaurant for dinner, while running a Venturing Crew is more like living off the land. Most Troops have a set of activities that they have found to be successful in the past, and often the only thing that changes from year to year is the location of the activities. There is car camping, backpacking, day hiking, and then summer camp. These

activities are generally easy to manage, simple to execute, and the reasons for and goals of the activities are usually well understood. There is plenty of parental support and involvement, and parents are usually helpful and positive (not always). Once a boy has been on a couple of car camps, or bike hikes, it is not a big challenge for him to set one up, make sure the food will be there, and make certain that the campsite reservations are made. Transportation is often handled by someone on the adult Troop Committee and finances are usually supervised by the adult Troop Treasurer. Often, the boys who are responsible for finances, transportation, and groceries are teamed up with Troop Committee adults, providing a safety net for the young men as they take on more and more responsibility. Many of the boys tend to stay in a Troop for four years or more, giving them plenty of time to grow into these responsibilities.

The bold talk about "letting the boys fail" most often has to do with forgetting a can opener or fire starter than with some serious safety violation or health threat. Some leaders take pride in the fact that they

have let youth go on camping trips without their coats, or without their tents. Many leaders tell the story of the young backpacker who brought a twelve pack of Coke in his backpack on a weekend hike.

Venturing is more complex, less predictable, and much more diverse in its activities

To illustrate why the Boy Scouting model may not work well in Venturing, let me walk you through a typical ski weekend in my Crew. We make two to three weekend trips a year to Whistler Village in British Columbia. Before we go to Canada, though, we must take all of our new members for lessons (I use skiing and snowboarding interchangeably. In my experience there are few skiers under the age of 40) at a local ski area. Everyone who goes with us to Whistler must have a basic proficiency in skiing or snowboarding as the terrain does not lend itself well to introductory instruction. Our local ski area has a beginner's package with snowboard, lift ticket, and an hour lesson at a greatly reduced price. These early season day trips are also a good place for the older youth and the adults to tune up their skills and check their equipment before a big weekend trip.

Once we have moved past the lessons, we have to scramble for loaner equipment, appropriate clothing, winter camping equipment, and finances. A special Crew meeting is usually convened a few weeks before the trip where snowboard tuning and waxing is taught and permission/information kits are handed out. Everyone MUST have a passport to travel to Canada and this responsibility cannot be left to the youth (the voice of experience! There is nothing more disappointing than being turned back at the Canadian border). Before we leave the curb, our (youth) Crew Secretary is responsible for collecting passports and permission slips and placing them in a large manila envelope which has a roster listed on the outside. A separate envelope is provided for the (youth) Crew Treasurer, who collects the trip fees and keeps a list of payers on the outside of that envelope. The Treasurer then buys fuel, pays campsite fees, and disburses other funds as appropriate, depositing the receipts in the envelope.



Snowboarders at Whistler, British Columbia

When we first hit the ski area, an adult usually has to go with the newbies to rent equipment and the rest of the Crew can buy their lift tickets and hit the slopes as a group. A lunch rendezvous place and time is communicated to EVERYONE, along with a final quitting time to be back at the parking lot. The kids usually sort themselves out by snowboarding ability and have been very responsible about reporting for lunch rendezvous, and we rarely have to wait for anyone at the end of the day. The newbies usually hang out with the adults for the first morning while they build their skills, confidence, and learn their way around the ski area. The adults are normally more willing to go slow, wait for stragglers, and assist with learning how to mount and dismount the high speed lifts. It isn't really fair to the older Venturers to expect them to spend their day on beginner slopes.

Because of the unique circumstances of Whistler Village, it is usually more expedient to go into town for dinner than to try and cook in the dark, cold campsite. There are plenty of inexpensive places to eat. The kids generally split up into small packs and go to find their favorite menu items. Sometimes we head for the Village Recreation Center for hot tubbing and swimming after dinner, but everyone is



Snowboarders at Whistler, British Columbia

generally ready for bed by 10:00 PM. The next morning, we start the whole rodeo over again, although this time we pack up so that we can leave straight from the slopes to go home at the end of the day.

There are many, many opportunities in this scenario for youth to demonstrate and develop their leadership skills. They are in small acts of kindness, in executing small routine tasks, and in simply spending the day with a younger, less experienced Venturer. What's not in here is an opportunity to fail. Teenagers

are already vulnerable enough, trying to find themselves, and trying to assert themselves socially.

The last thing they need is to be taught a lesson by an adult who "lets them fail". The typical Venturing Crew is also a fragile thing, and most Crews need as much success as they can reasonably achieve in order to be perceived as a worthwhile place to spend valuable social time. My goal with these ski trips is to send a bunch of teens back to school Monday morning talking about their big weekend snowboarding in Canada and what a great time they had. They don't need to realize that they have been learning social skills and leadership. Often they don't even realize that they have learned how to calculate foreign exchange rates, or how to navigate a mountain with a photo map.

Teens don't have the experience, the vision or the experience to design a truly great program

Every Venturing Crew is a collection of unique experiences. Since there is no "cookbook" for how to choose your activities, and there is no menu, every Crew is faced with a dilemma. What activities will be exciting enough and interesting enough to draw a crowd, while at the same time being "doable"? And what unique skills and resources does the Crew have that will assist in making an activity successful? Is it fair for the Advisor to restrict events to activities that he/she is interested in? Is a 1000 mile road trip to the Mall of America to go shopping really a worthy activity to spend a week of scarce vacation time? Is a trip to Disney World really age appropriate? Do we have the resources, the interest, and the finances to learn scuba and then go diving in the Caribbean? Will a backpacking trip to New Mexico help us recruit from the local high school?



Rafting on Idaho's Salmon River

These are the questions a Crew Advisor must ask when contemplating superactivity proposals. It is not realistic, nor is it wise to throw out the question "What do you want to do this year?" to a bunch of teens. An unstructured brainstorming session will almost certainly lead to a bunch of unattainable or inappropriate suggestions. But the largest danger of all when thoughtlessly tossing responsibility to the

youth is that nothing at all will happen. It is often the case that no single youth is willing to champion an idea, or that if someone is willing to advocate for an idea, it will be inappropriate. If an activity is chosen by popular vote, it is often very difficult to determine if the kids really, really want to participate in that activity. This is why so many Crew activities are chosen in a meeting and later, when the time comes, no one shows up. Many times, in a public show of hands, teens will vote for what they think their peers or the adults want them to support rather than being honest with themselves.

In my experience, the crew Advisor has a responsibility to be a major contributor of ideas during brainstorming sessions. Once a list of potential activities has been constructed, a good Advisor will step back and let the Crew make their decision. The Advisors role, in my opinion, is to help the Crew Officers develop a short list of appropriate and "doable" activities. If the Advisor is seen to advocate one of the choices over all the others there may be a problem. On the other hand, if there



are programmatic reasons, or other convincing reasons why one of the events is more attractive than the others, I think it is OK to say so. I was once faced with spending a week of my vacation driving to Minnesota to go shopping at the Mall of America. I dealt with this as honestly and openly as I could. I told the kids that I wasn't willing to spend my limited vacation time on that activity and that they needed to find some parents who would be willing to go with them. Problem solved, no harm, no foul. Instead, we drove the Alaska Highway and went sea kayaking near Skagway, AK that summer. We had 100% participation and had a very, very successful superactivity. Since then we have been back to Skagway three times, although we backpack the historic Klondike Gold Rush Trail now as we discovered that the sea kayaking wasn't as rewarding as the backpacking.

Two Venturers at the Summit of Chilkoot Pass on the Canadian Border

In Summary

Advising a group of teens is an art form, not a science. There is no cookbook, no recipe, and no menu. You have to wing it all the time, and the best job you can hope for is to work collaboratively with your teens. In order to get the most out of the program for your teens and for yourself, you must be actively engaged in the planning process. It is not appropriate to expect the teen leadership to generate program ideas and implement them, and if you abdicate this responsibility your teens will inevitably choose less challenging and less rewarding activities for themselves. You must always remember that they have no foundation for knowing what level of challenge is most appropriate, what resources may be



Venturers cutting lumber for a Hurricane Katrina repair job in Mississippi

available, and what is actually possible. They also may have no idea what level of commitment will be required to have a successful event.

We are advisors and our job is to advise. With teens, this is an active job, not a passive one. With my Crews, I have not been shy about making program suggestions. There have been "big ideas" that stretch the kids' ability to imagine, and these activities have encouraged the Venturers in my Crews to look beyond the horizon. We have gone climbing in Grand Teton National Park, hiked the Grand Canyon, sea kayaked in Alaska, helped with hurricane recovery in Mississippi, and gone whitewater rafting in Montana. Most of these were my ideas, but each was presented with other ideas in a brainstorming session where everyone participated. When the final choices were made, it didn't seem like they were my ideas at all. This is the art of the Advisor.