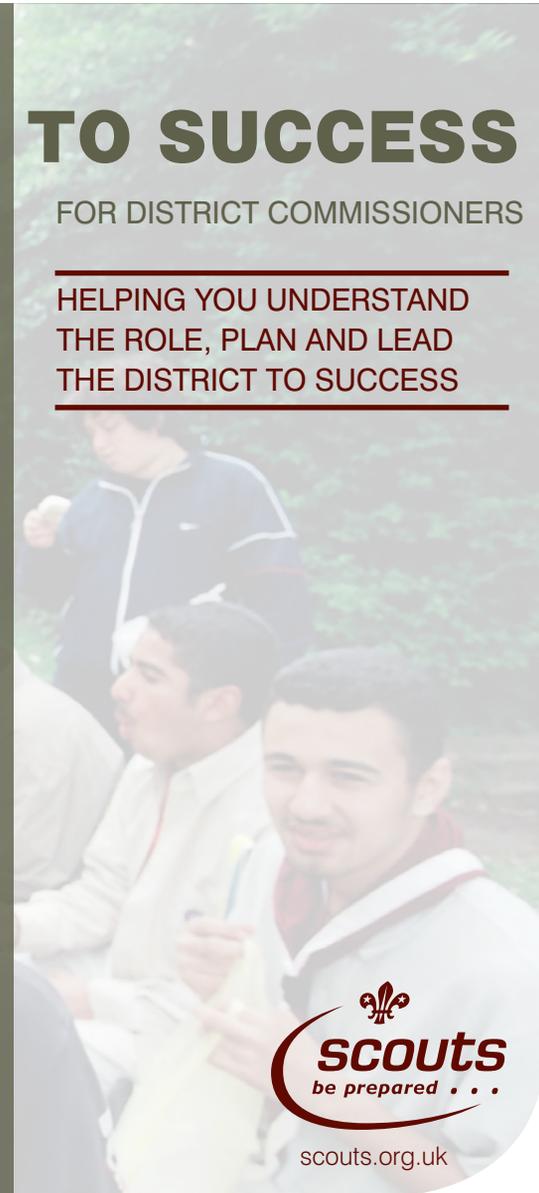




KEYS TO SUCCESS

FOR DISTRICT COMMISSIONERS

HELPING YOU UNDERSTAND
THE ROLE, PLAN AND LEAD
THE DISTRICT TO SUCCESS



scouts.org.uk

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Although in some parts of the British Isles Scout Counties are known as Areas or Islands and in one case Bailiwick, for ease of reading this booklet simply refers to County or Counties.



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The Scout Association

New Edition

First Printed 2006

Designed by Leona Smith

Printed by Belmont Press Ltd

www.scouts.org.uk

Registered Charity No.306101

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INTRODUCTION

If you are reading this, you are probably considering becoming a District Commissioner. You may even be in post already. The role of the District Commissioner is a very rewarding one and an important part of Scouting. However, it is sometimes seen as being a large responsibility. As District Commissioner, you are the figurehead for, and provide the leadership of the District.

The role is the similar to being a Scout Leader, but instead you are leading a team of volunteers. This can have challenges beyond managing adults in a work situation. You will need to create the right atmosphere in the District and work to achieve long-term goals.

Supporting you in your role

In this guide we provide advice to help break down the role and make it more manageable. We look at what you need to do and what you don't necessarily need to do. In the first section, we look at things that can help when you first start as a District Commissioner. The second section provides ideas on things that you can do to make life more manageable. The final section provides advice to help you throughout your time in the role.

This is not meant to be a definitive guide on how to be a good District Commissioner. Each District and person is different. You can choose what advice you think will work for you and suit your style. Hopefully, some of the ideas will help you to enjoy your time more as a District Commissioner. Thank you for taking on the role: it is an essential part of Scouting.

STARTING POINTS

Create the right atmosphere

As a District Commissioner, you have a great influence on the atmosphere within the District. By this we mean the general feeling of how things run. You need to consider what sort of atmosphere you would like. How much discipline and formality will there be in the way things are done? How approachable will you be and expect others to be? How will the District be structured? How procedural will the District be? How central or devolved will the decision making be? Every District and every District Commissioner has their own style and the way you act will affect the way the District starts to work. Importantly, recognise that if your style is very different to your predecessor, then it will take time for people to adapt and change. Allow time for the atmosphere to grow.

Where do you want to go?

A key aspect of the District Commissioner's role is to have a vision for the District. Where do you want it to go? What do you want to achieve? Areas to consider include growth, improving quality of programme delivery developing links with the local community, provision of activities and relationships within the District. Look at the County vision. Are there areas of this that you need to reflect within your District vision? Look at what is happening in the area. How does this impact on Scouting and what response is needed? For example, is there new housing being built in one area? If so, is there going to be a need for another Group? When considering the vision, don't just look at the short term. A good vision for a District should have a three-year timeframe. A vision is of little use unless it is shared and the rest of the District, or at least the majority, buy into it.





'A key aspect of the District Commissioner's role is to have a vision for the District. Where do you want it to go?'

Have a plan

Documenting the vision in a development plan will provide a framework for discussions, decisions and projects in the District. The development plan could start with a SWOT analysis of various aspects of the District. If you haven't come across it before, SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

What are the strengths of each Group, the District Team, and the Fellowship for instance? Equally, where are the weaknesses with each of them? What opportunities could there be for them and equally what potential threats are there?

For example, one Group may have a strong Scout Section, but have a weakness in that there is only one Beaver Scout Leader. The Group may have an opportunity to address a change in the age profile of the area with more young families moving in. A threat to the Group might be the loss of the Group Scout Leader who is in a busy job. From the SWOT analysis and the District vision you can then identify what objectives the development plan needs to have. This can then be translated into steps and projects for the next three years.

Look for the quick win

As well as the long-term view in the vision and the development plan, it helps to identify the 'quick win' items that will benefit the District. Just as in life, the 80/20 rule applies in the District Commissioner role: 80 percent of the gain takes 20 percent of the effort, whilst the remaining 20 percent of the gain takes the other 80 percent of the effort. Big projects have their place, but it pays to look for those things that can bring benefit for relatively small effort. Gaining some early quick wins helps establish a feeling that 'things are getting better'.

They help build confidence and satisfaction and sometimes it is the smallest changes that improve morale the most. Just changing part of a process that makes life easier or smoother for Leaders can have a very positive outcome. Sometimes, this might just be about making the right person responsible for some aspect of the District. A little time spent sorting this out could save a lot of extra work and hassle later. Of course, one must still consider the long-term consequences of any quick win actions. A quick win is of no benefit if it makes life harder further down the road.

Look ahead

It is surprising how often St. George's Day, the AGM, the Annual Census, or even summer camp come as a surprise to people. Part of being an effective as a District Commissioner is anticipating what is coming up.

Be aware of things on the calendar, forthcoming changes in Scouting either centrally or from the County, and changes in the local community. Anticipating in good time allows you to plan responses and actions so that there is less panic and pressure. It's about making sure that you stay aware. Make sure you are logged onto the membership database (see scouts.org.uk/membership) and read communications from Gilwell Park and the County. Look at the County and District calendars. Read the local newspapers. Is there anything that is going to need some action? When do we need to plan that action? Who else needs to be aware or involved? Good anticipation allows you to be in control rather than running from crisis to crisis.

Get the balance right

Having looked at all these important early steps for a District Commissioner, there is one important point missing, and it is probably the most important one. It can be best described as 'remember to have a life!'





We must never lose sight of the fact that family and work are more important than Scouting. Get the balance right. We all see adults in Scouting for whom Scouting seems to have taken over their life. Too often, they burn out or suffer family problems. Don't let it happen to you. Always remember that you are allowed to say no. In reality, there will be some things that will just not get done. Be realistic in your objectives. Think about how much time you should actually commit to Scouting and lead by example. Recognise that your Leaders have a life outside Scouting as well and allow them the right to say no. Don't let anyone bite off more than they can chew - indigestion will only result.

'Always remember that you are allowed to say no. In reality, there will be some things that will just not get done. Be realistic in your objectives.'

UNPACKING THE ROLE

Having looked at the initial steps in being a District Commissioner, it is now time to look at the role in more detail.

Build an effective team

Any management course will tell you that you cannot be effective as a manager without creating the right team. Being a District Commissioner is just the same. For the District to run well, there will always be far too much for any one person, other than Superman, to take on. You need others to help you and they need to be working as a team.

The first step is to look at what needs to be done. The vision and development plan provide one input. There are also the other routine things that go with the job such as visits, ensuring Sectional programmes are good and that recruitment strategies are working. Which bits are you good at and which are you weak? Where are the gaps in the current team? Thinking about these questions will help you identify what you need in your team.

When you have identified the gaps, it is just a matter of filling them with the right people! Having the right person for the right job is key and this can take time. Look wider than the immediate people and the usual suspects. Too often we look to the same people when filling roles. Look outside Scouting: at the Executive members across the District and at individual Leaders. New blood brings new ideas and experiences. Match their skills to the role you require, but be prepared to be flexible. Sometimes it is necessary to redefine the role to match the available person. It is better to have someone doing 80% of the role than nobody. The other 20% could possibly be moved to one of the other



‘Make sure that you agree with new adults exactly what you expect from them. Agree their responsibilities and initial objectives. Be prepared to negotiate!’



members of the team. Make sure that at the start you agree with them exactly what you expect. Agree their responsibilities and initial objectives. Be prepared to negotiate on these so that you are both happy.

Do the right things first

The District Commissioner’s role is one in which there is always more to do than can practically be done. It is therefore necessary to prioritise what you do so that the important things get done. Identify the priority tasks that cannot be left and put them at the top of the list.

It is easy to fall into the trap of doing the simple tasks or the ones that we prefer first because they give you a feeling that you are achieving something. There is however a danger that you never get round to the big or difficult tasks. One piece of advice you may have come across is summed up in the phrase: ‘Eat the ugly frog first’. Effectively this means starting with a difficult task. Complete this or move it forwards and you will start to feel better. The easier tasks can then be done afterwards since they will take less effort. Along similar lines is the rule of ‘doing one difficult thing a day’.

Key parts of the role

The Role Description for the District Commissioner gives guidance on the priority and additional tasks of the role. This is available from the Scout Information Centre. The priority tasks listed are:

- Ensuring that the District has sufficient ‘fit and proper’ adults
- Ensuring that Group Scout Leaders and members of the District Team are adequately supported
- Resolving problems that occur in the District, in particular disputes and Child Protection issues

- Producing and implementing the District Development Plan
- Acting as a Trustee of the District.

Many of the additional tasks listed in the role description can be delegated to members of the team. Others, which cannot be delegated, only become a priority at certain times.

When prioritising activities, remember that it is your priority that counts. There is a danger that we get driven into doing things that others see as a high priority. Although something may be urgent or important to someone else, it does not necessarily follow that it is the highest priority for ourselves. Do not be tempted to have your priorities set by those who shout loudest. Remember the First Response advice that it is often the quiet patient that needs the most urgent attention - not the one that is making the noise. Be prepared to tell people that you will deal with an item, but it will not be until next week or month - and of course you are allowed to say no if it is not a high priority and you do not have the time.

Use other people

You don't have to do everything yourself. One of the reasons for building a team is to be able to delegate. If you are to survive, you will have to delegate a number of things. Look at the list of activities on the District Commissioner Role Description that are shown as being possible to delegate. Add to this all the local things that you know need to be done. Then go down the list and identify those that you do not have to do personally. From this second list, consider who in your team could do each item. Are there people outside the team who you could get to do some of them?





‘As District Commissioner, an important part of your role is to make all the volunteers feel valued.’

Delegation is not about getting rid of tasks. Ultimately, you are still responsible for ensuring that they are done. You are delegating responsibility for doing them to another person who remains accountable to you. Consider the boundaries you wish to put on their responsibility and authority in doing it. For example you may delegate running the St. George’s Day event to an Assistant District Commissioner. What authorisation do they have to spend money? Are they responsible for sending out the invitations? How do you want to review progress with them? Who do you want them to liaise with? When do you want plans to be in place? If you think about these boundaries before you give someone the task then you are likely to have less surprises.

Having decided what you are delegating, and chosen the person who has the best skills to do it, you need to meet with them and ask them! Discuss the boundaries of the responsibility that you are giving them and agree these. They may have other suggestions so be prepared to adapt what you are asking. Once you have delegated the activity, review with the person from time to time how it is going and provide support where it is needed.

Value people

Remember everyone who does something for Scouting in the District is a volunteer. As District Commissioner, an important part of your role is to make all the volunteers feel valued. One of the greatest tools you have for this are the words ‘thank you’.

Whenever you are at a meeting within the District, never forget to thank people for all that they have done. If someone has had a success, or done something out of the ordinary, a phone call to say thanks can count for a lot. Make sure that your thanks is genuine though. People quickly see through false thanks.

Many District Commissioners send cards to their team and District members at Christmas. This is a good way of showing appreciation. Do however make sure that the cards are personalised and that you sign them individually. The same goes for letters saying thank you or expressing appreciation.

Awards are one of the more formal ways that Scouting expresses its appreciation for volunteers. As District Commissioner, you are responsible for recommending awards in the District. There are certain criteria for receiving awards in Scouting, which vary with the level of award. Many require the writing of a citation. If you do not feel confident with this, then why not delegate it to someone who has that ability? You could delegate the whole process of identifying potential candidates and writing the recommendation. You will however need to sign it, so check that you agree with the statements made.

Represent your District

One of the responsibilities that you take on as a District Commissioner is to represent your District at various events - both within and outside Scouting. You will be the representative of Scouting invited to civic and social events. Remember you are there as a Scouting representative, so wear a smart uniform when appropriate and talk positively about the adventure of Scouting. This is sometimes a great opportunity to network with community leaders and – tactfully - lobby for support.

You will also be called on to represent your District at meetings, both inside and outside Scouting. It is important that you act in the best interests of Scouting in your District at these meetings. Remember you are there as the District Commissioner. Many meetings get lost in politics and personal agendas. A good bit of advice is to always consider what is best for the young person at their Section meeting. This should have priority over our personal needs.





Make meetings effective

Many District Commissioners find themselves getting bogged down in meetings. Any decision requires a meeting. Everyone has their own view on what should be the outcome. We need to overcome this problem if things are not going to grind to a halt. Meetings called by other people are out of your control, but stop and decide whether you are the right person to be there. Should it be delegated to someone else? Does anyone need to go at all?

Quite often the District Commissioner is invited just because they are there. Do you have an input, or could your time be better spent elsewhere? If you are not going to a meeting, remember to send your apologies and wish them well.

Where you are calling the meeting, stop and write down your agenda for the meeting. What is it that you wish to achieve? This will help clarify who actually needs to be invited and the contents of the agenda. Call the meeting in plenty of time, preferably with a draft agenda. Make the location and timing as convenient as possible to those who are attending.

At the start of the meeting, state the objectives and agree the agenda. This is a good time to check if anyone has any other business items, which may have higher priority. Chair the meeting effectively, keeping to the agenda and keeping things moving so that the meeting can finish in a timely manner. Ensure that all attending have an appropriate chance to put across their views. Ideally, someone should have been delegated to take minutes. At the end of the meeting ask this person to summarise them. The minutes should only list decisions, with a short description of the reason and actions in the form of what, who and when. Ensure that the minutes are distributed as soon as possible after the meeting, including to those who sent apologies. If you hold efficient and productive meetings, people will be more inclined to attend.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Be realistic

The role of District Commissioner can become a monster if you are not careful. Be realistic about what you set out to achieve. It is all too easy to try and change the world. The result is inevitably failure and frustration. It is far better to set smaller, achievable objectives and focus on these. Succeeding with these smaller objectives will help maintain your motivation. Recognise what you cannot achieve. Remember that you are allowed a life outside being a District Commissioner, so consider what you realistically have time to achieve. Where possible, look at ways of delegating. This will allow you to achieve more.

Make sure you understand the limits of what you have authority to do. You cannot change Policy, Organisation and Rules or the County so don't set out to do something that would involve this. Importantly, do not promise things that you are not confident you can deliver. Doing so will lose you respect with the people to whom you have made the promise. It is better to say no and explain why. They may be disappointed, but they won't have false hopes that will end up being dashed.

Keep the ball rolling

Once you have started projects, make sure that they continue until completion. There is sometimes a danger of taking your eye off projects by moving the focus to new areas. If you are to gain the benefits, you need to see each project through to completion. One way of doing this is to set milestones along the way. Each milestone marks the completion of some stage of the project.

'Remember that you are allowed a life outside of being a District Commissioner, so consider what you realistically have time to achieve.'





The focus can then be placed on completing the next milestone. To keep the ball rolling, it helps to have set up the right structures and processes. This will allow you to empower members of the team and effectively delegate things.

Remember, delegating is not just about giving someone else the task. You need to give it to the right person and you still have a responsibility to support them and review progress. Again, agreeing some milestones helps. Be clear about when you need the milestones completed by.

When things go wrong

Accept that sometimes things will not go as you wish. In Scouting as in life, things do go wrong. Be prepared to re-plan or to rethink them as a result of what happens. You may need to revise your objectives as a result. When this happens, remember to communicate and manage the expectations of those involved.

Listen and be receptive

Sometimes the District Commissioner's role is seen as one of directing and telling people what to do. In practice, it is far more about listening to people. There is a lot of power in allowing people to talk and listening carefully. Sometimes people will phone you or buttonhole you at a meeting to tell you about their problems. There is a temptation to immediately tell them what to do. However, by listening, showing an interest and asking questions to check your understanding, they often come up with the solution themselves. Importantly, they feel more valued and have ownership of the solution.

When at meetings, it pays to listen to what the others have to say before making your own comments. The other participants often have a lot of useful experience and knowledge. You can only tap into it if you allow them to speak. The District Commissioner may often have the last word, but it should be based

on the input from those who spoke before. This does not mean that you have to go along with everything that is said, but you do need to consider the other inputs. Do not fall into the common trap of anticipating what someone will say. We tend then to only hear what we expect rather than what people are actually saying.

It pays to create opportunities for people to talk to you informally as well as formally. This means getting to meetings slightly early and not rushing off at the end. Stop and chat to people and importantly show that you are listening to them. You will find out a lot about your District in this way, and often, potential problems can be headed off before they occur. Sometimes we avoid talking to someone because we expect it to be bad news. Really, we should be going out of our way to talk with them. The sooner the bad news is out the easier it will be to deal with it. When problems are kept hidden, they have a tendency to grow and become more serious.

Growing the team

The team you put in place should not be static. As situations change, the skills you need in your team may change. Having the right people in the right place is important. People sometimes need a change to re-energise them. After four years of being ADC (Scouts) someone may be losing interest or becoming stale. This does not mean they are not valuable to you and Scouting. It may just mean that giving them a new responsibility might generate new interest and motivation. Do not forget that Group Scout Leaders are an important part of your team too.

It therefore pays to talk to people regularly to understand how they feel. At least once a year, it is a good idea to hold a more formal review to discuss how things have gone and explore their views about the future. Talk about how they

‘It pays to create opportunities for people to talk to you informally as well as formally.’





see their role in Scouting developing and any aspirations they may have. You may be surprised by what they would like to do. Of course it is not necessarily possible to accommodate everyone's wishes, certainly not immediately. However, understanding them allows you to plan and manage their expectations.

Looking to the future

One area in the team development you should look at is succession planning. Who could be the next ADC (Cubs) if the current one wishes to give up or change role? This means identifying potential successors and looking at how they can be developed to be ready for the role.

Stop every so often and review how your team is working and how it is likely to need to work in the future. The more you can anticipate changes and prepare for them, the easier your life will become.

And finally

As we said at the beginning, this is not a definitive guide to being a District Commissioner. However by picking those bits that you feel could benefit you, we hope that it will help you cope with the role and be successful. Good luck.



SUPPORT FOR YOU

Thank you for taking on the challenge of District Commissioner; it is an essential part of Scouting.

This is not meant to be a definitive guide on how to be a good District Commissioner. Each District and person is different. But hopefully some of the ideas will help you to enjoy your time more and be more effective.

