

Annual Program Planning for Troops

In Scouting, planning is a two-phase process. Long-term planning results in an annual calendar and a set of unit goals for the year. Short-term planning yields detailed plans for one month's meetings and outings—and sometimes a little more.

The Annual Planning Conference

Long-term planning happens at the annual planning conference, typically held in late spring or early summer, as soon as possible after school, community, and council calendars have been published. A month or two before the planning conference, the committee chair, Scoutmaster, and senior patrol leader, should perform the following steps.

Step 1 — Gather the necessary information.

- Key school dates, like holidays, homecoming, and exams
- Community event dates, including those the unit might want to participate in and dates you should avoid
- The chartered organization's key dates, again considering opportunities to collaborate as well as potential scheduling conflicts
- Personal dates, such as family vacations, that may affect the unit's activities
- Key district and council dates
- Data collected from the troop resource survey or activity interest survey
- Last year's annual plan, if you have one
- Troop priorities and goals
- Advancement records for each member
- A general outline of next year's program

Step 2 — The planning process is discussed with the senior patrol leader, explaining the importance of this process and his role in it. Discuss options for programs and activities and the troop's goals. Share a draft outline for next year's program and ask for the input and thoughts of the patrol leaders' council.

Setting Goals

What sorts of troop goals should the draft plan include? Here are some possibilities.

- Attend summer camp.
- Have an outdoor adventure at least once a month.
- Strengthen relations with the chartered organization by planning a service project to benefit the organization and by increasing the unit's presence, such as on Scout Sunday or Scout Sabbath.
- Earn the National Camping Award and a gold Journey to Excellence rating.
- Conduct a fundraiser to help pay for unit expenses such as new tents and other camping gear.
- Have each patrol earn the National Honor Patrol Award at least once.

Step 3 — The senior patrol leader should share the draft plan with other youth leaders, who then share it with other troop members to get their input and ideas. Besides reviewing the draft plan, members could evaluate the current year's plan. A useful tool is the "start, stop, continue" method, which is based on three simple questions:

1. What should we start doing that we are not currently doing?
2. What should we stop doing that is not working?
3. What should we continue doing that is working well and helping us succeed?

It's useful for members to have copies of the current year's calendar available for review, as well as the draft plan. They shouldn't limit themselves to those materials, however. They might, for example, see a need to focus more (or less) on advancement during meetings or to build more

opportunities into the calendar for patrol outings or social events—priorities that may not have been considered.

Step 4 — Invite the following people to attend the conference to maximize the efficiency of planning:

- The troop's youth leaders
- Unit committee members and other adult leaders
- The chartered organization representative
- The unit commissioner
- Anyone else who might be helpful, such as parents

Keep in mind that these people will play very different roles at the conference. Active roles are assumed by elected youth leaders. Supportive roles are assumed by the Scoutmaster, Assistant Scoutmasters, and any other adults. To keep the planning conference as purposeful and efficient as possible, invite only those adults who actively and regularly engage in unit activities and decision making.

Holding the Annual Planning Conference

The annual planning conference can be held at any regular meeting place in three or four hours on a Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon. However, if you have access to a cabin or retreat center, you might consider turning the conference into an overnight retreat to allow time for fellowship and team building. If the conference follows closely after unit elections, some troops also combine the planning conference with the Introduction to Leadership Skills for Troops (ILST), the first step in the youth leadership training continuum.

Most adults should not play active roles in the planning conference. Instead, they should give their input ahead of time to the troop leader for program. If extra adults attend, keep them busy by putting them in charge of cooking and cleanup, and allow the youth leaders to focus on the task at hand.

Besides the materials described above, you might prepare poster-size calendars for each month that will be planned. (Office supply stores offer a variety of products that will work, including wall planners with erasable surfaces.) Pencil in the dates from the draft plan, as well as other important district, council, community, school, and chartered organization dates.

Another useful tool is the program planning chart, a worksheet for recording by month the program features, activities, courts of honor, service projects, leader meetings, and more. This worksheet can help ensure, for example, that leader meetings are scheduled every month and that courts of honor and service projects are evenly spaced throughout the year.

The outcome of the conference should be an annual calendar, a list of monthly program features (e.g., hiking, engineering, wilderness survival), and a set of unit goals. The amount of detail in the plan will vary. For some months, the group will decide both where it wants to go and what it wants to do. For other months, the group may choose either the destination or the outing's focus. Ideally, the calendar should include a mix of familiar and unfamiliar activities and destinations. A few traditional outings each year are fun; more than a few can make the program feel repetitive. Even traditional outings can benefit from occasional tweaks, such as doing a favorite activity at a new location.

While discussing ideas at the conference, use these ground rules:

- It is important to respect one another's views. Listen and don't interrupt.
- Keep focused on the task to plan the troop's annual program. Don't get sidetracked.
- Write out ideas so everyone can see them.
- Be in agreement.