

If you've been in Scouting for awhile, you'll probably start your planning by looking through program files from the last few years. Any successful Scouter puts good ideas to use again and again, but stop to ask yourself a question. Is your annual plan becoming just another rehashed script of past years, with only the names changed to protect the innocent?

I know what you're going to say: "It's worked for years; it'll work again." And I'm sure it will. But, if you take the challenge and add a couple of new chapters or, at least, do major rewrites of a few of the old ones, you may enjoy one of the most exciting years in your Scouting career.

Here's a collection of ideas you can try. Take a look at them and have a go at a couple. And remember, if you get into trouble, you still have your old script to fall back on.

Outdoor Troop Meetings: Do you meet inside the same building week after week? Try a change of location. Meet at the local park for the entire couple of hours. Have a wiener roast and campfire. Do a service project. Play a wide game that takes up the whole evening. Map the neighbourhood. Go on a scavenger hunt. Use your imagination.

Now, you can just say, "Next week we'll meet at the park" or you can add some excitement. Call the wiener roast an Outdoor Adventure. Call the service activity a Community Improvement Project or Clean-up Challenge. Turn neighbourhood mapping into a treasure map making activity, then use the maps for a game. Call the scavenger hunt a search-and-save mission or send out the Scouts with tape recorders to collect a list of sounds (jet flying over, children playing, cat meowing, television commercial, siren...).

Indoor Meetings: Your patrol leaders receive a phone call from a mysterious person who identifies himself (or herself) only as a member of the Canadian Undercover Security Squad. "There's a clandestine underground organization trying to catch Scouts going to meetings," the person says. "You and your patrol members must get to the next meeting in disguise so that you aren't recognized as Scouts."

Something as simple as this can add a spark to a typical meeting. Fill the evening with games and activities on an espionage theme.

Camping: Hold a day camp at the Scout Hall. Have the Scouts set up tents, learn to light lanterns and stoves, and boil water for hot chocolate. Cook banana boats on a charcoal barbecue in the parking lot.

Double Vision: When was the last time you invited another Scout troop to a joint meeting? How about getting together with a group of Guides or Pathfinders? The experience can be a lot of fun for everyone.

Leaf Night: You may really be going out on a limb for this one. We had great success with it the two times we tried it.

In the fall, ask each Scout to save a couple of bags of leaves from the lawns he rakes. As soon as the first snow falls, send out the call for the leaves. Dump them in the centre of the Scout Hall. They may be damp at first, so spread them out to dry before diving in and indulging in leaf fights. Have brooms and shovels handy to clean up afterwards.

In the Dark: Ask the Scouts to bring flashlights and hold a meeting in the dark. In wartime England, all the lights in a city had to be shut off so that enemy bombers wouldn't know where to drop their bombs at night. You may want to bring along some candles but be aware of the fire hazard. Place them carefully and don't have too many. Perhaps the Scouts can make tin can lanterns to put them in (punch designs into the tins with a nail, place candles inside).

Try Something New

Finish the evening with a sing song around a plug-in campfire.

Boomerangs: Ask the Scouts to collect the sides of cardboard boxes and bring them to a meeting. Keep a good supply of scissors on hand and spend an hour designing, cutting, and flying boomerangs indoors. If you have too many breakables in your hall, try the same thing with paper airplanes. Hold friendly competitions for distance, height, speed, tricks, and the like.

Monks' Meeting: Tell the Scouts that the next meeting will be a silent or sign language night. They may bring paper and pencil to communicate. Write activity instructions on large cards or simply demonstrate. Use familiar games and relays. Hold tent-pitching competitions or a Kim's Game. Present a special prize at the end of the night for the patrol most successful at maintaining silence. Break the silence with a couple of good yells before they head home.

Fancy Dress Party: Turn your next traditional troop party into a fancy dress affair where the Scouts wear dress shirts and slacks or suits and ties if they have them. Adapt games to avoid popped buttons or worn knees. It adds a little class to the evening and may give you a chance to see a side of your Scouts you've never seen before. It's a good night to encourage troop entertainers, as well.

Troop Camp: Start off the year by holding a camp after your second troop meeting. The new Scouts will be taking a big plunge if you haven't had time to teach them camping skills at the two meetings, but you have experienced Scouts to help them out. After all, isn't camp the best place to learn camping skills? If you've never tried a camp this early in the new year, try one. If you always hold an early in-the-year camp at the same site year after year, find a new location for your overnigher.

Take a Course: This may involve a weekend or a series of troop nights. Ask the Scouts

what kinds of special skills they want to learn, then find an expert to offer a training course. If the troop is split on two ideas, run two different courses. Possibilities? Kayaking; survival skills; search and rescue; first aid; life saving; archery; riflery; specialty fishing; skate boarding; roller skating; bird watching; hunter training; snowshoe making; car care and maintenance; silkscreening; computer courses (word processing, graphics, desktop publishing); or a thousand other ideas.

You may have a parent with special skills who would be willing to offer a course. If you haven't already developed a challenge for the Troop Specialty Badge, something may come out of this approach.

Go out on a limb; take the plunge; try something new. It may change the way you Scout. And remember, when you think of a different and exciting activity, spread it around. Write it down and send it to the Leader so that other Scouters across the country can give it a go, too.

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