



The Patrol Method

One of the great tools of Trail Life USA is the Patrol Method. A patrol is ideally a group of 6-8 boys. This number is ideally suited for small excursions, setting up a tent, cooking and eating together, and practicing how to lead—and follow—effectively. Some thought should go into how boys are assigned to patrols to ensure that new starters will always have old hands to pass along skills.

WHY USE THE PATROL METHOD?

The major benefits of the patrol method are:

- Responsible Democracy – Learning that the most popular candidates for leadership may not be the best leaders.
- Esprit de Corps – Experiencing things in groups that they cannot experience alone, such as friendship, encouragement, and cooperation. Made in the image of a triune God, there are parts of that image we must experience through companionship.
- Interdependence – Knowing when and how to trust others and how to be worthy of their trust. Society, family, and the patrol are built upon bonds of trust that have been earned honestly and protected diligently.
- Friendly Competition – Desiring to showcase your best work and measure it against the best work of others. When competition encourages everyone to improve and excel, everyone wins.
- Synergy – Leveraging strengths of people working together better than the strengths of people working alone.
- Apprenticeship – The transmission of winning skills and attitudes from teacher to apprentice goes even better with boys learning from their peers. In the environment of the Trail Life and its patrol method, the skills passed on will be worthwhile and wholesome.

HOW CAN MY TROOP IMPLEMENT THE PATROL METHOD?

Patrol members do not have to do everything on a schedule, but certain things should be put on a duty roster and done in a structured manner:

- Cooking – Over the course of his career, each boy should gain skills and confidence preparing a variety of breakfast, lunch, and dinner menus. Success is measured in safety, appeal, timeliness, and efficiency. An ideal cook prepares food that is properly done, tastes good, and has items that require different cooking times finish about the same time. This is an enormously important skill for learning self-reliance and project management.
- Cleanup – Washing cooking and serving implements properly is a health and safety issue. The feeling of accomplishment may be less than cooking a full meal, but in the overall scheme it is equally important.

- Fire Tending – Starting, feeding, and putting out a fire are big responsibilities and they should be taken seriously. Errands – Whether it is filling the water containers or retrieving equipment from the Troop trailer, there are no bad jobs, just bad attitudes. When a Trailman is doing unpleasant tasks, his fellow patrol members get some idea what sort of leader he would be. A Trailman who is prompt and cheerful stands a much better chance of being elected Patrol Leader than a one who puts things off and gripes.
- Layout – Every Trailman should have real-world practice in the art of selecting a proper patrol campsite, and determining the correct layout of patrol resources such as tents, campfires, and cooking supplies.

Remember, Trailmen will not always be efficient or even as effective as adults, but your job is to coach, encourage, guide and—when all else fails—rescue.

PRINCIPLES TO KEEP IN MIND ABOUT THE PATROL METHOD

- Leadership is giving the gift of guidance – A boss directs his power; a leader directs the power of others. The best leader is a treasure map that leads others to the hidden riches.
- Learn by doing – Whenever possible, show something rather than tell it and demonstrate rather than show it. Divide students into patrols and run course like a troop activity. Put boys in charge of running their group and change up the leaders so everyone gets a turn. That way boys graduate with both training and leadership experience.
- Construct the leadership triangle: Morale, Confidence, and Experience – Build morale, since proper leadership returns satisfaction. Build confidence, since a leader’s attitude is usually a self-fulfilling prophesy. Build experience because it is the toolkit that keeps the patrol running.
- We’re all in this together – A Patrol Leader also holds another important title—Patrol Member. He remembers that “We” accomplishes more than “You,” as in “We need to arrive by 10,” or “Let’s get these tents up.” The Patrol Leader must be busy with more than supervising. A Patrol Leader with his hands in his pockets is not exercising leadership by example, and he’s also wasting a patrol resource—his active participation.
- Training should be like a stone arch – Every class should be a seamless part of a whole course with each topic and method supporting all the others. They should all contribute to morale, confidence, and experience. Every outdoor experience is a chain, and a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. When boys go on a trip, they will remember it mainly by what was best about it and what was worst. Make sure the best outweighs the worst through advance preparation.
- Everything in Trail Life happens for a reason – Troops only succeed when their members succeed. Help these new leaders understand their role in helping others—and themselves—succeed.
- Timing is everything – Make sure lectures are as short as they can be and activities are as long as they need be.