

Are You Losing Volunteers? Give Feedback That Keeps Them

By Stan Richards (aka ScouterStan)

Feedback should build confidence, encourage growth, strengthen volunteer leadership, and never make someone feel small.

Feedback is not criticism. When addressing a missed detail, weak presentation, or poor outcome, focus on improvement, not failure. Criticism finds fault; feedback fosters growth. Volunteers are not paid employees. They serve because they believe in the mission. Correction without support or appreciation can drive them away, and Scouting depends on them.

Separate the person from the problem, and address the behavior, decision, or outcome, not the person. Instead of *"You don't know how to run a meeting,"* say, *"The Scouts seemed to lose focus. Let's find a way to keep them engaged next time."* This makes the conversation collaborative: you are partnering with the leader to solve a problem, not attacking them.

Before explaining what went wrong, ask, *"How do you think it went?"* Then listen. Leaders often recognize the issue themselves, making the conversation easier and more productive. Feedback works best as a conversation, not a confrontation. People are more likely to act when invited into the discussion.

Praise publicly and correct privately. Recognize good work promptly, specifically, and publicly when appropriate. A sincere *"Thank you"* goes a long way. Correct privately, never through public embarrassment. When youth are present, follow two-deep leadership and safety guidelines while keeping the conversation respectful.

Always focus on one thing at a time. Do not unload every concern at once. Choose the most important point and focus the conversation there. When coaching skills such as boards of review, Scoutmaster conferences, or presentations, one clear, actionable suggestion teaches more than a flood of details.

Timing matters. After a late meeting, saying, *"Let's talk tomorrow,"* may be better than processing everything immediately. A brief delay allows more thoughtful feedback.

Exception: Address youth protection or safety concerns immediately. Safety is a responsibility, not ordinary feedback.

Give a specific next step. Instead of, *"You do not handle Scoutmaster conferences well,"* say, *"Next time, ask more questions and give the Scout more room to talk."* Do not confuse *"different"* with *"wrong."* Before correcting another leader's style, ask whether it harmed understanding, safety, or the outcome.

End every feedback conversation by affirming the volunteer's value. Sometimes feedback is simple encouragement. *"Thank you for covering this important topic. Your effort helped the Scouts."* Leaders improve with practice. Good feedback helps them grow while reminding them their work matters. At Wood Badge, we say *"feedback is a gift."* Given well, it strengthens leaders, protects relationships, and shows volunteers they are valued. That is how we "keep building a better America, one Scout at a time."

Website <https://scouterstan.org>

YouTube Video <https://youtu.be/YSaQCk1NrMA>