

7 Ways to Apply RW in Combat, Congress and the Church

What is the common link between commanding soldiers in combat, passing a bill in Congress and leading a church or ministry?

Answer: Success in each of these venues is more likely when leaders live out the relational principles set forth in God's Word.

This common link was repeatedly revealed during discussions at three seminars I recently taught in Washington, D.C. These events were attended by Congressmen, their spouses and Chiefs of Staff, ambassadors and high-ranking officers from the Pentagon.

One individual in particular highlighted the far-reaching impact of applying relational wisdom in critical leadership positions.

Before being elected to Congress from Oklahoma, Lt. Col. (U.S. Army, Retired) Steve Russell led the 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division in Iraq. In 2003, his battalion occupied Tikrit during Operation Iraqi Freedom.



Lt. Col. Steve Russell

Since Tikrit was Saddam Hussein's hometown, it quickly emerged as the epicenter of insurgency efforts to restore the dictator to power. Steve wrote a fascinating book about these events, *We Got Him: A Memoir of the Hunt and Capture of Saddam Hussein*. Once I started reading it on the flight home, I couldn't put it down.

I was especially intrigued by the many ways Steve had applied biblical relational principles as he led his soldiers through months of deadly conflict ... and continues to apply them in Congress today. As I describe a few of these principles, I encourage you to consider ways God may be calling you to apply some of them in your own family, workplace or church. (If you're a pastor in a typical church, you could probably apply each of these principles every week!) I've provided seven reflection questions at the end of this post to help you make these applications.

1. Understand the culture in which you are serving (Acts 17:22-23; Paul at the Areopagus) – Before he arrived in Iraq, Steve diligently studied the Arab culture, partly by reading books like *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, written by T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia"). His thorough understanding (other-awareness) of Arab culture served him well throughout his deployment, especially when he was seeking to form a trustworthy local militia. Rather than accept unknown volunteers, he first identified the ten most respected sheiks in the region, who he knew would be the ones sitting in the front row of every major leadership gathering. Showing them honor, he pulled them aside and told them he wanted to train the best of their men. But Steve also told them that they must give him a signed personal endorsement for each man. Why? Because he knew that no sheik would want to be dishonored by having one of his men sent home as a coward or troublemaker.

2. Pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17) – Steve was constantly in prayer for his soldiers, their missions, his family back home, and the people of Tikrit who were seeking to rebuild their lives after decades of oppressive rule. As I read how frequently he was on his knees,

I was reminded of Oswald Chamber's famous comment, "Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work."

3. Demonstrate compassion (Matt. 14:14; Jesus' compassion for the crowd) – All too often, Steve was notified of an attack that had killed or wounded soldiers under his command. Whenever possible, he jumped into his Humvee and raced to the scene to form a protective perimeter and speed the evacuation. He often ended up holding a soldier's bloody head in his hands, reassuring him that help was on the way and praying earnestly for his healing. There was no doubt in any wounded soldier's mind that their commander cared deeply for them and would shield them with his own body if an attack was renewed (John 15:13; "Greater love has no one...").

4. Control your anger and love your enemies (Eph. 4:26; "Be angry, and do not sin..."); (Luke 6:27; "Love your enemies..."); (Rom. 12:19; "... never avenge yourselves...") – One of the greatest challenges Steve and his soldiers experienced was not to return evil for evil against the terrorists who sought to do them harm. After many firefights, they discovered wounded terrorists who had just killed or wounded U.S. soldiers. Although the temptation for revenge was intense, the consistent response was to administer life-saving first aid and then rush the helpless enemy to the same hospital that was caring for the soldiers that insurgent had recently sought to kill.

5. Maintain the initiative (Rom. 5:8; "... while we were still sinners..."); (Rom. 12:20-21) – Whenever the terrorists inflicted casualties through an ambush, it would have been easy for the 1st Battalion to go on the defensive. They could have huddled in their fortified posts and waited for the enemy to come to them. Like a seasoned Chess player, however, Steve knew it would be fatal to surrender the initiative. If all they did was respond to the enemies' moves, they had already lost the battle. So day after day, he and his men patched up their wounds and their vehicles and ventured back into the streets and alleys of Tikrit, keeping the terrorists off balance and steadily reducing their will to continue the battle.

6. Do to others as you would have them do to you (Matt. 7:12) – When soldiers in Steve's command were killed or wounded, he could have relied on others to convey the news to their loved ones back home. Considering what he knew his family would want in such a situation, however, he knew the right thing to do was for him, the battlefield commander, to call those families personally and immediately. He realized he could not eliminate their grief or apprehensions, but he could enter into that pain with them, add his heartfelt sorrow to theirs, and walk a few steps with them as they processed the most painful news any of us could ever hear.

7. Seek advice and welcome criticism (Prov. 9:9; "Give instruction to a wise man..."); – Every day he was stationed in Iraq, Steve had to make decisions that could literally have life-and-death consequences. Recognizing the limits of his own wisdom and experience, he constantly sought counsel and welcomed feedback from others in his command, not only from his fellow officers but also from the enlisted soldiers who shared in the burdens and dangers of their mission (see Approachability: The Key to Real Ministry and Leadership).

During my conversations with Steve and other Congressmen, ambassadors and military leaders who attended our recent seminars, I heard many examples of how they are

applying these principles every day on Capitol Hill and at the Pentagon. Please join me in praying that God would give them success as they seek to guide our nation through the challenging issues we are facing in these tumultuous times!

If you would like to develop this kind of relational wisdom yourself, I encourage you to use the following reflection questions to identify ways that you can apply these principles in your own family, workplace or church. As Scripture exhorts us,

“Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress” (1 Tim. 4:15).

~ Ken Sande

Part Two: See 8 More Principles of Relational Leadership drawn from Steve Russell's book, *We Got Him!*

Reflection Questions

Understand the culture in which you are serving: Do you deliberately study the people you live and work with every day? How well do you understand the backgrounds, strengths, weaknesses, interests and desires of your friends? Spouse? Children? Coworkers? Church members? This skill is especially helpful with people who oppose or attack you (see Reagan, Lincoln, RW and You).

Pray without ceasing: What does your prayer life look like today? A short little ritual early in the morning and then silence the rest of the day? Don't wait for a crisis to drive you to the throne of grace. Develop the habit of frequent “frontal prayer,” preceding even the mundane activities of life with brief thanksgiving and petitions to God (1 Thess. 5:17). As you develop the habit of talking to God constantly about “little things,” you'll experience the peace of knowing he is involved in “all things” in your life.

Demonstrate compassion: Who do you know that is needy or hurting, emotionally or physically? How could you go to that person and bring encouragement, help or support? (Matt. 14:14) How could you demonstrate that you love others so much that you would gladly sacrifice your time, resources or convenience to serve and protect them? (John 15:13 Open in Logos Bible Software (if available)).

Control your anger and love your enemies: How do you respond when someone has hurt, criticized or rejected you? Do you give into anger and seek ways to strike back? Or do you simply pull away from that person to shield yourself from further pain? What would it look like if you instead resolved to live out the principles set forth in these passages: Ephesians 4:26 (“Be angry, and do not sin...”); Luke 6:27-28 (“Love your enemies...”); Romans 12:19-21 (“... never avenge yourselves...”)?

Maintain the initiative: When you have been bruised in life, are you tempted to go on the defensive? How has that worked for you in the past? How does the gospel demonstrate God's determination to maintain the initiative in our lives? (Rom. 5:8 Open in Logos Bible Software (if available)) What do these passages tell you about maintaining the initiative with people who have disappointed or hurt you: Luke 6:27-28; Romans 12:20-21 (“... while we were still sinners...”)?

Do to others as you would have them do to you: How do you typically respond when you see that others are struggling or in pain? Are you inclined to pull in to shield yourself from that pain or to reach out to ease it? How does imagining what you would need or want if you were in their situation help you to avoid a self-protective response? (Matt. 7:12)

Seek advice and welcome criticism: One of the greatest signs of wisdom and humility is the willingness to seek advice and welcome criticism from others (Prov. 9:9). Is this your inclination? If not, why? What price do you often pay when you act without relevant advice or resist correction? What message does your self-reliance send to the people in your life? How would your relationship with those people change if you began to actively seek their counsel and welcome their criticism? (see Approachability: The Key to Real Ministry and Leadership)

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