

FIFTEEN WAYS THAT RELATIONAL WISDOM BUILDS READINESS AND RESILIENCE IN THE MILITARY

Ken Sande

What is the common link between commanding soldiers in combat, passing a bill in Congress and leading a family, church or any other group of people?

Answer: Readiness and resilience in every human setting is strengthened 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.

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.



1. Understand the culture in which you are serving (Acts

17:22-23) – 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) – 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**).

4. Control your anger and love your enemies (Eph. 4:26; Luke 6:27; Rom. 12:19) – 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 very soldiers that insurgent had recently sought to kill.

5. Maintain the initiative (Rom. 5:8; Luke 6:27-28; 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; 12:15; 13:10; 15:32) – 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* at www.rw360.org/approachability).

8. Correct others constructively (2 Tim. 2:24) – One day two of Steve’s men carried out a counter-insurgency operation without fully informing other units in the area. They had used a civilian truck for transportation, and when they returned to their base in the evening, they came under fire from U.S. sentries. One of the men was seriously wounded. Although Steve was upset by this needless injury, he did not let his anger move him to say things he would later regret. Instead he reviewed the situation calmly with the two men, helped them to identify the gaps in their planning, and enabled them to learn from their mistake.

9. Be open (but not obnoxious) about your faith (Luke 12:8) – I was surprised to read how open Steve was about his faith in Christ. Not only did his men see him pray on numerous occasions; they also heard him play the guitar during chapel services. He never pushed his faith on others, but he was always open to talking about the Bible and Jesus. His relaxed and open attitude was shared by other believers in the battalion, which opened the door for many conversations about God. As a result, dozens of soldiers came to faith in Christ and were baptized in the swimming pool in Saddam Hussein’s Summer Palace – of all places!

10. Communicate so clearly you cannot be misunderstood (Col. 4:3-4) – One of the most frustrating parts of Steve’s job was working with the news reporters assigned to follow his mission. Some of them seemed to be looking for negative things to report, and even well-intentioned reporters often had their stories altered by state-side editors to capture headlines. Rather than letting resentment and defensiveness control him, Steve made a deliberate effort to get to know the reporters personally, to assume that their intentions were good, and to do all he could to help them succeed in their jobs. Most importantly, he learned to communicate so clearly and with such colorful words and illustrations (that he knew would make good copy for the front page), that it was increasingly difficult to misunderstand or misquote him.

11. Kindness opens doors (Eph. 4:32; Rom. 2:4) – “Intelligence” was the key to success in suppressing terrorism in Tikrit. The more detailed and accurate information they had about the community and the enemy, the more successful the battalion could be in carrying out their mission. Some of their best “intel” came as the result of an unplanned act of kindness. One day Steve visited the home of a helpful Iraqi official. When he met the official’s father, he saw that he was suffering from a terribly infected foot injury. Steve immediately arranged for the man to undergo needed surgery that resolved the problem. A few days later he learned that the man was the “Mukhtar” of Tikrit, which meant that he recorded and preserved all public records (births, marriages, etc.) as well as the military enlistment records for the region ... which included the names and photos of many of the men who had become terrorists. In appreciation

for Steve's kindness in healing his foot, the Mukhtar shared these records with him, which greatly facilitated efforts to reduce terrorism and the eventual capture Saddam Hussein.

12. Let others get the glory (Phil. 2:3-4; Matt. 23:12) – The soldiers in Steve's battalion often worked closely with small teams of Special Operations Forces (SOFs). When those combined efforts were successful, it would have been natural for Steve to boast of his leadership role and to claim the glory for his battalion. Instead, he deflected the personal praise and drew attention to the skill and courage of both his infantrymen and the SOF teams who carried out those dangerous missions.

13. Look out for the interests of others (Phil. 2:4) – God blessed the 1st Battalion with many outstanding officers. As their skills and experience became evident, they were often offered transfers to higher levels of responsibility and command. Although each transfer would inevitably leave a gap in Steve's command structure, he resisted the temptation to hold on to those officers. Trusting that God would fill those gaps with the talent he needed, Steve celebrated and supported his officers' advancement and sent them off to their new positions with his blessings and prayers.

14. Weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15; John 11:15) – Steve grieved over every soldier who was injured or killed while under his command. One death was especially hard to bear. Specialist Holly McGeogh served as a highly skilled mechanic in the battalion motor pool. She worked long hours in blistering heat to make sure her fellow soldiers had reliable vehicles during their dangerous missions. During her off duty hours, she played with Iraqi children, trying to bring some fun and laughter into their war-torn lives. One day Holly volunteered to "ride shotgun" on a supply convoy. When her vehicle was destroyed by an IED (improvised explosive device), Holly was killed instantly. During her memorial service, Steve simply could not hold back his tears. As he wrote afterwards,

"I don't care what anyone says. Losing female soldiers in battle is different. We had now lost two. People can try to talk themselves into any type of theory they wish, but to the average infantryman in battle, losing a female soldier is different I am only human. My voice broke. As a commander, I did the unthinkable. I cried before my soldiers. I suppose I could have shown more sternness as a commander. Still, the Army tradition goes that memorial services are the place to say our goodbyes If we could not show our love for our fellow soldiers there, then where could we? My soldiers knew me. They knew I would lead the fight for them, and now they knew I was also capable of mourning along with them. I don't regret it" (p. 451-2).

15. Trust in the Lord ... and keep going (Ps. 37:1-9; Gal. 6:9) – Although Steve and his soldiers experienced many successes in their efforts to bring peace and stability to Tikrit, they also experienced many heart-breaking losses. Again and again, their best plans, greatest efforts and noble sacrifices were thwarted by opponents who fought from the shadows and cared nothing about the innocent bystanders who suffered from their actions. During those times of loss and discouragement, Steve turned again and again to God through prayer and reflection on the many promises of Scripture that the Lord watches over those who put their trust in him and do not grow weary in doing good ("God-awareness and God-engagement").

Even though you probably don't face the kind of life-threatening dangers Steve and his soldiers encountered in Iraq, you can still follow his example in whatever challenges you encounter in daily life, whether in your marriage, as a parent, with co-workers or in your church. As David (a husband, father, soldier and king who experienced failure on all of these fronts) wrote thousands of years ago:

Fret not yourself because of evildoers;
be not envious of wrongdoers!
For they will soon fade like the grass
and wither like the green herb.

Trust in the Lord, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him, and he will act.
He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday.

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him;
fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way,
over the man who carries out evil devices!

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!
Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.
For the evildoers shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land (**Psalm 37:1-9**).

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 fifteen 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 Timothy 4:15*

~ Ken Sande

Reflection Questions:

1. **Understand the culture in which you are serving:** Do you deliberately study the people you live and work with every day? (**Acts 17:22-23**) 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** at www.rw360.org/reagan).
2. **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.
3. **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**).
4. **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; Luke 6:27-28; Romans 12:19-21**?
5. **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**) 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**?
6. **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**)
7. **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; 12:15; 13:10; 15:32**). 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**, www.rw360.org/approachability)
8. **Correct others constructively:** How do you respond when others make mistakes? Do you berate them and make them feel worse, or do you let them know you've made similar mistakes and then then guide them through a constructive learning process? (2 Tim. 2:24) The real test of

this quality is whether people try to conceal their mistakes from you or willingly bring them to your attention.

9. **Be open (but not obnoxious) about your faith:** How open are you about sharing your faith? (Luke 12:8) Do your neighbors and co-workers know that you are a follower of Christ, or do you deliberately keep a “low profile” on matters of faith? What does your openness about your faith say about your understanding of the gospel and your love for people who do not yet know Christ? What will you do differently this week to make your faith more evident to people around you?
10. **Communicate so clearly you cannot be misunderstood:** Can you think of any conflicts in your family, church or workplace that were caused or aggravated by poor communication? To avoid those situations in the future, always remember: “It’s not good enough to communicate so that you can be understood. You must communicate so clearly that you cannot be misunderstood” (Col. 4:3-4) In what setting would this principle help you the most?
11. **Kindness opens doors:** Think of a time when someone showed you an unexpected act of kindness. How did it make you feel toward that person? Did it move you to return kindness to that person or to others in your life? How does the kindness God reveals through the gospel lead us to repentance? How could he use your kindness toward others to lead them to repentance? (Eph. 4:32; Rom. 2:4)
12. **Let others get the glory:** When you’ve been part of a group effort that has achieved great success, are you inclined to draw attention to yourself or to point to the contributions of others? (Phil. 2:3-4; Matt. 23:12) Think of someone who naturally plays down his or her own accomplishments and sincerely delights to see others get the glory. How does that attitude affect the productivity and morale of the groups that person works with? Who could you give appropriate credit to this week?
13. **Look out for the interests of others:** Give an example of someone in your life who naturally looks out for the interests of others even when it means sacrificing some of his or her interests (Phil. 2:4). What benefits has the person experienced in the long run by putting others’ interests ahead of his or her own? Is there someone in your life whose interests you could advance this week even if it costs you something in the short-term?
14. **Weep with those who weep:** Are you reluctant to shed tears in front of others? Why? What message does it send when you are tearless when others are weeping? What message does it send when you imitate Jesus and “weep with those who weep”? (Rom. 12:15; John 11:15)
15. **Trust in the Lord ... and keep going:** Think of a challenging or discouraging relationship in your life. How have you been tempted to respond? What will probably happen if you give into that temptation? What is more likely to happen if you follow the guidance of passages like Psalm 37:1-9 and Galatians 6:9? Which course of action is more likely to bring glory to God and reveal his presence and power in your life?

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