

SEVEN LESSONS ON CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP FROM GENERAL MATTHEW RIDGWAY

by Dennis L. Peterson

General Matthew Ridgway inherited a dismal situation. In the midst of a war that his army was losing, his primary general on the ground where the action was occurring was killed in a vehicle accident. The overall commander of the theater, General Douglas MacArthur, had made several political and strategic blunders, and the president had fired him. Now Ridgway was thrust into that gaping wound to stop the hemorrhaging, restore health to the entire organization, and regain the offensive to end the war. It was no easy task.

On June 25, 1950, the North Koreans invaded South Korea and by September 15 had pushed the defenders down the peninsula to a tiny pocket on the extreme southeastern corner of the country called the Pusan Perimeter. But MacArthur had counterattacked, catching the North Koreans off guard with a brilliantly successful amphibious invasion at Inchon. U.S. forces pushed the enemy back across the 38th parallel and northward almost to the border with China.

Then, on October 25, the Communist Chinese launched an attack across the Yalu River into North Korea. Their horde pushed the American and South Korean forces back into South Korea, surrounding a large number of them at Chosin Reservoir in November. A few days before Christmas, the ground commander, General Walton Walker, was killed when a South Korean weapons carrier collided with the jeep he was riding in. General Matthew Ridgway was named as his replacement. The outmanned and outgunned and “green” Americans were forced to “advance to the rear,” fighting the Chinese onslaught all the way. MacArthur pushed President Harry Truman for permission to expand the theater into China, even to use atomic weapons if necessary. When Truman refused, MacArthur angrily, deliberately, and publicly criticized the president. Truman, his authority challenged and his patience worn thin, fired MacArthur. The American public and political leaders demanded results in the war.

This was the situation when General Ridgway took over command. He began immediately to turn things around, and soon U.S. troops were once again on the offensive. They pushed the Chinese and North Koreans back over the 38th parallel

and offered to start peace talks. The fighting was a stalemate from that point, but the war finally ended in a truce at Panmunjom in July 1953.

Perhaps the best history of the Korean War is the late David Halberstam's *The Coldest Winter*. That book provides not only a riveting account of the war but also seven lessons from General Ridgway's military skills that can help every Christian school teacher today. Applying these lessons could make as much difference in classrooms today as they did on the battlefields of Korea in the early 1950s.

1. Get out on the front lines often.

Ridgway knew the importance of getting out among the soldiers, seeing things from their perspective, and coming to a first-hand understanding of the problems they faced. He made it his regular practice to rub shoulders with the grunts, not just the colonels, majors, and captains. He let them see that he lived like the common soldiers did.

No matter how big or small your class is, the students must see you out there working beside them "in the trenches," not just towering over them from the lectern. Get away from your desk once in a while and see what is going on in lives of the individual students and their families. Even the Red Chinese generals in Korea understood the importance of this point, for they were known to get down into the dirt and dig trenches and foxholes with their soldiers occasionally. Do so, and you will see student morale and school spirit soar. It won't hurt the students' respect for you, either.

2. Stay informed about what is going on.

General Ridgway believed in what is commonly known in the business world as "management by walking around." He understood the value of feet-on-the-ground intelligence. As he got out among the troops, he heard and saw firsthand what was happening on the battle front. That allowed him to see what he could never see from his map-lined, rear-echelon headquarters office.

Don't rely on what other teachers say for your information. Admittedly, those teachers' opinion and insights can be helpful, but first-hand knowledge of each of your students is even better. Ensure that you have a high degree of human intelligence about what is happening within your classroom population both inside and outside the classroom. Insist that your intelligence be the very best. Pay close attention to the details. This will keep some problems from arising and nip little problems in the bud, thereby keeping them from becoming big problems.

3. Reprove or reprimand uncooperative or unmotivated students; reward and praise those who do well or show improvement.

This necessity is never a comfortable task for a leader. That is why it generally is either omitted or delegated to someone else. Too often, the teacher's attitude is *Maybe that problem will just resolve itself*. But that seldom is the case; it usually only gets worse.

Acting promptly when such a need becomes evident, especially after the person has been gently but biblically counseled about the particular situation, preempts problems in the long run. Doing so also gives other students a chance to excel in ways that otherwise might not occur. Combined with the rewarding of faithful and exemplary students, it improves the morale of students who have to work with the ineffective or disruptive student. It also encourages other students to try harder so that they, too, can be promoted to opportunities of greater responsibility and honor.

4. Even when in retreat, have a plan for attacking.

While General Ridgway was coordinating the retreat of his troops and trying to save whatever he could of personnel, equipment, and arms and ammunition, he was deliberately calculating the best place and time to turn on the pursuing enemy and launch an attack that would send him reeling and hasten the end of the war.

Setbacks occur in every classroom, but teachers must look ahead, plan for the day when they can see a reversal of the setback, and be ready to launch a positive initiative when the opportunity arises. In this way, the teacher does not spend his time putting out brush fires and accomplishing little of value. Rather than thinking merely tactically about the current problems, the effective teacher is thinking strategically of the future. He is seeing the big picture rather than getting mired down in the discouragement and malaise of current details.

5. Know your enemy.

Early on, General Ridgway gleaned from his frequent visits to the front that the average soldier and even many of their superiors in the field had developed one of two attitudes toward their Red Chinese opponents. Some of them had no respect for the Communists as soldiers because they perceived them to be ill-trained, ill-equipped, and ill-advised incompetents. Therefore, they were caught by surprise when the Chinese proved to be quite the opposite in actual combat. But other soldiers, including some of their officers, so feared the Communist opponents that they attributed to them almost superhuman strength and abilities and were therefore ready to surrender or flee at their first encounter. Ridgway, however, took a more reasoned approach. He had seen enough that he dared not despise them as

incompetents, but he also knew that they were indeed ill-trained and ill-equipped and often ill-led. Therefore, he knew that they could be defeated under the right circumstances. And he determined to bring about those circumstances.

Classroom teachers face a formidable foe: Satan and the powers of darkness. We must never underestimate him; he's sneaky and sly; he's thrown down many strong leaders. But neither should we overestimate him. He is not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent. God, however, is all those things. If we know the enemy's philosophy, mannerisms, and modus operandi, and if we rely on the power of God within us, Satan can be defeated.

6. As much as possible, you choose the battlefield.

One problem that the retreating Americans faced in Korea was that, in their haste to escape the enemy, American leaders allowed the Chinese to determine when and where the battles occurred. Ridgway, however, refused to allow this, planning instead to determine those factors for himself. Instead of fighting a continual retreating battle on the enemy's terms, he counterattacked at his time and place and forced the Chinese to do the adjusting to the new circumstances.

Not every problem in the classroom deserves the same amount of time, effort, or energy. Choose your battles carefully. Draw the line and stand your ground when necessary, but always keep in mind the larger plan of turning the battle back against the enemy.

7. Boost morale and honor success with more and greater responsibility.

Reward faithfulness and exemplary behavior publicly and substantially. Let others see that it pays to be a good student. Exemplary behavior in "small" things warrants advancement to greater responsibilities and "larger" areas of opportunity. Give faithful students greater responsibilities, but don't overload them! Doing so would only discourage, not encourage, others. Rather, move faithful performers upward while moving other students into the slots that the honorees vacate. This not only advances the faithful, loyal, and compliant student and provides a good example for his classmates but also makes room for other students to use their gifts in learning.

General Ridgway's example in the thick of the warfare in Korea teaches valuable lessons for teachers in the Christian classroom. Those lessons show the importance of knowing both our enemy and our own troops, recognizing the both problems and the opportunities of the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged, and keeping our classrooms focus on the right things.