

“Tap Lightly”: Managing Classroom Behavior

William C. Ostenson

William C. Ostenson (williammarilynostenson@msn.com) is a retired Church Educational System seminary principal.

Mike Mansfield, a highly respected United States senator from Montana, served as majority leader for sixteen years and, after retiring from the Senate, as an ambassador to Japan for an additional twelve years. Much of his success as a senator and an ambassador can be attributed to the fact that in his relationships with people, he always tried to “tap lightly.” He picked up this saying from his nine years in the copper mines of Butte, Montana, following his service in all three branches of the military during and after World War I.

The statement came as a warning to those who used explosives to loosen the rock in which the copper ore was embedded. An experienced miner would drill holes into the rock and then place an explosive charge deep into each hole. The charges had to fit tightly deep in the rock or the force of the explosion would cause a rockslide that would almost certainly lead to sudden death. This process required the miner to tap the explosive into the hole until it reached the far end. Of course, if he tapped too hard, the charge would go off prematurely, leading to the caution, “Tap ’er light.” Mike Mansfield saw in this a metaphor for dealing with people. As he sought to apply this rule in his relationships with people, he won the respect not only of Republicans and Democrats in the Senate but also of the Japanese people.¹

Teachers and principals in the seminary program can use this same principle to solve disciplinary problems.

As a principal, I once worked with a student whose teacher had kicked him out of class for persistent disobedience. I do not recall all

the complaints the teacher had about this student, but on that particular day the student had brought a can of pop into class and had refused to put it away. I invited the student into my office, and I began by getting better acquainted with him. That is not what students usually expect when going into a principal's office for disciplinary reasons, but to be of any help to this student I needed to know something about him. Furthermore, such an approach is usually disarming, and I could address the issue at hand more easily once the student's defenses had been loosened up. After getting better acquainted, I asked him to tell me his side of the story. I find that this approach too can be disarming and can reveal a great deal about a student. "Tapping lightly" in this way is often the first step toward a solution.

When I asked the student for his side of the story, he complained that because his high-school teachers allowed him to bring pop into their classes, he couldn't see what was wrong with bringing it into seminary. I explained that this was merely the rule we had throughout the seminary, and because he was able to drink pop in all his other classes, he certainly did not *need* to drink pop in seminary. That was my way of showing my support for the teacher in that situation, and he was hard pressed to disagree. I also thought that he would agree to being more cooperative if I promised to ask his teacher to cut him some slack. He agreed to that as well, and then the teacher and I had a talk.

As teachers, we sometimes get pulled into a contest of wills with a student, and it becomes difficult for us to see our own contribution to the contention that exists between us. I could have moved this student to another class, but it seemed important that the student and teacher work through their differences. First, the young man needed to stop showing his independence through disobedience, and second, the teacher needed to learn how to tap more lightly and take it less personally when his students tested his authority.

Having worked for fourteen years as a coordinator in the U.S. Northeast Area, I knew that this young man was one of the reasons why we have released-time seminary. During my fourteen years of service to the wards and branches of northern Indiana and the north-west corner of Ohio, I had the opportunity to watch many excellent teachers teach in early-morning and home-study classes. All of them were volunteers. But the percentage of enrollment in early-morning or home-study classes was never as high as in released-time classes, which is why we rarely saw a casual student—like the young man—in those classes. Such students do come to our released-time classes, however, and as such they provide some of the justification for paying a profes-

sional teacher to teach those classes. We ought not to be too quick to dismiss them when they become a challenge for us.

As part of my assignment as a coordinator, I taught a monthly lesson to the home-study and early-morning students prior to their monthly stake, or Super Saturday, activities. I always enjoyed those classes, and I seldom had problems with discipline. Yet on one occasion the students came to class so excited that early into the lesson I had to stop and wait quietly for them to settle down. All seventy to eighty students responded to this approach except for one young lady in the very center of the chapel who resumed talking to a young man on her left as soon as I started the lesson again. When I saw her talking again, I stopped and announced that I would wait until she was finished before I continued. Having been singled out, she stomped out of the chapel, pushing her way past the students who sat between her and the aisle. I could not tell how anyone else felt, but when she got up to walk out of the room, I felt like the Spirit walked out too.

We always held an in-service meeting for the teachers after the students left for their activity. During the meeting, I asked which teacher had that young lady in his or her local class. When I found out, I asked her teacher to do everything she could to get that young lady back again next month. I also admitted to the teachers that I had not set a very good example for how to handle a disciplinary problem, though the teachers admitted they were hard pressed to think of another way of handling it.

For the next monthly lesson, we met in a different building, and we were in a different room than the chapel. Eighth-graders had also been invited so they could see what a Super Saturday was like because they would be attending the following year. The room was so full of people that a number of students had to sit on the floor in the front of the class. When I started the lesson, everyone was once again excited and inattentive. But I knew that I had a good lesson prepared, so I began by directing a series of questions to a group of eighth-graders sitting on the floor to my immediate right. When I saw the fear in their eyes turn into sincere interest in the lesson, I turned to another group and endeavored to pull them into the lesson as well. I kept doing that until I had everyone in the room engaged in the lesson except for the young lady from the previous month. She was sitting in the very center of the room and seemed intent on challenging my authority once again. But it was a good lesson, and she quickly became interested when I began involving her in it.

With twenty minutes left in the lesson, I saw one of our home-study teachers and another student come into the room and sit down

on the floor to my left. Then I saw that teacher get up and leave, only to return moments later with another student. I was interested in what he had to say in our in-service meeting once the lesson had concluded and the students had left for their activity. First, he apologized for being late. He was a new teacher, and he had no idea how long it would take him to pick up his students who needed a ride. When they finally got there, it was so late that he could only convince one of them to come into class with him. But once he got into the room, he felt the Spirit so strongly that he left to try and convince his other students to come into the room so they could at least feel the Spirit that was there. That Saturday our in-service lesson was on how to discipline students by using questions to pull them into the lesson rather than pushing them away by pointing out their misbehavior. In other words, how do we “tap lightly” enough to loosen sometimes rock-solid resistance without having our efforts blow up in our faces?

There is no substitute for a well-prepared lesson when it comes to discipline in the classroom—and especially when it comes to those disciplinary problems that arise from boredom. Because of four years of good lessons from a variety of teachers, the young man who had brought pop into class did feel the Spirit at times and did learn some things about the gospel in spite of himself. I know that because I kept an eye on him for the next four years. And even though he did not graduate from seminary, I believe that what Elder Henry B. Eyring said in 1993 applied to him: “If you treat them as seekers, they will feel that you love them, and that may awaken a hope in them that they could have a softer heart. It may not happen every time, and it may not last. But it will happen often, and sometimes it will last. And all of them will at least remember that you believed in the best in them—their inheritance as a child of God.”²

Nevertheless, part of loving and believing in them is to discipline them when they need to be disciplined. For example, when I became principal for the third time, I discovered that we had more than twenty seniors who were using their released-time status to do whatever they wanted. I had each of these students into my office to visit with them individually about their plans for the future and to ask if they were planning to graduate from seminary. All of them said they wanted to graduate, so I told them that they could as long as they never skipped class again. But if they did skip again, I would be required to dismiss them from seminary, and they would not graduate. I explained to them why it was important for them to honor their released-time contract with the high school and how important it was for us to protect our

legal status as a released-time program and maintain a good relationship with the high school. I said that what I was saying had nothing to do with how I felt about them personally, as I had to live by the same rules as they did. Finally, I said that I would be calling their parents to tell them the same.

With one exception, the parents were supportive. One father said that it was about time his son was held accountable and that his son would complete his makeup work before spring break or be left home while his friends went on a trip to Lake Powell. All those students but one stopped skipping class and graduated. The one who skipped class had her enrollment discontinued, after which she came and asked if there was any way she could still graduate. Having acted blatantly in her most recent absence, I told her that I was unable to trust her enough to allow her back into released-time, but I would set up a demanding alternative for her, which, upon completion, would enable her to graduate. She accepted and graduated with her friends.

I believe the rules we have in seminary should be used to motivate our students to do what they already know they should do. In other words, we ought to always "tap lightly" with the rules rather than use them to their full weight. I have learned that if you are kind but firm with students, they almost always step up and do the right thing. When they do not, the consequences belong totally to them. We can take comfort in knowing that we have followed the admonition of President Howard W. Hunter, who encouraged us to "give a soft answer" when we might otherwise be tempted to give a harsh answer, to "encourage [our] youth" rather than discourage them, to "try to understand" them rather than being quick to judge them as lacking in spirituality or maturity, to "examine [our] demands on [them]," and to be "kind" and "gentle" with them.³ That is good counsel for those of us who want to "tap 'er light." **RE**

Notes

1. Don Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield: The Extraordinary Life of a Great American Statesman and Diplomat* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 1–14.

2. Henry B. Eyring, *To Draw Closer to God: A Collection of Discourses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 146.

3. Howard W. Hunter, "This Christmas. . . ." in *LDS Church News*, December 10, 1994.