

Down in the Trenches

William J. Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education and one of the leading lights in the struggle to restore moral and ethical values in our society, tells this fascinating personal story. In the late spring of 1985, his wife, Elayne, who is a former teacher, urged him to visit schools and teach classes.

"While we were courting, she had seen me teach high school classes in Portland, Maine," Bennett said. "Later, when I became education secretary, she told me, 'You're a good teacher and people will take you more seriously if they see you doing what you're talking about. In addition to talking about education, why don't you go out and show people you can teach somebody something?'"

Bennett resisted and said, "I don't do retail now, I do wholesale." At that point, Elayne persisted and said, "If you do some retail, you'll do better wholesale."

It is good strategy -- as old as time itself. She was saying that by example he would be demonstrating the importance of teaching, and giving dignity to teachers and the profession of teaching. Elayne Bennett was also declaring that the real heroes of life are "down in the trenches," doing the job and encouraging others to do the same.

That thought carries a message for every leader of Life Care, American Lifestyles and Life Care at Home. If executive directors and general managers are knowledgeable about every phase of their business, they will have a greater appreciation for what the rest of their staff is doing staff. It is not by happenstance that Life Care's administrator-in-training program requires the candidate to work in every department in the building in order to know its mission, its capabilities and its challenges.

A leader should regularly explore what happens in each department and talk with the people doing the jobs. This interest will bring him or her closer to the associates, and the knowledge that the executive director (or regional or divisional vice president) and general manager will acquire will help them to more effectively achieve the best outcomes.

Put another way: Don't expect your "leader-ship" to come in if you are unwilling to unload the cargo.

--Beecher Hunter