



The Rehearsal



Bill Elby had never been more anxious.

Tomorrow he would deliver his first “state of the company” address to employees since becoming chief executive officer of Treeview Industries one year ago.

He had spent the past week struggling to find just the right words and prove correct the friend who said, “Don’t worry, something always comes to you.”

Leaving nothing to chance, he had come to the empty company auditorium to practice the speech one final time.

After arranging his notes on the podium, Bill gazed briefly at the empty seats in front of him, took a deep breath, and began:

Ladies and gentlemen, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today about our business. It truly is my pleasure to address such a fine group of people. As you know, our financial picture could be much better than it is. Nevertheless, we have made several significant accomplishments during this past year. We...

He continued — working his way through the list of achievements, a somewhat dismal financial report, and a review of a planned reorganization that he hoped would be the key to Treeview’s future prosperity.

Suddenly a noise from the back of the auditorium brought the rehearsal to an abrupt halt. “Who’s there?” asked Bill.

“It’s just me, Clarence, the janitor,” came a response from the dark. “I’m supposed to clean this place up.”

“Go right ahead, Clarence,” said Bill. “I’m Bill Elby. I’m just practicing my speech for tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir, I know who you are,” replied Clarence. “You just keep on practicing. You won’t bother me a bit.”

“That’s terrific,” chuckled the CEO. He found it refreshing to meet someone apparently so *underwhelmed* by his presence.

After finding his place, Bill continued:

Despite our current financial position, I am optimistic about the future. You only have to review our corporate values and philosophies to know that we’re the kind of organization that’s destined to be successful. We believe that our employees are our most valuable resource and that quality is our primary objective. We believe in working together to solve problems. We believe in decision making at the lowest possible level. And, we believe in trust, mutual respect, and an ethical approach to doing business.

By now, Clarence had worked his way forward from the darkness into the light. Bill could clearly see a smile on the warm, weathered face of this man he didn't recognize. Wondering if that broad smile was a response to his speech, Bill engaged his one-person audience.

"Were you listening to what I was saying, Clarence?"

"Yes, sir, I sure was," answered the janitor.

"What do you think?" continued the CEO.

"About that last part I mean."

"Good words."

"You're right!" spouted Bill. "Those are our values, and they *are* good words."

"Words to live by?" probed the janitor politely.

"Absolutely," answered Bill. "Words to live by. But why do you ask?"

"Well," replied Clarence, removing his cap and wiping the perspiration from his face and neck, "I've been around here darn near forever. I've cleaned up after a lot of folks who have come and gone over the years, and I've heard lots of good words just like those."

"That's because they're important," said Bill.

"That's why we talk about them, and why we've put them in our company publications and posted them all over the place."

"I understand," responded Clarence. "But it seems to me that words to live by are just words, unless you live by them. You have to *walk* the talk."

"Those are good words, too," said Bill. "Very profound for ..."

“For an old janitor?” interrupted Clarence.

“Yes,” said Bill, “profound for a janitor.”

“Well, believe it or not,” said Clarence sharply, “I don’t check in my brains when I check out my brooms.”

“I didn’t intend that as a put-down. It’s just that you’re probably pretty isolated from what we do around here every day.”

“I think you’d be surprised what you can pick up when you pick up. That’s a janitor joke!” laughed Clarence. “Anyway, I know a lot about what goes on here. Maybe more than you might think.”

“I’ll bet you do,” replied Bill in an attempt to appease the old man. “Tell me, what do you mean by the words ‘walk the talk’?”

“Well,” said Clarence, “let’s see. Have you ever made a promise you didn’t keep?”

“Of course! Everyone at one time or another has had a good intention they didn’t deliver on.”

“What do you suppose happens when we don’t deliver on something we’ve promised?” asked Clarence.

“Obviously, we lose trust and credibility. If it happens too many times, our promises become meaningless.”

“That’s what I think, too,” said Clarence.” And that’s why we have to walk the talk. Those good words you spoke earlier are like promises. People read and hear them, and then they expect the promises to be kept. But, if what they actually see is different than what they hear and read, there’s a problem. Like my grandpa used to say, ‘when you break a promise, more than the promise gets broken.’”

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YOU LIVE BY THEM.*

*YOU HAVE TO
WALK THE TALK.*

Looking somewhat troubled, Bill asked, “Are you saying we don’t walk our talk here at Treeview?”

“Sometimes folks do,” answered Clarence, “and sometimes they don’t. But one thing’s for sure — business seems to run a lot smoother around here when people DO!”

“So, you’ve seen what happens when we walk the talk ... and when we don’t?” asked Bill.

“Yes sir, I sure have.”

Like most CEOs, Bill was not in the habit of seeking advice from janitors. But somehow this situation was different. As he looked into the eyes of the old janitor, Bill could tell there was more to this man than met the eye. He sensed an indefinable something that tempered his sarcastic inclinations and compelled him to probe deeper. “I suppose you can tell me about some of those examples?”

“Heck, I can do better than that,” said Clarence. “If you have a few minutes, I can show you.”

“Actually, I’m very busy right now,” said Bill, glancing at his watch. “I really don’t have the time to go anywhere. I’ve got to work on my speech.”

“I think what I have to show you will *help* your speech,” suggested the janitor. “Considering how you’ve been struggling with that rascal all week, what do you really have to lose?”

“How did you know I’ve had a tough time with the speech?” asked the CEO, whose curiosity was now aroused.

“Like I said earlier,” answered Clarence, “I just might know more than you think!”

“Apparently so,” Bill thought.

“I bet a walk would do you good,” continued Clarence. “Why don’t you come with me?”

“Well,” replied Bill reluctantly, “all right. I suppose I don’t have much to lose. But only for a few minutes. I’m short on time.”

“It won’t take long,” assured Clarence.

Just then, Bill heard a faint, repetitious chime.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Just my watch,” answered the janitor, as he pulled a small gold pocket watch from his right pants pocket. After opening the cover and checking the watch face, Clarence continued. “It’s time we took that walk.”

Bill slowly followed Clarence to a set of doors at the rear of the auditorium. As they approached, the doors opened, revealing an almost blinding white light. Shielding his eyes, Bill saw that it was an elevator interior.

“I didn’t know this was here,” he said.

“Not many people do,” responded Clarence with an assuring grin. “Watch your step.”

Looking at the control panel, Bill quickly discovered that this was no ordinary elevator.

“What’s this?” he asked, as he pointed to the panel. “Where are the floor numbers?”

“We don’t need any numbers. Those buttons will get us to where we’re going.”

“What’s going on here, Clarence?” asked Bill. “This is not your average elevator, and it’s obvious that you’re not an average janitor!”

ELEVATOR

- The Wonder of Walking The Talk**
- The Conflict of Contradictions**
- The Value of Values**

“There’s nothing special about me,” responded Clarence. “But this elevator is very special. It will show you everything you need to know about walking the talk. Just push that first button and see for yourself.”

“This is crazy. But now I’ve got to know where this thing goes,” muttered Bill, as he reached for the top button labeled **The Wonder of Walking The Talk**.

Clarence gently grabbed Bill’s arm to stop him. “Why don’t we start at the bottom and work our way up,” suggested the janitor.

“For some strange reason,” thought the CEO, now looking into Clarence’s twinkling eyes, “I trust this little man. He knows something, and I must find out what it is.”

Bill pushed the bottom button, **The Value of Values**, and the elevator doors closed.