Top Brass Try Life in the Trenches

By 1 1 :30 A.M. one recent day, Carolyn Kibler had

been on her feet for nearly six hours, shuttling

among sixteen dialysis patients at a DaVita Inc.

clinic in Atlanta, Georgia. Her lower back ached

from the unaccustomed strain. The outgoing and

talkative former nurse had known little about dialysis

before she joined DaVita in 2006. (Dialysis takes the

place of nonfunctioning or poorly functioning kidneys

in ﬂushing wastes from the body.)

Kibler is a vice president of the nation’s number

2 dialysis-treatment operator, earning a six-ﬁ gure

salary while overseeing forty-eight other clinics. For

three days this spring, however, she helped treat

seriously ill patients alongside technicians working

up to thirteen-hour days for $1 4.30 an hour. “The job

is deﬁ nitely more physically demanding than I had

imagined,” the 48-year-old executive admits.

Kibler quickly feels the stress of the job. She

must don a close-ﬁ tting surgical gown and plastic

face visor. “It’s real hot,” she says. While wearing

the protective gear, she helps a technician monitor

patients’ blood pressure, checks other vital signs,

watches the machines’ water purity, and completes

paperwork.

After her hectic three-day stint, Kibler describes

her technicians as “some of the most empathetic

caregivers I have ever seen.” DaVita’s prosperity

depends on front-line troops aiding patients. “Band-

Aid by Band-Aid, piece of tape by piece of tape, and

alarm by alarm,” she continues.

Back in her ofﬁ ce in another part of Atlanta,

Kibler tries to integrate the lessons from her

clinic experience into her leadership of a roughly

7 50-employee division. “I am more conscious of

the power of my words and my actions and the

impact they have down in the organization,”

she says. So Kibler is more lenient when clinics fall

behind on paperwork due to stafﬁ ng shortages. She

praises a nurse who skipped a conference call to

discuss a clinic’s quality report so she could ﬁ ll in

for an absent employee caring for patients. “When

something like that comes up, I have a picture of

the treatment ﬂ oor, everyone scurrying around

and patients waiting in their chairs,” Kibler says.

“Patient care comes ﬁ rst.” At an evening staff meet-

ing in another clinic on June 1 3, she thanked work-

ers for “the gift of life they had given to each patient

they touched that day.”

DaVita requires managers to attend two days of

classroom training before working in a clinic, and

surveys participants after their visits. DaVita chief

executive Kent J. Thiry created the immersion pro-

gram for his senior managers in 2002. “The experi-

ence changes their view of the world,” he says.

“They are better leaders as a result.”