Commentary - October 29, 2007

Mike's Align

by Rushworth M. Kidder

The other day I stopped by our local garage, a trim, gray-stained, three-bay affair hugging the verge of Route 1. With the Maine winter not far off, I needed Mike to put the snow tires on my car. I'd also run over a parking-lot curb one misty night the week before, so I thought I'd talk to him about an alignment.

I pulled around to the side where he keeps his 55-gallon waste oil drums, painted in different colors and lined up like a rank of pudgy toy soldiers, and recalled that I used to see Mike a lot more often. Back in the 1970s, our family owned a succession of station wagons that regularly went out of alignment. You'd touch a curb or hit a patch of potholes, and the front end would immediately develop a case of the wobbles. If you didn't visit Mike pretty regularly, you'd soon be looking at some oddly worn treads and a bill for two new tires.

But for years I hadn't thought about alignments. Why not? Maybe, despite my recent nocturnal encounter, I was driving better. Maybe there were fewer potholes -- though you couldn't prove that by the road up to our house. Or maybe the cars we'd owned recently were better engineered. Whatever the reason, I couldn't recall when I last had to change tires because of those lopsided bald patches.

I went inside, and Mike and I set a time for an appointment. As I was leaving his sign caught my eye. "Mike's Align & Repair," it said, offering customers a distinction I hadn't focused on before. When something's damaged or broken, you fix it. But when something's in fine shape but a bit out of whack, you bring it back into line. Mike knows the difference between aligning and repairing, and he won't charge you for a replacement when all you need is an adjustment. That's what has earned him so many loyal

customers over the years.

As I drove away, reflecting on the success of small-business integrity in rural America, I recalled a workshop we'd just conducted on moral courage. At one point, discussing the opposite of courage, we asked the participants to identify the qualities that go along with cowardice. In a few minutes we'd filled a flip-chart with words like *fearful, defensive, self-centered, indifferent, sullen, inconclusive, fretful, mean, removed, cynical, passive,* and *fractured.* Any business that merits this description will never come close to building the loyalty that Mike has. But does that mean the business is broken? Or are things simply out of line?

You hear a lot these days about the need for organizational alignment. It's not something you do in a three-bay garage, but it's a good analogy. Organizations, like cars, can get botched up. They hit economic potholes and flip off their wheel weights. They bounce hard over hidden regulatory curbs or cross ditches of morale at odd angles. And before you know it, they start to wobble. That's when they lose confidence, muffle their moral courage, and settle for a fuzzy pragmatism that borders on deceit. Mistaking bluster for integrity and stubbornness for fortitude, they slip into the moral cowardice described on our flip-chart.

When that happens, what they need is the managerial equivalent of Mike's Align & Repair. Too often, however, what they get is either Slick Willie's Fix-It-Cheap or the Royal Reconstruction Service. Though the price is different, each one's got the same answer: Things are really messed up here, so let's gut this puppy and do a total makeover.

Don't get me wrong: I'm no fan of organizational cowardice. But most of the time I suspect that what a cowardly organization needs is not repair but realignment. The thing still runs, after all: It's not as though the front wheels are at right angles to the chassis. They're just off by a few degrees. Sure, that's a key divergence, enough to keep you from running up to speed. But all it needs is someone with the right equipment and the skill to set it right.

Why? Because a lot of what seems to be cowardice isn't the opposite of courage, but the counterfeit of it. It's not that employees have set themselves deliberately at variance with moral courage. They don't hate putting integrity into practice or bringing values into action. They've just drifted off into something that looks like courage but isn't. They don't like feeling fretful and defensive, but they don't quite know where they went wrong. It won't help to tell them, "Okay, let's tear it out and start over." Nor will it do to fall back on that shallowest of excuses, "Hey, if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Those words are perfectly true in theory -- and frightfully harmful in practice. Lots of things that aren't broken still need alignment.

Mike knows that. He doesn't give you a new front end, nor does he walk away saying, "Nothing's busted, so I can't help." He rolls you into the bay and tweaks your camber and toe adjustments until everything comes into line. He knows you're made of good stuff. His job is just to point all your parts in the right direction.