



The Old Man, the Radiator Shop, and Integrity

By *Harrison Barnes*

In the summer of 1989, a man put a 5,000 gallon tank of asphalt sealer in an unused bay of his radiator repair shop.

Instead of servicing cars, the mechanic had chosen to place a gigantic tank of asphalt sealer within that space. Somehow a large asphalt company from God-knows-where had decided that he was in a good location and, to his astonishment, had set him up in business. It was a good thing too because as a mechanic he did not have a lot of customers, and the longer I dealt with him the more I realized why.

This asphalt tank was like something that had dropped from heaven right into this man's shop: It brought him all sorts of clients. I witnessed his business go from zero to something, and back to zero all in the space of a few years. It was quite inspiring to witness; there was a sense of simplicity to the lessons that I learned.

It was an old mechanic shop, down the street from a Budweiser brewery on a street of boarded up businesses in Pontiac. I imagine the mechanic had witnessed the neighborhood undergo incredible transformations over the years, since he had worked there for most of his life. Auto plants had closed down over time, and this guy appeared to run the only white-owned business around for miles. Drug dealers talked on the pay phone all day on a corner of his lot, and there did not appear to be a lot of cars with exploding radiators pulling up to his shop. I saw the man service a couple of such clients over the several years I did business with him, and it was pretty amusing. It seemed it was always the same sort of thing: a car would pull up with its engine smoking and someone would get out and pop the hood. I remember one guy popping the hood, getting burned by a bunch of steam and then hopping all over the parking lot. That was funny stuff.

I first found out about this guy when I was in line one day at an asphalt sealer plant several miles down the road. When you purchase asphalt sealer, the material needs to be pumped into a tank and the process of filling the tank can sometimes take 30 minutes or more. While you are in line, there are all sorts of brushes, gloves, chemicals, pylons, caution tape, and other accessories, which the factory will generally try and sell you. When you sit in this line, you typically talk to your competitors about what they are up to and this is about the only way to learn about anything in the asphalt business. One day somebody told me that some asphalt conglomerate from Alabama had put an asphalt sealer tank in one of this radiator mechanic's bays, and that the guy was offering sealer for 85 cents a gallon during an opening sale instead of the \$1.04 we were paying at the asphalt plant where we were waiting in line. I instantly backed up my truck and trailer and headed over there.

It was an exciting sight indeed when I pulled up to the radiator store. There were some cheap plastic flags that had been placed along the street announcing the arrival of the new 5,000 gallon tank. This was completely unnecessary since there were probably less than 25 full time asphalt sealer contractors in the Detroit area at the time; plus there was no way in hell most of them would ever be anywhere near this crummy neighborhood. So it was exciting. Once I got inside the radiator store, there was a real air of enthusiasm. The old man, who looked like he had been drinking a pint of whiskey each day for 50+ years, had his hair slicked back and parted to the side, and he appeared to be wearing a new uniform. He looked very proud. His son was also there, a kid around 17 years old, and he too looked extremely eager. Sitting in a chair in the waiting room was another man in a tie. He spoke in a Southern accent and wore a hat emblazoned with the name of the asphalt sealer company. He jumped up and handed me his card with the Alabama address on it and proclaimed that it was great to meet me.

I will never forget the scene when I pulled in that day because everyone was so happy. The old man told me with pride how he had had the radiator store in this same location since he was 22 years old, and how it was a family business.

Over the next several years, it turns out, the scene would change as corruption and family politics would overrun the business.

Asphalt sealer contains a lot of water and typically when you purchase the material, you need to water it down a bit in order to get it to flow. It is made from byproducts that result from manufacturing oil, and it is almost like Play-Doh before various chemicals and so forth are added to it. When you purchase the material, it is supposed to be very thick in consistency, and then, depending on the contractor, you add either a little or a lot of water to it. Thus, if you were to purchase 100 gallons of the material, you would probably add at least 50 or 60 gallons of water to it in order to make it a good consistency.

Over the course of the next several months, I frequented this small shop, and I noticed that the asphalt sealer kept getting thinner and thinner. Now, there are all sorts of chemicals and thickening agents you can add to the asphalt sealer that will make it seem thicker than it really is. Essentially what these thickeners do is put a lot of air bubbles in the sealer. I started seeing five gallon pails of this stuff stashed aside in various areas of the radiator shop. The longer I continued doing business with the radiator shop, the more messed up things seemed to get. The old man demonstrated less and less enthusiasm. There also seemed to be some hostility between the man and his son that I did not understand. The work area became dirty and unkempt. Worse yet, the product for sale was becoming so watered down that it was a complete rip off. And finally, to top things up, the man started charging more than the competition for the sealer, which did not make any sense. What had once looked like a very happy business success story had very quickly gone wrong.

"Why are you charging more money than everyone else?" I asked him on my last visit there. "It does not provide people with any incentive to use you. And you are also watering down your product."

The man did not deny watering down his product. All he said was "I need to make a living too. How much money do you make?"

I stopped going to see the man for asphalt sealer, and after several weeks I started hearing stories in the asphalt community about why the man was not making money. Apparently the old man took the weekend off and during his days off, the son worked the radiator shop. During this time, the son was selling people asphalt sealer and giving people more than they paid

for in exchange for money under the table. Apparently this had been going on for a long time, and the old man did not know about it. This was the reason he was not making any money. It was pretty sad to me because I had seen the glow in the man's face when the business had first started, and for several months after that. But now his pride had been taken away from him. He probably had started watering down the product because he was not making any money, since his son was stealing the product from him.

I also noticed that his son started wearing all sorts of gold jewelry and so forth, putting expensive rims on his car and more, and I knew that this was probably from the money he was making from selling the father's asphalt sealer behind his father's back.

This was discouraging to me, and one day I went by the old man's garage on the day his son was there. Sure enough, he tried to get me to give him money under the table in exchange for giving me more of the asphalt sealer. I told him I did not think this was a very nice thing to be doing to his father.

"I gotta look out for myself," he told me. He became pretty hostile and it scared me a little. I think I recall him saying something to the effect that I was a dumb-ass contractor if I would not give him money under the table.

I pulled away, completely astonished by what I had witnessed. The day I had first pulled into the radiator shop, the parking lot had been clean, the outside had been recently painted and there was a lot of pride. You could see it in the faces of the father and son. Now, the atmosphere felt much different. It was hard watching a business and a dream fail all because of a son who took advantage of his father.

A few weeks later I pulled into the radiator shop on a weekday with my asphalt tank. I felt like I needed to do or say something. As the father was filling the asphalt tank I told him:

"I do not know how to say this but I know why you are losing money," I said. "Your son is selling asphalt sealer under the table on the weekends."

I could see that the man heard me but he did not say anything. He looked up at me while I was talking and then looked down and kept filling my tank. A few minutes later he was writing me a bill of sale and handed it to me and I started writing a check.

"You ought to mind your own business," he said.

A few weeks later I drove by the radiator shop on a weekend on my way to purchase asphalt sealer from another plant and I saw the old man standing outside. I did not see the son or his car with the flashy rims parked proudly in front of the radiator store like it always was.

A few weeks after that I drove by the radiator shop and saw it was out of business.

This entire episode was very upsetting to me on numerous levels. Suddenly I saw that there can be a real danger in opportunity. What had initially been a very productive and excellent business was in a very short time destroyed by the greed of one person. When people cheat, in however small a way, the damage adds up. I bet the son did not think there was anything wrong with what he was doing. He probably thought his father would not miss the sealer. But he did miss the money. Out of necessity he then started cutting the product quality, which drove away customers. Eventually, the father found out and who knows what happened with their relationship. Moreover, a business which had been around perhaps for 50 or more years was destroyed.

Every action we take with our employer and in our lives needs to be accounted for, and every small action has consequences. In my entire career, I have seen people cheat their employers in the smallest of ways and what ends up happening is that this cheating adds up, and eventually comes back to get the person and the organization. The only way to truly grow and [progress in business](#) and in life is to be on the side of good and to be a team player all the time. Just one person can bring down an entire company. We invest our lives in our careers, therefore the most important thing we can do is act with integrity in our jobs and in everything we do.

THE LESSON

Opportunity used the wrong way can destroy everything. Cheating, even in small ways, can add up to cause ruinous damage. You must account for every action you take with your employer and in your life, and realize that every action carries consequences. With so much invested in your job and career, you must act with integrity in everything that you do rather than risk the consequences of taking the easy way out.