

The Role of Driver Motivation

This critical element in vehicle safety programs is often overlooked.

BY FRED D. RINE

Look at any company that operates a fleet of trucks and ask whether it pays attention to safety. Chances are good you'll find four basic elements in its program: equipment maintenance, hiring policies, training, and holding people accountable for accidents. But often missing is a fifth element that can make all the difference in accident rates: ensuring that drivers are motivated to operate safely.

Truck drivers have one of the least-supervised front-line jobs around. When trucks roll out of the depot and onto the road, managers are left behind. If management is to have any hope of a decent safety performance from those unsupervised drivers, it must do a top-notch job on the first four basic elements,

Before we go into depth on motivation, let's take a brief look at the four other ingredients of a good vehicle safety program.

1) Maintain the fleet well. Drivers are professionals, and their main tool is their vehicle. It needs to be in tip-top shape.

2) Hire good people. Any fleet operator should check out a candidate's background, driving record, and references. A road test should be part of the hiring checklist.

3) Provide strong training. It is important to provide not only training to new hires, but also retraining to ongoing employees to keep knowledge fresh.

4) Hold people accountable. It's easy to let your guard down and say, "Accidents are going to happen." But companies should set a target of zero accidents and hold everyone from the CEO to the drivers accountable accordingly.

After 18 years running safety programs at Roadway Express and FedEx, I am convinced that most fleet operators do pretty well at those four steps. If, for example, you asked a typical over-the-road trucker whether his company had trained him on safe driving techniques, the truthful answer would likely be yes. The real question, though, is whether drivers are motivated to use the training they have received. The fact that some are and some aren't is evident in the fact that some drivers go three, five, or 20 years without a preventable accident, while others have problems with alarming frequency. The difference almost always isn't in their equipment or their training; it's in their attitudes.

It's Never Too Late to Change

Time and comfort are two powerful motivations to drive unsafely. Time pressures, for example, make speeding tempting. And the comfort factor of driving without a seat belt can drown out strong training messages about the importance of buckling up. So time and comfort need a counterweight that will push decisions in the right direction. That counterweight is the motivation to drive safely.

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although they address only the question of how to be safe. It is the "why's" of safety -- drivers' motivation, or lack of one, to drive safely -- that ultimately can determine whether they are careful or sloppy and whether they pay attention to the road at all times or let their attention wander.

It doesn't take much mental wandering to have potentially catastrophic consequences. Think of the countless safety decisions, conscious and unconscious, you make in a brief drive to run errands. Multiply that by hundreds, and you have a day in the life of a truck driver. Even a 99 percent success rate in paying attention isn't good enough.

What are those motivations, and how do you get employees to embrace them? Before we get to that, we should examine who needs to be motivated.

For a safety program to be truly effective, there must be buy-in from everyone from the CEO to the front-line truck driver. The CEO needs to make it clear to all employees that the company has a strong safety policy. For example, a firm memo from the CEO of a trucking company that there is to be no speeding greatly increases the chances that drivers will comply.

What motivates a CEO? Most would say money, reputation, and concern for employees. It's easy to make the case that safety saves money -- from the cost of accidents themselves to possible legal action and disruption for customers. As for reputation, well, a truck is a rolling billboard that advertises its company's attitudes toward the safety of the motoring public. And there is no better way for CEOs to demonstrate concern for their employees than to make sure those employees return home safely.

What motivates a front-line worker? The

company's economic well-being and reputation should, of course, be on the list. But the on-the-ground reality all too often is that safety is viewed as a "have to" activity, rather than a "want to." Workers frequently arrive at safety training sessions with a sense of dread that they will have to listen to a droning instructor for hours on end and deal with a stack of documents.

The safety awareness training that our company has presented to more than 400,000 people in a wide range of industries tries to change the "have to" mentality. We provide not a single handout. Instead we look at why drivers are on the job in the first place. The answer, of course, is to provide for themselves and their families. Then, we discuss the consequences of not returning home safely. When I ask what would happen to a worker's family if he or she died on the job, the room gets focused pretty quickly. Workers then understand why they should obey the rules -- not from a textbook perspective, but from a gut, personal level. They understand that safety is one of the most unforgiving things there is. One error, and you're out of here. And your family lives on with the devastation.

At a safety awareness program I conducted for a group of drivers in Detroit, I started by asking all in attendance to introduce themselves, as I always do. Red flags began waving in my mind when one veteran started talking. He said he had 35 years in as a driver and would be retiring in five days.

"I don't want to be here," he said. "After 35 years on the road, I don't need safety training."

I began worrying that he would cast a pall over the session with non-stop naysaying. So imagine my surprise when he approached me at the end of the session, complimented me on the training, and told me he planned a major change in his behavior.

He said he had never worn a seat belt in his 35 years on the road. But he said he now realized why it was important. He planned to wear one in his remaining few days so that he would actually make it to retirement. **OKS**

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