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Make Drivers Part Of Your Safety Team
By Brian Schiavo

Prevent accidents by bringing drivers into your company's safety culture.

Truck drivers are the life blood of the food transportation business. Without them product would languish at the dock and thanks to the ongoing truck driver shortage, qualified drivers are hard to find and even harder to keep.

In addition, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration estimates that fatal crashes involving large trucks--with a gross vehicle weight greater than 10,000 pounds--have been rising by hundreds of incidents each year, since 2001. In 2005, there were 4,533 crashes that claimed the lives of 5,212 people.

With this in mind, it is in the best interest of a company to do all it can to keep its drivers safe while they're on the road. In order to do this, fleet managers have to not only examine the attitudes of the drivers they're employing, but they also have to examine their organizations' safety culture and the ways they can bring the two together.

"When you're someone who spends his days driving an 80,000 pound rig, you tend to feel like you're invincible," notes Michael Kolodzie, safety director at G&C Foods, a Syracuse, NY-based re-distributor of boxed beef as well as frozen, refrigerated and dry products. G&C maintains a staff of approximately 45 drivers.

"It's hard as a director to try and take that invincibility away from the drivers and say they have to take 10 hours off from driving because that's what the law says they must do," says Kolodize.

He adds that he's not trying to play big brother. "I try to coach them to follow the rules and directions because I don't want them to get hurt." The buy-in happens when he lets them know the company just wants them to get home safe to their families each day. "After that it's an easy sell."

The "bullet proof" attitude is even stronger with experienced drivers, according to Gary Petty, president and CEO of the National Private Truck Council (NPTC), Arlington, VA. According to Petty, this ingrained attitude can have serious repercussions for everyone on the road.

"They've been so successful at having never had an accident that they get overconfident," he says. "They overestimate their skills and underestimate the risks."

Petty explains that most of these drivers have never been trained in essential crash survival skills such as decision driving, crash avoidance and pre-emptive strategic visioning--which are specific skills that can dramatically mitigate a drivers' experience in an accident situation. The NPTC has been arranging training sessions for its members that demonstrates these skills.

Panic breaking, Petty says, is an all-too-frequent tactic that experienced drivers fall back on in crash situations that leads to jackknifing--a problem that could be avoided by encouraging them to develop more cautionary practices such as giving themselves more time and distance between the vehicle they are following.

"At only 29 mph, a tractor trailer still needs at least 460 feet to come to a complete stop," he says. "Realizing the physics of your equipment and braking capacity are critical."

Getting drivers to attend training can help them see how they overestimate their skill set and teach them new crash avoidance skills such as chop or shuttle steering--where the driver shimmies the steering wheel left/right/left/right in skid situations. "It changes their behavior," he adds.

Orient Toward Safety

Time and again, industry professionals point to the fact that if an organization changes its culture, it will change the level of safety the individuals in it experience--but the only direction it works from is the top-down.

"It really starts with our CEO and his leadership team," says Tony Montalbano, group director of safety division, for supply chain solutions at Ryder System Inc., Miami. "Their level of commitment has helped us earn our reputation for safety."

From there, the company's emphasis on safety works its way down to the drivers themselves. Ryder has found great success with indoctrinating drivers into their safety culture through computer-based training. It begins with eight hours of employee safety orientation that can be done remotely. When new employees arrive for work, they receive location specific information during the face-to-face orientation.

Every quarter the company has a 45-minute online training requirement for all of its 6,000 drivers to meet--these cover such topics as rollover prevention and space management. Ryder also posts a monthly training topic online. The most recent topic was driver fatigue. After the driver reviews the document, he must successfully complete a quiz on it.

"Since 2005 we've given approximately 100,000 online lessons," notes Montalbano. Having training through the internet allows Ryder's drivers to take the courses at their own pace, from home or from work. "It works especially well with remote drivers, who are unable to report to a location every day. In addition, doing it over the internet allows us to track who's taking the training."

Montalbano is able to create a scorecard report that utilizes the information (it uses the Protrend internet training program from ITI). Once a month he goes over the scorecard with all of his operations executives. The scorecard lists every team in his chain and the percentages for each team in terms of who has completed their monthly training sessions. "You want to be close to 100 percent on that call," he says. "That's how we drive accountability."

At G&C foods, monthly safety talks take the form of paper bulletins that are sent out with the drivers' paperwork. Topics have included subjects such as driving through construction sites and season specific topics such as slipping on ice.

Companies such as Mennel Milling Co., a Fostoria, OH-based milling company that produces a variety of hard and soft wheat flour products, rely on driver meetings to pass safety information to its rank and file.

"At our last driver meeting one of our older drivers related how he has moving from the left lane to the right lane, when an aggressive driver in a little car spun around him--even though he had his turn

signal on--and got up beside him. Our driver ran him right off the road because he couldn't see him back there," says Gary Strausbaugh, vice president of transportation for Mennele.

"So we got into a discussion about it at the meeting and the driver presented what he could have done differently."

Getting all the drivers together at one location at the same time can be difficult, Strausbaugh admits. "But we try and do it when we think we're going to have some downtime."

Safety Through Technology

Modern technology allows a company's safety culture to extend beyond the borders of its brick and mortar business, into the truck itself.

"The touch screen computer in the cab, as well as the onboard computer that's attached to the truck, sends information back and forth through the Internet," explains Tom Flies, senior vice president of product management for on-demand fleet software company XATA, based in Eden Prairie, MN.

Through its proprietary XATANet software, XATA collects vehicle information like speed, fuel consumption, RPMs, braking and mileage and communicate the information to driver and the office. "It's like a black box flight recorder, but for trucks," Flies explains.

Similarly, Manchester, NH-based Cadec's own Mobius TTS electronic tachograph feature provides fleet managers with information directly from the truck engine such as speeding, sudden deceleration and over-revving. This information drives Cadec's "Green-Yellow-Red" Report--which provides key performance indicators to fleet managers in an easy to address format.

"The report has a green, red, yellow visual scorecard based on how a driver's performance has been over time," says Frank Moreno, vice president of marketing and product management for Cadec. "Companies post the report in the driver break room so that they can see their performance against the company standard and against their peers."

One of the problems with employing technology-based safety solutions is that drivers can react negatively to something they see as an intrusion into their workspace--the cab.

"If you just drop the system in there overnight, you're going to have unhappy drivers," says the NPTC's Petty. "Some might quit, some might sabotage the system, and some might just grumble and plod on."

When implementing new safety measures, Petty and others suggest doing some test modeling with a small group of drivers--six or so. Typically, the test group ends up realizing how the new technology will actually protect them and make their lives easier. After that, the positive word of mouth spreads to the rest of the fleet and smooth adoption is assured.

Incentivizing Performance

With the new technology, fleet managers can find it much easier to reward positive behavior with such things as incentive-based pay.

"You can reward the guys on the leader board," says G&C Foods' Kolodzie, which utilizes the Cadec report on a monthly basis. "We're giving Duncan Donuts cards for being the most improved and for first, second and third places. Positive is the way to go."

Companies can also identify those drivers that need additional training in order to avoid such things as tail-gating and panic braking. Sometimes though, they don't need to.

"Their egos get involved if they're in the middle of the pack and they're not the best," says Kolodzie. His lower performing drivers actually approach him about their standings and want to know what they can do about the sudden decelerations they're having each month. "They don't want to be on the bottom of the report, meaning they have a lot of 'reds.'"

However, to maintain the safety culture at a company, officials need to be ready to step in and discipline drivers who may be engaged in unsafe behavior.

Mendel Milling's Strausbaugh has a system in place that involves pulling the unsafe driver into the back office and talking to him about the unsafe behavior he's been exhibiting and the corrective actions that he will be required to take.

"We have a series of progressive steps of discipline that we take if he doesn't correct the behavior," he adds.

The NPTC's Petty says to perpetuate a culture of safety, a company must regularly discipline drivers that break protocol by retraining or even removing them and, alternately, rewarding good behavior. "If this isn't done, the driver will say: 'If the company doesn't care, why should I?'"

Are You A 'Green' Or 'Red' Driver?

According to Frank Moreno, vice president of marketing and product management for Cadec, the following are driver behaviors that are consistent with safe driving practices and make a driver "green:"

- The proactive monitoring of truck speed;
- An increased anticipation of turns and stops (better knowledge of routes for fewer rapid decelerations);
- Shutting off of the truck engine during delivery, fueling, coffee breaks, etc.;
- Efficient shifting techniques;
- Using the on-board computer for electronic logs vs. paper driver logs;
- Switching from "drive" to "on-duty" status on the OBC during unknown stops to save drive time for Hours of Service compliance.