

A Fleet Safety Culture is Critical to Loss Prevention

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Whether you have a commercial fleet or use company vehicles to support other business activities, establishing and developing a proactive fleet safety culture is a valuable return on investment — it is the cornerstone of preventing potentially large losses. Following are some critical aspects in developing a fleet safety culture.

Commitment from Management

As with any loss prevention program, a clear management policy statement should be written and signed by upper management and communicate management's support and commitment to the fleet safety management program.

Demonstrated commitment of top management to a fleet safety culture can make a big difference in terms of insurance coverage. A few years ago, I was involved with the investigation of a large auto claim when a commercial vehicle collided with a much smaller passenger car, resulting in the death of the driver of the passenger car. The auto insurance carrier ultimately decided to not renew the policy for this firm, not because of the large loss this firm recently incurred but because management seemed to lack commitment and interest in developing a proactive fleet safety culture.

Rules, Policies and Regulations

Drivers of commercial motor vehicles used primarily in the transportation of perishable products have their own specific safety issues. Recently, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) made changes to hours of service which dictate that drivers must have 10 consecu-

tive hours off-duty; an 11-hour driving limitation, and a 14-hour on-duty limitation.

Two federal agencies in the U.S. Department of Transportation — FMCSA and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) — hold primary responsibility for developing and enforcing safety standards related to vehicle design and operation. Motor carrier safety is the responsibility of the FMCSA and minimum design and safety performance requirements of motor vehicle equipment are regulated by the NHTSA. Key provisions of applicable regulations should be incorporated in the company's fleet safety management program.

In addition, a set of safe driving behavior rules or "rules of the road" should be established and communicated to supervisors and drivers.

Selecting Drivers

Obtaining and reviewing Motor Vehicle Records (MVR) should be part of the driver selection process because of the statistical relationship between past and future driving behavior. However, the intent is not necessarily to identify acceptable drivers but to identify high-risk drivers. A history of accidents and traffic violations reflects attitudes and habits and can indicate if a driver is at risk of having a future accident. Many times I've asked company management if they're checking their driver's MVRs on an annual basis and they respond that they are. But soon after, it is often uncovered that no criteria have been established to help determine the acceptability of a person's driving record. Before obtaining MVRs, the benchmark of acceptable driving records must first be set.

Substance abuse screening, legal driving history and experience with other carriers are the top screening criteria based on

a survey of motor carriers with exceptional safety records. Remember, frequency of violations or accidents is a much better indicator of future accidents than the severity of a single accident.

The driver qualification and selection process includes the following steps:

- » Obtain and review an application form designed for drivers filled out in the driver's own handwriting.
- » Conduct a face-to-face interview to further evaluate the applicant's job knowledge and qualifications.
- » Obtain and check references to further assess past performance.
- » Obtain a valid driver's license compatible for the type(s) of vehicle(s) to be driven.
- » Obtain and review the applicant's motor vehicle record and determine if it meets your company's MVR criteria. Sample criteria might go back five years to include no more than two convictions for moving violations, no more than two preventable accidents involving personal injury or property damage, no major violations (excessive speed, committing a crime while driving, etc.) and no convictions for any controlled substance-related driving offense.
- » Administer a written test on traffic regulations.
- » Administer a driving test.

MVRs should be obtained and reviewed prior to hiring and at least annually thereafter. For CDL (Commercial Drivers License) drivers, medical examinations are required in accordance with the FMCS Regulations (49 CFR Part 391 Subpart E).

Training Drivers

A truth to keep in mind about driver training is the larger the fleet, the greater the

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frequency of exposure to accidents.

Training should include an orientation on company rules and procedures, new hire driver training, supervisory and management training, regulatory training, and continued in-service training.

An accident is most likely to occur during the first 18 months of a driver's tenure and many companies experience 30 to 40 percent of their fleet accidents from new hires. Therefore, employers should provide some level of driver safety training for all drivers, and new hire driver training should include a behind-the-wheel driving segment.

Supervisors and managers should receive the same driver training as drivers. Supervisors and managers should also receive instructions and training on how to conduct an observation/commentary drive. It's also a good idea for the fleet safety manager, supervisors and drivers to meet regularly to analyze the company's incidents and determine how their safety performance can improve.

Monitoring Drivers

Driver performance should be evaluated on an ongoing basis by monitoring drivers' hours of service in accordance with FMCSA, conducting ride-along observations and providing regular feedback and recognition.

Establishing a formal ride-along observation process provides an excellent opportunity to monitor driver performance, provide one-on-one coaching to drivers and provide constructive feedback, including verbal praise.

All CDL drivers are subject to the hours-of-service regulations (49 CFR Part 395) and must complete a daily log (and/or time sheet). Those without a CDL may not have to complete a log or comply with the hours-of-service regulations, but all drivers should manage their workday and workweek so that they are not driving when tired.

Since 80 percent of crashes are typi-

cally caused by 20 percent of fleet drivers, consider categorizing drivers based on their level of risk as a means to systematically allocate accident prevention resources. More resources such as training and supervision should be directed towards those drivers that have the highest risk profiles.

Maintaining and Inspecting Vehicles

Department of Transportation regulations require a pre-trip vehicle inspection at the beginning of each shift or trip. Drivers are responsible for the condition of the vehicle being driven and for the load. A thorough pre-trip inspection is important for several reasons:

- To ensure that the tractor, trailer, and cargo are not dangerous or a hazard to the driver or others on the road
- To ask any questions about the load and check shipping papers while in the yard
- To reduce down time and freight delays created by undetected mechanical problems
- To reduce vehicle maintenance costs

Federal and state regulations require certain inspection criteria, which should be provided or at least referenced in a fleet safety program. Such criteria include specific items to be inspected, frequency, procedures, and required qualifications of the inspector(s). Written vehicle condition reports should be completed at the end of each shift or trip. Reports should be handed in promptly so that repairs can be made before vehicles are driven again. Preventive maintenance should be performed in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations. An effective vehicle maintenance program will reduce down time and increase profit.

Substance Abuse Screening

CDL drivers are required by DOT regulations to participate in substance abuse

procedures. Such procedures need to be documented in a written substance abuse program and should include pre-employment, random, post-accident, for reasonable cause, and return-to-duty testing for controlled substances as well as specific substance abuse screening procedures as required by MVR.

Reporting and Investigating Incidents

Incidents and crashes should be reported and investigated immediately and drivers should thoroughly understand the organizations' protocol for reporting vehicle incidents. A primary purpose of investigating fleet incidents is to identify causal factors and trends and implement corrective actions to minimize the recurrence of similar incidents. Establishing an incident review committee is useful in reviewing incidents to determine their preventability, recommend control measures and analyze incident investigation data.

A checklist for drivers is also a helpful tool to ensure that all steps that need to be taken after a vehicle mishap are performed.

The Bottom Line

Management's commitment to establishing a thorough driver qualification and selection process, rules of the road for drivers, comprehensive training programs, driver performance monitoring and feedback processes, vehicle inspection and maintenance programs, substance abuse programs, and incident investigation procedures all contribute to a fleet safety culture. Companies that develop and maintain an effective fleet safety program may see fleet incidents drop by 40 to 50 percent initially and 20 to 30 percent on an ongoing basis.

To access a list of industrial hygiene consultants who specialize in fleet safety issues, visit the American Industrial Hygiene Association website at www.aiha.org and go to the consultants listing.