

Case Study 2: Medium Sized Metropolitan Transit Authority

Keywords: Safety Culture / Communication / Driver Health / Wellness / Transit

Transit is a complex undertaking. Large fleets of vehicles must move through public streets on coordinated routes and schedules, consistently and reliably, day after day. The operational challenge is monumental, even for a modest-sized agency. Transit is also a very public undertaking, being publicly funded, providing a public service, and operating large vehicles on public streets. Thus, the nature of transit operations (i.e., coordinated passenger movement in public) dictates an ever-present awareness and concern with safety. Phrases like “Safety – Security – Schedule” used by one transit authority to describe their philosophy capture this priority. Safety programs are usually (but not always) fully integrated into the driver hiring process (referred to as “on-boarding”) and completion is a condition of employment. This situation creates a continuum between safety programs and individual performance/human relations concerns.

There is a heavy reliance on packaged/commercial safety programs. Packaged programs, or slightly modified packaged programs dominate the industry. Transit agencies are highly networked with each other and highly risk-adverse. Industry practice is a common criteria and justification for selecting a given program, followed by previous experience with similar systems in other agencies. Modifications, when they are present, are usually hybrids of multiple packaged programs or a modest tailoring of a commercial package.

The primary traffic safety programs used by the transit industry are Smith System, TAPTCO (Transit and Paratransit Company, described as a bus version of the Smith System), and USDOT TSI (USDOT Transportation Safety Institute, TAPTCO is said to be TSI based). Programs are typically delivered as a mixture of classroom training, in-vehicle monitoring, and trainer/supervisor observation of revenue service (picking up fare-paying passengers).

The physical and physiological challenges of bus driving are recognized and well understood within the transit industry. Most agencies have some form of wellness program designed for bus operators. These are so fully integrated into the fabric of the transit business that they are not seen as elements of a safety program per se, though the link to safety is recognized.

Transit safety programs are of interest to other transit organizations or quasi-transit organizations (e.g., corporate shuttles) as benchmarks, and to general safety program managers for their use of packaged safety programs and the size of their operations.

This example is a transit system operating 127 buses and 92 paratransit vans. New hires (25% with CDL / 75% without) are trained for six weeks including a basic Smith System defensive driving / 5 keys based two day sequence consisting of 1 day of classroom – video based training and 1 day of field training. The safety segment is a standard Smith System “modified” for transit, meaning reduced from the seven day full system to the 1 day on emphasizing the 5 keys.

As is typical of transit authorities, there is close monitoring of “incidents” for HR purposes, but also for feedback into the safety training and other safety programs. Incidents are classified into “preventable” and “non-preventable” meaning the driver / authority are at fault or not. The impact for HR / driver responsibility is obvious. However, incidents are also tracked “statistically” to identify trends that may involve locations or routes (i.e., things beyond a single operator). These patterns are fed back into the training and safety communication process.

Safety communication: There are multiple mechanisms for (primarily operator) feedback regarding safety issues. One is a “trend analysis” by the risk management group. Trends are identified and then discussed at quarterly “all hands” (9 meetings over 3 days) training meetings. Issues are categorized for addressing into operator issues, area issues or behaviors. Another is a “safety drop box” that is checked daily / weekly and issues (e.g., hazards) identified and escalated to the appropriate group within the organization. Examples include problems with wheel chair ramp deployment (examine the hardware and possibly additional training) and “nose diving” (pulling in crooked so that the back of the bus hits things when it pulls out – additional training).

There is also a “fitness for duty” screening procedure, whereby the dispatcher or scheduler can assess an individual driver’s state of fitness for duty. These individuals have received “reasonable suspicion training” and can refer an operator to the next level of management for assessment or re-scheduling.

There is an active effort to implement a Hazard Management Program consistent with Federal regulations that extended the organizational safety procedures required of light rail to bus operations. (49CFR673 and related regulations referred to as the “promotion of safety”)

Regarding Wellness programs, there is an active wellness program, including wellness program managers and “instructors” at transfer hubs. There is no direct link to the safety training or safety programs. Employees get lowered health insurance rates for participation in the wellness programs.

Comments & Takeaways

- Safety communication: There are multiple mechanisms for (primarily operator) feedback regarding safety issues.
- Another is a “safety drop box” that is checked daily / weekly and issues (e.g., hazards) identified and escalated to the appropriate group within the organization.
- There is also a “fitness for duty” screening procedure, whereby the dispatcher or scheduler can assess an individual driver’s state of fitness for duty.
- Incidents are tracked “statistically” to identify trends that may involve locations or routes (i.e., things beyond a single operator). These patterns are fed back into the training and safety communication process.