

Case Study 5: Large Private Truck Fleet

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At the highest level, trucking is divided into for-hire fleets and private fleets. Within that typology, fleets are divided into trucks (sometimes called straight trucks, meaning a single unit vehicle with no trailer) and tractors (the powered part of the common tractor-trailer “semi” commonly seen on roadways). Trailers are also included in fleet composition, counted separately. Within this typology, there are the various industries these fleets serve. Note that this typology is slightly different from the one used by the trucking industry itself, which distinguishes between truckload (TL, the entire load delivered to a single location) and less-than-truckload (LTL, the load delivered to multiple destinations, including but not limited to package delivery).

The idea and importance of safety permeates the trucking industry. Every company is highly aware of the business impact of any negative publicity associated with trucking. This is also reflected in industry trade publications where public image is frequently mentioned and discussed. This is in addition to the obvious legal liability and regulatory impacts surrounding safety. Broad comprehensive safety programs (beyond those required for the commercial driver’s license [CDL]) are a condition of employment in virtually all trucking companies. There is a heavy reliance on packaged/commercial safety programs, but with a wide range of modification, elaboration, and tailoring. In one form or another, the Smith System dominates the industry. Modifications range from adjustments in focus and emphasis, to radical restructuring of the basic Smith System elements. For example, one company has a staff developed extension of the Smith System dealing with close quarter maneuvering which is unique to their business, fleet and operation.

Given the critical importance of safety in image as well as in fact, and the requirement of safety program/training completion as a condition of employment, the possibility of terminating a traffic safety program is not an option. Only incremental adjustments and/or re-training/remedial training elements are conducted.

Regulatory compliance and sound business practice require that incidents, including preventable crashes, be meticulously monitored and tracked in the trucking industry. Metrics often include near misses and behavioral infractions (called triggers in Smith System parlance). The line between individual performance (a human resources issue) and program evaluation (refine or refocus) is blurred and somewhat subjective. The two merge completely with re-training, which combines elements of both individual performance and program evaluation.

While all trucking companies are diligent with regard to safety and safety programs, some are aggressively pro-active, incorporating safety into the business plan as well as corporate culture.

This is a distribution network based company with locations nationwide. Each location has a few designated drivers, many delivery vans and pick-ups, and personal vehicles used by the sales force and management. The driver safety program and training is the same for all three groups of drivers.

All employees complete a Smith System based training course of one day including classroom and on-road element sections. There is quarterly follow up via videos. The program is administered and training provided by certified Smith trained employees (completing Smith's 5 day instructor certification course). There are approximately 500 locations with 10 to 90 drivers each. Each location has at least one trainer.

There is a supplemental Close Quarters Maneuvering (CQM) section developed by the company in cooperation with Smith. The Smith program was acquired over ten years ago. There were alternatives considered. The CQM supplement was developed in consultation with Smith based on incidents experienced.

There is limited program assessment. There is on-going driver evaluation using the Smith System keys. This is both compliance driven and program assessment, but at the individual level. (Effectiveness is treated as an individual issue and the program is adjusted or modified as indicated.) Incidents in general are tracked, and CQM incidents are tracked separately. Statistics are kept and used for both program refinement and individual employee (re)training.

Direct program assessment is not performed. Rather incidents are tracked and patterns fed back into the program / training process to address emergent issues. The CQM program element was itself the product of this procedure. The CQM itself is also monitored this way. CQM incidents are tracked and individuals retrained as deemed necessary.

To address ongoing specific incidents, this organization developed a special training segment on close quarters maneuvering (CQM) based on the experiences of their large vehicle drivers. Incidents are tracked and patterns are fed back into the training to address emergent issues. CQM incidents are tracked and individuals retrained as deemed necessary.

The CQM program consists of 14 drills that the trainers learn and pass on to employees. The method of implementing this aspect of the training indicates reflection on behavioral principals or learning theory, or at least an intuitive appreciation for these perspectives. The implementation of the CQM element of the safety program is based on short monthly installments and individual re-training as necessary based on incidents.

There is a general wellness program available and encouraged for all employees. However, there is no direct linkage to the driver safety program except for providing information about the wellness program during driver safety training.

Comments & Takeaways

- A critical aspect is the recognition that different vehicles have different safety challenges. The challenges vary between their larger vehicles compared to their smaller vehicle risks.
- Also, as part of this CQM program, this company recognized that their high risk employees have less than 3 years on the job, which for many industries is a long time (3-6 month probationary periods are common); they work hard to keep supporting “newbies” longer until they are out of their typical risk zone.