

Case Study 6: General Freight Carrier

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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.

There is rigorous pre-hire screening. The CDL is the absolute minimum / prerequisite. Once hired, the emphasis is on integration rather than orientation. The new-hire's fit into the company safety oriented culture is critical. There is a two week mentored training. Driver-trainer has veto authority. The driver and observer roles are alternated. Attitude, behavior, and company safety culture are the focus of the training.

There are weekly "vertical alliance" / "safety tailgates" (Monday). F2F quarterly. Meetings preceded by videos Sunday to all employees with quiz.

Peer to peer accountability is a critical element in the safety strategy. Top down support a given necessity. There is a driver committee that advises management on safety matters. Every supervisor coming in to contact with drivers going on duty has had "reasonable suspicion" training. The safety department is the entire organization! This is seen as providing "psychological safety" which is built on trust and also builds trust.

Company safety culture: Safety permeates the entire organization. Tactical, technical and behavioral issues are not equivalent to Safety. Training is not a program. Compliance alone is not enough. The company sees what other call "safety programs" as tactical elements in an overall safety strategy.

There are of course monitoring and tracking of incidents, but these metrics are on safety in general, not specific programs (tactics). The feedback from these metrics is used to personalize the process to change behavior. Goals like "Driving to perfection" dominate the conversation. Corporate thinking (culture and goals) are the driving concept (no pun intended). Great care was taken to distinguish between values and priorities. Analogous to qualitative and quantitative objectives? Zero injuries may be unattainable but to have anything less as a goal invites acceptance of injuries. Similarly, rules do not make a safety culture. Safety culture is not rules, it's a world view. Rules create a "wag the dog" situation where the rules become an excuse or distraction. Similarly for metrics, especially when used to undermine the "zero goal" philosophy. This focus does not ignore or minimize the use of technology, however. The company uses Lytx DriveCam monitoring technology extensively. Interior and exterior. This is seen as better than statistics since it is incident specific. Massive improvements in driver safety were obtained with the introduction of this monitoring technology. Liability advantages were also obtained when there were incidents. Information was transferred to personal behavior in the form of coaching or topics for the weekly safety meetings (safety tailgates).

Regarding the genesis of safety culture, the company was acquired in 2006. A rigorous safety culture initiative implemented in 2009 in response to a period of rapid growth which generated short cuts which in turn led to safety issues. A consultant was brought in and the all-encompassing safety culture was the response.

Regarding transferability and scalability: Size (i.e., too big) is seen as an excuse. So is public versus private and union versus non-union. The tactics may vary (aka specific "programs"), but the overall (cultural) strategy does not.

Wellness is a separate program, but is not seen as having an explicit link to the safety culture initiative. There are wellness elements in the safety culture in the form of “fitness for duty” assessments. However, these are not explicitly linked to the wellness program.

Comments & Takeaways

- Zero injuries may be unattainable, but this organization believes that anything less as a goal invites acceptance of injuries. Their management seeks all employee buy-in, not just drivers, so everyone focuses behavior beyond rules toward a safety worldview. Examples include, Sunday night videos followed by Monday morning “safety tailgate” informal safety meetings.
- These efforts are perceived as positive and for them, by the employees. They know that the company wants them safe. Another example is that monitoring technology has been used to help fight liability claims. These are also used as teaching moments about the road and driver behavior.
- Rapid growth can generate short cuts which undermines safety and creates safety issues. Rapid growth times are areas to take extra precautions.
- The company sees their safety programs are scalable and transferable. They consider size an excuse. They consider union vs. nonunion and private vs. public additional excuses. Safety culture is everything.