

Best Practices Approach to Driver Safety

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Introduction

Historically, traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for American workers. Nearly 25% of worker fatalities occur from vehicle collisions each year. Yet, driver safety rarely receives the same level of attention as other areas of employee safety. Fortunately, things are changing. Since the ANSI Z15.1 standard on driver safety was published, awareness of driver safety has been elevated. That's great news, since the problem must be recognized before it can be corrected. Once the problem has been identified, then what? Safety professionals must be familiar with the steps necessary to create a comprehensive fleet safety initiative that will improve employee safety. This article describes a 10-step, best practices approach that will help any safety professional create an effective driver safety initiative.

Step 1: Understand the Problem

To justify undertaking a driver safety initiative, it is necessary to understand the scope of the problem.

Consider these facts. In 2007:

- 6.3 million vehicle crashes were reported involving 12 million drivers.
- 3 million of those drivers were injured.
- 42,636 driving-related deaths occurred, which equals 117 deaths per day.

One in 15 average American drivers will be involved in a vehicle collision over the next year. One in 45 average American drivers will be involved in an injury-producing collision over the next year. And, 1 in 65 average American drivers will be involved in a fatal collision during their lifetime. But, is an employee driver really an "average" driver? Consider that the average driver logs 10,000 to 12,000 miles per year, while the typical business driver logs about 25,000 miles a year, placing the employee driver at much greater risk of a collision.

To determine your organization's crash history and risk level, first calculate the crash rate (the percentage of drivers involved in a crash annually), as well as the number of injuries, lost workdays and workers' compensation claims resulting from crashes.

Step 2: Set Achievable Goals

Successful driver safety programs have one thing in common: Driver safety is a pervasive part of the culture. Setting achievable goals will help develop such a culture and guide your organization to success.

Organizations that have a clear set of goals have had a much better success rate than companies who do not have goals set in place. Drivers who are aware of what is expected of them are more likely to keep these safety goals in mind while behind the wheel. This provides them with a clear idea of what is expected of them on a daily basis, therefore keeping them safer while on the road.

It is also important to establish the crash reduction goals on a quarterly, semiannual and annual basis. These goals must not only be realistic and attainable, but also challenging. Goals keep safety on the minds of drivers.

Step 3: Enlist Help

Understand that you cannot undertake a driver safety program alone. Seek help from employees in various divisions of the organization. For example, the human resources staff can help build a case for driver safety by emphasizing the human element of safety. Fleet management staff can also help justify the initiative, since they see the damage, lost assets and costs resulting from collisions.

Risk management staff should be involved; since managing risk is what driver safety is all about. If your organization's vehicles are insured, a reduced crash rate will result in reduced insurance rates. If the organization is self-insured, the savings from a reduced crash rate will fall directly on the bottom line.

Finally, involving the legal department is critical for two reasons: They can help ensure the initiative is within all applicable legal guidelines, and they can emphasize the benefits of driver safety in terms of the reduced exposure to litigation.

Step 4: Secure Management Buy-In

No initiative will work without upper management support. Senior managers control the money and they also set the priorities. If it is important to the boss, it will be important to the employee.

Most managers understand that creating a safe work environment is a fundamental requirement of running a successful business. The driving environment should be no exception. With management buy-in, much can be done to create the safest work environment possible for employee drivers.

To obtain management support, first articulate the human element: How vehicle collisions impact workers' compensation, lost workdays and quality-of-life issues. Next, quantify the return on investment from a driver safety initiative. Create math models that consider all losses resulting from crashes, including workers' compensation, lost productivity, litigation, and vehicle repairs and replacement. Industry sources estimate the cost of an employee crash at \$16,000, including \$10,000 in direct costs (e.g., property damage, personal injury and workers' compensation

claims) and \$6,000 in indirect costs (e.g., lost productivity and lost sales). Contrast those expenses to the savings that can be achieved with a reduced crash rate. The fiscal benefits of a driver safety initiative will soon become apparent.

Step 5: Develop Policies

You must also create fair and comprehensive driver safety policies such as driver's license requirements, standards for the frequency of driver's license records checks, hiring standards, an action plan for problem employees, training requirements and safety incentives.

By creating policies, Organizations have a clear understanding of what is expected from everyone and in turn not allowing senior management or top sales or service employees to become invincible to the rules.

Step 6: Run Records Checks

It is imperative that driver's license records checks be performed on all drivers. However, systems must be in place to help manage these records. You must also be prepared to take immediate action on drivers with poor records.

There are 50 states with 50 different motor vehicle codes, which makes it difficult to interpret driving records across states. Use a system that interprets these records and provides a common point system, assessing the same number of points for a given violation, regardless of the state. The points should be appropriate to the severity of the infraction (e.g., a stop sign violation may result in 2 points, while a DUI violation may result in 10 points).

You must also obtain information on your drivers' crash history, but keep in mind that only reportable crashes (those involving injury, death or the need to tow a vehicle) will show on a driver's record. For a true assessment of the driver's crash history, you need to capture all crash data.

Next, classify drivers into risk levels based on the number of points they have accumulated and determine the appropriate safety intervention for each group. For example, Level I drivers may be required to complete a computer-based training program, while Level II drivers may need a more active intervention, such as a classroom and behind-the-wheel program. A driver who reaches Level III may require a one-on-one training intervention; termination may also be a consideration.

Various industry suppliers can help conduct driver's license records checks, develop points systems, obtain crash data and provide safety intervention for drivers at different risk levels.

Step 7: Educate Drivers

Helping drivers who are having safety problems is a great way to teach accountability. However, it is not possible to hold drivers accountable if they do not have basic knowledge of safe driving. Drivers cannot be held accountable for an avoidable collision if they are not aware of safe driving

principles. Therefore, companies must provide drivers with safe-driving information, and maintain records on the safety education offered.

We recommend a comprehensive driver safety approach to any safety plan

- New-Hire Driver Training – Sets the bar for what is expected of the drivers.
- High-Risk Training – 80% of the problem is 20% of your drivers.
- Manager’s Training – Assists the managers on proper ride-along techniques and in turn allows the managers to see the value of driver safety training.
- On-Going Training – Safety must be kept in the forefront at all times to ensure your drivers are utilizing the safety training they have received.

Step 8: Begin at the Beginning

Statistics prove that new hires crash more often than tenured drivers. In fact, the crash rate for employees is especially high during their first 12 months on the job. This stands to reason, as new employees are learning new tasks, often in unfamiliar vehicles and in new surroundings. Learning the new job can also distract them, and they may be overloading their schedules to impress their employer.

Providing new hires with driver safety training from the start will help them stay safe behind the wheel. Doing so will also set the right tone, as the importance of safe driving will be elevated if the topic is part of new-hire orientation.

As with all driver-training programs, they should be designed with the idea that driving is two parts:

- Good Driving Skills.
- Proper Driver Attitude.

During the classroom training, driver attitude is addressed. Drivers learn that the most important task that they accomplish every day is to arrive at their destinations safely. Emphasis is placed on having the driver take responsibility of their actions when driving. They will understand that when they are driving they are in control of their well being. They will learn how to stay focused on the task of driving when they are behind the wheel.

The driving exercises will vastly improve the driver’s abilities and skills. They will learn emergency maneuvers that will help them avoid collisions while maintaining control of their own vehicle. They will learn how to react properly to the mistakes made by other drivers.

Programs should be customizable to fit the particular needs of the client. You will want to make sure that their problem areas are addressed.

Step 9: Address Field Managers

Managers who are directly responsible for the organization’s drivers can make or break a safety initiative. These managers may tell drivers, “Go, go go,” or “Safety first. Now, go, go, and go.” If safe driving is not important to a driver’s immediate supervisor, it will not be important to the driver.

Teach managers that they play a vital role in helping to keep employee drivers safe. Instruct them on how to conduct safety ride-alongs, in which they travel with the employee and provide a

commentary on his/her driving. Managers should conduct ride-along at least twice per year and include them in the employee's performance review.

For a fleet safety initiative to work, it is imperative that management is involved. Considering that mid-level managers have direct contact with the people who are driving the vehicles, it is easy to understand how they can influence the effectiveness of a safety initiative. If the manager discounts the importance of driving safely, the driver who reports to that manager will reflect that same attitude. However, if the manager emphasizes driver safety, the positive effects will soon be realized in the form of reduced accident rates.

Step 10: Sustain What You Achieve

Don't waste time, money and effort developing a driver safety initiative if there is no plan to sustain it. You might identify and address problem drivers, provide all drivers with initial training and achieve great results. Unless you keep driver safety in front of drivers, however, those results will diminish with time. Newsletters, e-flashes, periodic testing and recognition of safe driving are all effective measures that can help maintain a safety culture.

It's Worth the Effort

Developing a driver safety initiative is a challenging yet achievable task. Hopefully you now have some ideas on where to turn to improve driver safety. Driver safety is an area of safety that can make a big difference.