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The importance of a properly developed driver safety training program

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With telematics, global fleets have never been better connected, and data reporting has never been more simultaneous. Driver mistakes can be captured instantaneously from anywhere in the world. However, this data may lead some company administrators to mistakenly believe that by catching drivers "in the act," they understand the entire problem that must be addressed. They do not. Unless driver attitudes and behavior are targeted in training and then frequently reassessed, company administrators might not learn about an employee's propensity to speed, fall asleep, or weave through traffic until after a collision has occurred. At that point it is too late, because an organization has already suffered the cost of a mistake.

The reality of operating a large fleet is that some drivers will take unnecessary risks or fail to respond to other road users appropriately. Collisions happen as a result. Some organizations may accept this reality, but it does not have to be. The goal of a fleet should be to achieve zero collisions and zero injuries. To help achieve this goal, organizations need driver safety programs that are proactive. Fleets should offer an innovative, comprehensive solution for educating their drivers on the dangers of road risk and safeguard them from injuries and fatalities. An effective driver safety program should feature several key traits that directly address some of the main problems experienced by fleets.

Problem: Drivers perceive risks differently

A company's risk exposure is greatest where it has the least control over its business. For companies that employ drivers, this means public roads. These organizations rely on their drivers to make appropriate and safe decisions every time they leave the parking lot. One wrong choice by a driver can increase the risk of a collision. Until driver behavior is tested, it is difficult to verify what judgments drivers might make in high-risk situations. Avoiding crashes requires many skills, including constant vigilance, the right attitude, appropriate speed and space management, and hazard scanning ability. Unique factors affect driving choices and shape how each driver perceives road risk.

Prioritizing risk

Drivers might embrace risks known to be dangerous simply to offset other risks they fear more or over which they have less control. An example is an individual who intentionally runs a stop sign because their fear of missing a delivery is greater than their fear of a collision. Drivers may believe that they have no control over the likelihood of a collision, but that they have complete control over whether they adhere to a schedule. Taking risks that we think we can control to compensate for the risks that we cannot often satisfies an emotional response deep in the brain. To combat this problem, organizations need to clearly communicate corporate values through driver safety training. If an organization's corporate culture has made it clear to drivers that navigating the roads

safely is the highest priority, then drivers are more likely to prioritize the risk of a collision above the risk of anything else.

Responding to risk

What people perceive to be a risk and how they view the severity of that risk is subjective. We might process risk the same way, yet our perceptions of risk vary based on personal, and often unconscious, emotional knowledge. Trying to coordinate risk perceptions—especially in a large population—is difficult, because individuals make judgments about health and safety. Humans tend to underestimate familiar, immediate threats without realizing it.

Risk psychologists claim that how we react in an emergency is often predefined by our experiences and that our emotional and physical responses to risk are hardwired.[1] The brain filters information about an emergency through a warehouse of "unconscious emotional processes,"[2] which are feelings associated with sights, sounds, smells, or even words or memories. The brain unconsciously maps information about the existing emergency to a set of coordinated reactions based on past experience. This optimizes the individual for a quick-thinking response when a match is found.[3] These mental shortcuts are helpful for quick responses, but they hinder uniformity in judgment.

Mental shortcuts for drivers

One of the biggest challenges for drivers to overcome is overriding mental shortcuts that tell them that their actions are safe when they are not. Driving is one of the most dangerous and complex tasks people do every day, yet the act of driving can reinforce a driver's sense of being in control. In general, drivers tend to remember their dangerous behavior only when it led directly to a crash. In these instances, drivers often develop a negative association with that behavior and respond more cautiously in the future. However, if a dangerous behavior did not cause a collision, drivers may attribute their success on the road to good skill rather than good luck.[4],[5] Without a negative association tied to that behavior, drivers may fail to recognize it as dangerous and continue to exercise less caution than is necessary.[6] These beliefs can lead drivers to disregard or underrate the risks they face while driving, so they take fewer precautions or make other unsafe decisions that ultimately end in a crash. Furthermore, even when negative events do occur, they are often forgotten if the consequences were not severe enough to register a negative association in the driver's mind.

Program objective: Risks are categorized the same way for everyone

Fortunately, research indicates that it is possible to train the human brain "to react to a crisis in less emotionally-charged and more organizationally-savvy ways."[7] These predetermined reactions can be altered or replaced when the brain is given new, consistently reinforced information to map. An effective driver safety program should provide that information.

Many driver safety programs may target a dangerous behavior, such as following too closely, by establishing why it is dangerous and listing its potential consequences. Effective programs, however, should target the underlying attitudes surrounding why drivers continue to tailgate in the first place—they may have done it regularly without incident in the past and therefore mistakenly believe that the amount of space they leave is reasonable and safe. If fleets implement a driver safety training program that screens driver attitudes about risk, they can identify the dangerous beliefs that lead to risky decisions while driving. When trained to be aware of these beliefs before they are even on the road, drivers can then minimize the influence of these beliefs and make smart decisions while driving. Fleet managers can control neither the various factors drivers are exposed to on the road nor the specific

choices that drivers make in the moment. However, they can seek to standardize how drivers make these decisions before the situations arise by ensuring that drivers have been trained to understand risks the same way.