

Fleet Drivers And Their Organisations: Just how insane are they?

Drivers of company vehicles are more likely to be involved in crashes than private motorists, even when mileage has been taken into account, with as many as one in three road deaths involving someone driving while at work. It appears that fleet drivers are heavily influenced by the demands of their organisation - with time pressure being the number one contributor to at-work road crashes. Whilst children learn to deal with the world around them by watching and copying the behaviours of their parents and other role models whom they regard highly, employees learn to function in companies by watching and emulating the behavior of co-workers and managers who have achieved status, recognition and rewards. So, taking risks whilst driving is partly due to the expression of culturally consistent behaviours that have been learned and passed on to others at work. To reduce risk taking, we need to understand the root cause of organisational behaviour. In other words, what motivates a company to behave the way they do?

Seeing Things

In my work on helping organisations to improve their crash risk over the last 10 years, I have noticed characteristic patterns in the way companies behave. Many fleet drivers and their employers possess strong egos - both struggle for status, power and money in a climate of fear - fear of loss. The organisation fears loss of profits or status. Fleet drivers worry that they will lose their job if they can't cope with a high workload or fail to maximise revenue and/or status for themselves and their company. The organisation's



ego both feeds and feeds off the egos of their employees, reflecting the collective mind of the people it employs. In contrast, sane organisations develop a strong bond with their employees. They care about the welfare of their people, developing health and safety practices and policies that are designed to protect them. Most importantly, senior managers support and uphold them. By way of an unexpected reward, research shows that these sane organisations experience lower staff turnover, decreased levels of absenteeism and fewer crashes compared with those that operate in a climate of fear. Of course there are insane individuals working for both insane and sane organisations and recently there have been several published studies looking at the psychology of the risk-taking fleet driver. It seems that fleet drivers feel compelled to respond to tight schedules, construct stressful appointment diaries and drive without considering the risk of being involved in a crash. Their attitudes, beliefs and motivation towards work and driving lead to dangerous decision making processes on the road. People regularly let their feelings affect the way they drive. For

example, it's not fatigue that causes drivers to crash - it's their decision to carry on driving when they know they are sleepy. It's not time pressure that causes people to crash - it's whether a driver decides to speed or drive too close to other vehicles when they are late. To justify risk-taking behaviour, most drivers believe their driving is not dangerous and that they have the skills to cope with whatever comes their way - they feel invulnerable.

Losing Your Mind

This situation operates unconsciously and those that become conscious are often unwilling to step out of the insanity, take the pressure off and drive more carefully. They think there is a bigger risk at stake than the risk of being in a crash - the risk of losing their job if they don't keep up with their (sometimes self-imposed) workload. To lose one's job is a greater threat than the potential for being involved in a crash, because that risk is perceived to be more immediate and salient. Indeed, the way human beings perceive risk is full of distortion and inconsistencies. To influence this kind of behaviour, an organisation needs to raise awareness about how personal goals and

motivation affect decision-making and increase the risk of being involved in a crash. Increasingly, organisations are using online driver risk assessments to feedback behavioural and attitudinal risk. Those highlighted as 'at risk' may then be invited to participate in a group session to raise awareness of how their attitudes and behaviour can lead to a crash. Driver coaching uses the same principles, but on a one-to-one basis. Usually people avoid, deny or give in to their emotions, but if the driving instructor has been trained in certain techniques, fleet drivers can be taught to understand how their beliefs fail to serve them and how to learn from their emotions. Essentially, everyone has control over the way they feel - it's not driving or work experiences and events that *make* drivers respond the way they do, but their *interpretation* of their experiences. Some companies provide skills-based driver training. There are now several studies showing that this approach is not as effective as group discussions about risk, but perhaps the very act of engaging in driver training may send the right message and change behaviour. Skills-based driver training often produces a temporary change though, because drivers fail to internalise the reasons why they behave the way they do. There are also innovative new technologies such as internet-based e-learning tools to educate drivers about why the rules of the road have been constructed. A high fidelity video based hazard anticipation system has recently been launched by a2om to train skills in hazard perception rather than just testing them. Simulators are increasingly being used to address decision making for critical events, whilst



in-car data recorders keep tabs on drivers and feed back unsafe behaviour.

Reality

If there were saner organisations using the kinds of interventions outlined above, the new Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007 would not be necessary. Prior to the introduction of this legislation, organisations could only be convicted of manslaughter if a 'directing mind' at the head of the company was personally liable. The problem was that it proved difficult to find out who was actually responsible for decisions in individual cases, especially in large organisations. An organisation is now guilty of the new offence

if the way in which its activities are managed or organised, causes a death and amounts to a gross breach of duty of care to the deceased.

To improve the psychological health of an organisation, a strong safety culture must be adopted. Companies need to understand what their behaviours and attitudes really are, and how to determine the causatory factors that influence and then determine unsafe behaviour at work. Using all 'recipients' of the culture, from employees to stakeholders and customers, it is possible to 'map' out these behaviours and attitudes, linking each back to the relevant influence(s). This can be translated into a picture of the existing culture that can then be compared with the

'vision'. The gap between this and the existing culture then becomes obvious and the mapping process can be used to bring about a prioritising of what needs to be done to bring about the changes required. The Corporate Manslaughter Act is essential to address the current insanity and will function as the first step in the process towards reducing at work road risk - my only hope is that it is well enforced.

Get Involved

Addressing attitudinal and behavioural characteristics requires a level of skill that currently, driving instructors have not yet trained to deal with. The real benefit in the use of a self-assessment is the intervention put in place to

mitigate the risk it identifies. To address the skills gap, a 3-day Continuing Professional Development short course has been developed to train instructors in these competencies. Gaining knowledge about the human factors in driving is highly desirable - but being able to influence driver behaviour and attitude is even more crucial. Using these kinds of behaviourally based approaches to managing risk has the potential to make significant improvements in the frequency and severity of vehicle operator crashes. Organisations that cut costs by taking unjustifiable risks with people's safety are particularly vulnerable. **adi**

Dr Lisa Dorn graduated with a BSc in Human Psychology and was awarded a PhD on Individual and Group Difference in Driving Behaviour from Aston University in 1992. She was appointed Director of the Driving Research Group at Cranfield University and is a Reader in Driver Behaviour and Training. Lisa is an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, a member of the Association of Applied Psychologists, and has authored and co-authored many academic publications. She is also Research Director for a2om.

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