

Managing Unsafe Drivers and Their Unsafe Habits

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Introduction

Habit – (Noun) A settled tendency or usual manner of behavior. (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*)

We all have habits. The way that we brush our teeth, or comb our hair, the manner in which we put on our shoes and socks or the way that we prepare our coffee are all habits that we have developed over time. Most of these habits are developed because they work for us. They get the job done and we are comfortable with them. Most of these habits are inconsequential. Nobody cares how you put on your shoes and socks, or how you prepare your coffee. It doesn't affect them. The same cannot be said when it comes to our driving habits. The way that we drive can, and does, affect many people.

Drivers begin to acquire their driving habits from the first time they sit behind the wheel. Some of these habits are good, and some of them are bad. It is important to identify both. Once identified, we must work to retain the good (safe) habits and remove the bad (unsafe) habits. In order to be successful at this, drivers must utilize the four "R's:" **R**ecognition, **R**eplacement, **R**epetition and **R**etention. Drivers must first recognize their "bad" habits, replace the bad habits with good habits and then repeat this process until the good habits are retained.

Identify Your Problems

For those who manage organizations with employee drivers, it is important to identify the drivers who are causing the problems. It is not uncommon to find that most of the problems are caused by a small percentage of drivers. When identifying who the problem drivers are, keep it simple. This process does not involve smoke and mirrors. Check DMV records and obtain accurate crash histories for each driver. Make sure that you obtain the total crash histories for the drivers. There are two types of crashes – Reportable and Non-Reportable. The reportable crashes are those crashes that involve injury and/or are severe enough that vehicles must be towed. Non-reportable crashes are those that do not involve injury and the vehicles are driven away from the scene. Generally speaking, most non-reportable crashes do not appear on DMV records. By utilizing an accident management system, you will be able to obtain an accurate crash history of the drivers.

Once the "problem" drivers are identified, determine what habits are occurring that are causing the problems. This article will address some of the most common unsafe driving habits and provide practical instruction that will help drivers improve.

Driver Inattention

Paying attention is the absolute key to safe driving. According to The National Highway Safety Administration (NHTSA), 80 percent of all crashes and 65 percent of near crashes in the U.S. involve some type of distraction. Unfortunately, for many drivers, the actual act of driving becomes second nature to them. As a result, they fail to focus on the safe driving techniques that will help them arrive home safely each day.

There are two classifications of driver distraction – physical and mental. Most people are aware of the physical distractions of driving. Eating, reading, a disruptive child and the use of cellular phones are all examples of physical distractions. Less familiar, and less recognizable, are the mental distractions that occur while driving. The loss of focus due to work or family related issues, the inattention to driving that is created when a driver becomes angry by the actions of other drivers or the distraction that is created when a driver is running late. These are all examples of mental driver inattention.

Physical Distractions

Eating. It is not uncommon to see drivers eating a three-course meal while they speed down the highway. They have the burger, the fries and a drink that is large enough to extinguish a bonfire. The distraction of eating is bad enough, but what is worse is the distraction that is created from the spill. When the ketchup from the burger gets on clothes, or the giant sized drink tips over, there is a total loss of driver focus; all attention goes to the spill. You don't have to be a safe driving expert to figure out that this is unsafe. In reality, how long does it take to eat a burger and fries – ten minutes? Is it worth risking a vehicle crash just because you feel you don't have the time to eat before you drive? Take the time to eat, wash the grease from your hands and then drive.

Distracting Baby On Board. Kids can be a major distraction when driving. Examples of the ways that children can distract a driver include: a baby crying because of a wet diaper; a toddler screaming because they can't reach a dropped toy; and the brother and sister who are fighting because he or she touched the other. It is the driver's responsibility to stop the car and remedy the situation when a child's behavior is becoming a distraction. Also, children must learn from an early age that, when riding in a car, they must not distract the driver.

Phones. Cellular communication is a beautiful thing. With the development of cellular technology, our ability to converse has expanded to exceptional levels that were unheard of just a few short years ago. With this expanded ability to communicate comes a level of driver distraction that has reached epidemic proportions. As if eating, reading, and children weren't enough, cellular communications has taken driver distraction to a whole new level.

Numerous studies have shown that, a person talking on a cell phone is as likely to crash as a person who has a blood alcohol concentration of .08%. That is the assumed level of intoxication in all 50 states of the U.S. and all of the provinces of Canada. No sane person would condone a drunk driver getting behind the wheel. However, these same people see no problem with talking on the phone while driving. They create their own double standard.

The studies have also consistently shown that hands-free devices do not make the act of cell phone use while driving any safer. It is not the holding of the phone that causes the distraction; it

is the conversation that makes this act so unsafe. Some argue that using a hands free device is no different than talking to a passenger in the car. The studies have proven that this is not the case. Talking on the phone, whether hands free, or handset takes more of your cognitive concentration than talking to somebody sitting next to you. The States and municipalities that have banned handheld cell phones while driving, but allow the use of hands-free devices have created flawed laws. These laws are actually promoting unsafe driving conditions.

Another variation of the use of communications devices while driving is texting. Some studies have shown that if you are texting while driving, you are sixty times more likely to crash. It stands to reason, if you are holding a device and typing, your total focus is on what you are typing. You don't have your hands on the steering wheel and you are distracted. There is no justification or argument for doing this. It is unsafe and stupid.

Mental Distractions

The other type of distraction is mental. Whereas phone conversations and texting can cause mental distractions, the simple loss of driver focus is what is being discussed here. Our minds can wander when we are behind the wheel. We may start to think about work or family issues. We may start to daydream about an upcoming vacation or night out. We may get angry and lose focus on our driving due to the acts of other drivers. We center our attention on the other driver and fail to maintain our safe driving techniques.

Whatever takes our thoughts away from driving is dangerous. In order to combat this we must first recognize that it is occurring. Once we recognize that our minds are wandering, a simple way to regain focus is to verbalize what we observe while we are driving. Describe out loud the traffic that is around you. Verbalize any possible hazards as they occur. For example, you may observe and verbalize the following – There is a red car at the intersection. I am covering my brake in case it pulls out in front of me. This may sound strange, but by verbalizing your driving, it forces your mind to focus on your driving, and that is where your focus should be.

Reckless Driving

The vehicle code defines Reckless Driving as - The willful and wanton disregard for the safety of people and property. This is clearly a much more egregious act than distracted driving. Whereas distracted driving is extremely unsafe, reckless driving elevates this to a much higher level. This act involves the purposeful use of a vehicle in a manner that is out of control and is immediately life threatening.

Reckless driving can, and does, occur in response to the actions of other drivers. Tempers flare over a traffic incident and the offended parties drive aggressively towards each other. This type of behavior is ill advised and can end tragically. Drivers must learn to control their emotions when they are behind the wheel. If somebody cuts you off, let it go. If somebody is tailgating you, let them pass. The other driver's stupidity is not worth the risk of a crash.

There are those who are in the habit of making reckless driving a part of their routine. The person who is constantly running late and therefore drives in a manner that puts them, and everyone around them at risk is an example of a reckless driver. Many times a reckless driver is the driver who feels the rules do not apply to them. They speed on a regular basis; they accelerate towards red lights and routinely apply their brakes only briefly at stop signs. They weave in and out of traffic and create numerous unnecessary hazards.

Unfortunately, reckless drivers are some of the most difficult drivers to bring under control. Some will not correct their reckless habits until a tragic event occurs. In other cases reckless drivers will not change their unsafe ways until they are fined, have their driving privileges suspended, they lose employment driving privileges or they lose their jobs as a result of their reckless acts. For those who manage vehicle fleets, it is imperative to identify the reckless drivers in your organizations and take action before a serious incident occurs. With a habitual reckless driver it is not a matter of if they are going to crash, it is a matter of when they will crash.

Drunk Driving (DUI/DWI)

According to The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Approximately 18,000 people die every year in the U.S. as a result of drunk driving. About three in every ten Americans will be involved in an alcohol related crash at some point in their lives. The recidivism rate for drunk driving now stands at 33% in the U.S. In other words, of those arrested for drunk driving, 1/3 of them will be arrested again for the same offense. These numbers prove that drunk driving is a habitual offense.

There are those who routinely drive while intoxicated. Many of these drivers believe that, since they are “experienced” drinkers, the effects of alcohol do not apply to them. They could not be more wrong. One of the first things affected by alcohol is reaction time. For the average healthy human adult, an anticipated reaction time is approximately three-quarters of a second. For that same adult, one drink doubles their reaction time. If one drink doubles reaction time, just think what drinking to the point of intoxication does. Considering this, it begins to become clear why drinking and driving is so unsafe.

Even after being arrested for drunk driving, losing their licenses, paying fines, risking their careers and personal relationships and having to endure the humiliation created by being arrested, 1/3 of these people will repeat the offense. For many, drunk driving is a habit. Some are alcohol dependent and must seek help in order to defeat this enemy. Others are “social” drinkers who do not grasp, or choose not to grasp, the seriousness of their actions. Either way, it is vividly apparent that drunk driving is a scourge on our roadways.

It is imperative for safety managers to make sure that all potential employees are screened for prior DUI/DWI convictions. If they have a previous conviction, do not hire them. Considering the recidivism rate, why hire a problem? If an employee driver is arrested for drunk driving, make sure that you have strict guidelines in place regarding how you will deal with this. Involve you H/R Department and you legal advisors in creating these guidelines.

Red-Light Violations

As mentioned earlier in this article, there are those who drive aggressively which, in turn, lead to red-light violations. Aggressive driving is just one of the reasons for this type of violation. The other two are rushing and not paying attention. What makes a red-light violation so dangerous is the type of collision that it typically creates. Many intersection crashes occur at forty-five degree angles. The resulting injuries from these crashes are very often severe. Even with side-impact airbags that are standard equipment on many of today’s vehicles, the energy of the crash is not absorbed through the struck vehicle’s trunk or engine compartment. If a driver or passenger is hit on the door where they are seated, there will be a direct transfer of energy that is absorbed through their body. As stated before, this type of collision creates very severe injuries.

If as a driver you find yourself “pushing” red signals on a regular basis, you must evaluate your driving methods. If you are approaching a signal, and the first time you notice the light, it is already green, you have no idea how long that light has been green. At this point you need to scan the intersection, begin to prepare to slow down or stop if necessary and pick a point of no return. The point of no return is that point that, once you go by it, you will continue to go through the intersection. It is at a point where it would be unsafe to attempt to stop. By being more aware of your surroundings and approaching traffic signals with an idea of what you are doing, you will decrease your risk of being involved in one of these devastating crashes.

Speeding

At some point in time almost every driver speeds. It is almost impossible not to do so. Whether it was an inadvertent increase in speed, or a situation of going with the flow of traffic, almost every driver would have to honestly admit that they do occasionally speed. The “occasional” speeder is not the problem. The habitual speeder is what is being addressed in this paper.

There are those who speed because they are constantly running late. Those drivers need to evaluate how they are doing things. They need to get up earlier, allow more time between appointments, and stop overloading their schedules.

The other type of habitual speeder is the person who has a comfort level when going fast. It is their habit, and they are unfazed by the fact that the traffic they are passing seems to be sitting still. What this habitual speeder needs to realize is that, if they are involved in a collision, their crash forces at impact double for every ten miles per hour of speed. If they are traveling at an excessive rate, it will not be possible for them to survive a severe impact. Couple this with the fact that, although the vehicle is traveling faster, the driver’s reaction time does not increase. At a high rate of speed the driver may very well eliminate the ability to react in time in order to avoid the collision. They will just crash, and there is a high probability that they will die. Here is a suggestion – SLOW DOWN!

Safety managers need to be aware of the habitual speeders working for their organizations. Be diligent in checking motor vehicle records. If you detect a pattern of aggressive driving and/or speeding (They typically go hand in hand.) Take action to correct the situation. Provide training, have sanctions and involve the driver’s manager and upper management.

Fatigue

Some may not think of fatigue when discussing driving habits. However, in reality, there are numerous people who make a habit out of driving while fatigued. It becomes a part of their routine. They set a schedule and do not sway from it, even if that means driving at a time when they should be taking a nap. The habitual sleep offenders often use various tactics to keep themselves awake when they are behind the wheel. Slapping oneself, rolling the window down and/or turning on the air conditioning, turning up the music, and drinking inordinate amounts of caffeine are all methods utilized in order to defeat sleep deprivation. The fact is that all of these tactics are at best, short fixes. If these are the tactics that must be utilized in order to avoid falling asleep while driving, then they have no business being on the road.

The National Sleep Foundation estimates that 1.9 million drivers have fatigue-related crashes or near misses every year. Fifty-four percent of drivers surveyed have admitted that they have

driven while fatigued in the past year, and 28% have admitted to this offense within the past month. These are not just coincidence. Drivers are making decisions to drive while fatigued, and many of them do this habitually. As with the reckless driver, it is not a matter of if these drivers will crash, it is a matter of when.

If you know you have a long drive ahead of you, work your schedule so that you can rest prior to the drive. If you have not had enough sleep, don't drive. Even when you have had enough sleep you should stop at least every two hours to refresh yourself. Get out of the vehicle, stretch, wash your face and get that cup of coffee. This will energize you and make you a much more alert and safe driver.

Safety managers need to be aware of the challenges that face their organization's drivers. Be aware of demanding schedules that may lead to fatigue related driving. Work with your organization to identify and eliminate these risks.

In Conclusion

Habits, we all have them, both good and bad. This paper has pointed out some of the most common bad habits that are exhibited by drivers. This writer takes a pretty hard stand when it comes to offenses, such as using a cell phone while driving, DUI/DWI, and reckless driving. As a former police officer, a motor vehicle crash investigator and a driver safety professional, I have seen the consequences of bad driving habits. Driving is a skill that must be worked on every time we get behind the wheel. We must be diligent in our efforts to improve. Remember the "Four-Rs: **R**ecognition, **R**eplacement, **R**epetition, **R**etention. Get rid of the bad habits and replace them with the good. It truly does come down to each driver making a decision to drive safe or to drive unsafe. It's a choice that we all have to make.

There are very few things in life that can change so many lives as quickly as a vehicle crash. What takes fractions of a second to occur can cause devastation that, for those who are left behind, are not recovered from in a lifetime. Do I take a hard stand when it comes to driver safety? I guess I do. I can't help myself, that's my habit.

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