

Managing Unsafe Drivers & Their Unsafe Habits

By Philip R. Moser

Habit: (*n*) A settled tendency or usual manner of behavior. We all have habits. The way we brush our teeth, comb our hair, put on our shoes and socks, or prepare our coffee are all habits developed over time. Most habits are developed because they work. They get the job done and we are comfortable with them. Most habits are inconsequential. Nobody cares how you put on your shoes and socks, or how you prepare your coffee. These habits do not affect others.

The same cannot be said when it comes to driving habits. The way we drive can, and does, affect many people. Drivers begin to acquire habits from the first time they sit behind the wheel. Some habits are good, some 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. To be successful at this, drivers must utilize the four Rs: recognition, replacement, repetition and retention. Drivers must first recognize their bad habits, replace them with good habits, then repeat this process until the good habits are retained.

Identify Problems

For those who manage organizations with employee drivers, it is important to identify the drivers who are causing the problems. Typically, most of the problems are caused by a small percentage of drivers. When identifying the problem drivers, keep it simple. Check Department of Motor Vehicles records and obtain accurate crash histories for each driver; make sure you obtain drivers' total crash histories.

The two types of crashes are reportable and nonreportable. Reportable crashes involve injury and/or are severe enough that vehicles must be towed. Nonreportable crashes do not involve injury and vehicles can be driven away from the scene. Most nonreportable crashes do not appear on DMV records. Utilizing an accident management system helps obtain an accurate crash history of the drivers.

Once problem drivers are identified, determine what habits are the problem. This article addresses some common unsafe driving habits and provides practical instruction to help drivers improve.

Driver Inattention

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

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

Physical Distractions

Eating. It is common to see drivers eating while they speed down the highway. The distraction of eating is bad enough, but what's worse is the distraction created by a spill. When the ketchup from the burger gets on clothes, or the giant-sized drink tips over, a driver loses focus; all attention goes to the spill. You don't have to be a safe driving expert to realize that this is unsafe. How long does it take to eat a burger and fries, 10 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, then drive.

Children. 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 he can't reach a toy; siblings fighting because one touched the other. It is the driver's responsibility to stop the car and remedy the situation when a child's behavior becomes distracting. Also, children should be taught from an early age that when riding in a car, they must not distract the driver.

Phones. With the development of cellular technology, humans' ability to

communicate has grown exponentially. This increased ability to communicate brings with it a high level of driver distraction. As if eating, reading and children weren't enough, cellular communication has taken driver distraction to another level.

Many 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 legal limit in all U.S. states and Canadian provinces. No reasonable person would condone a drunk driver getting behind the wheel. However, these same people often see no problem with talking on the phone while driving.

Studies also have consistently shown that hands-free devices do not make the act of cell phone use while driving any safer. Holding the phone is not what causes 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. Studies have proven that this is not the case.

Talking on the phone, whether hands free or not, takes more cognitive concentration than talking to a passenger. 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 communication devices while driving is "texting." Some studies have shown that a person texting while driving is 60 times more likely to crash. It stands to reason that if you are holding a device and typing, your total focus is on what you are typing. You do not have your hands on the steering wheel and you are distracted. No justification or argument can be made for doing this.

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. A driver may start to think about work or family issues, or daydream about an upcoming vacation or night out. S/he may get angry and lose focus due to the acts of other drivers. This can cause the driver to center his/her attention on the other

driver and fail to maintain safe driving techniques.

Whatever takes a driver's thoughts away from driving is dangerous. To combat this, a driver must first recognize that it is occurring. Once you recognize that your mind is wandering, a simple way to regain focus is to verbalize what you observe while driving. Describe aloud the surrounding traffic. Verbalize any possible hazards as they occur. For example, 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 verbalizing driving forces the mind to focus on driving, where the 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 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 toward each other. This type of behavior is ill advised and can end tragically. Drivers must learn to control their emotions behind the wheel. If another driver cuts you off, let it go. If someone is tailgating, let that driver pass. The other driver's actions are not worth the risk of a crash.

For some, reckless driving is routine. The person who is always late and, as a result, drives in a manner that puts him/herself and others at risk is an example of a reckless driver. Often, reckless drivers feel the rules do not apply to them. They speed on a regular basis, accelerate toward red lights and routinely apply brakes only briefly at stop signs. They weave in and out of traffic and create numerous unnecessary hazards.



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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, lose their driving or employment driving privileges, or lose their jobs as a result of their reckless acts.

Those who manage vehicle fleets must identify the reckless drivers in the organization and take action before a serious incident occurs. With habitual reckless drivers, it is not a matter of if they are going to crash, it is a matter of when.

Drunk Driving

According to NHTSA, approximately 18,000 people die each year in the U.S. as a result of drunk driving. About three in every 10 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, one third will be arrested again for the same offense. These numbers prove that drunk driving is a habitual offense.

Some people 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, the anticipated reaction time is about three-quarters of a second. For the same adult, one drink doubles the 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 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, one-third of these drivers will repeat the offense. For many, drunk driving is a habit. Some are alcohol dependent and must seek help in order to overcome the addiction. Others are "social drinkers" who do not (or choose not to) grasp the seriousness of their actions. In all cases, it is vividly apparent that drunk driving is a serious hazard on the roadways.

Safety managers must make sure all potential employee drivers are screened for prior DUI/DWI convictions. If a potential candidate has a previous conviction, do not hire the person. Considering the recidivism rate, why take the risk? If an employee driver is arrested for drunk driving, make sure strict guidelines are in place on how to deal with this. Involve human resources and legal advisors when creating these guidelines.

Red-Light Violations

Aggressive driving also can lead to red-light violations. Aggressive driving is just one reason for this type of violation. Other reasons 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 45° angles. The resulting injuries from these crashes are often severe. Even with side-impact airbags—standard equipment on many vehicles—the energy of the crash is not absorbed through the struck vehicle's trunk or engine compartment. If the door is hit where a driver or passenger is seated, the occupant's body will absorb a direct transfer of energy. This type of collision creates severe injuries.

As a driver, if you "push" red signals regularly, 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 it has been green. Scan the intersection, begin preparing to slow down or stop if necessary, and determine a point of no return beyond which you will continue through the intersection. It is the point at which attempting to stop would be unsafe. Being more aware of surroundings and approaching traffic signals with an idea of what you are doing will decrease the risk of being involved in a crash.

Speeding

At some point, almost every driver speeds, whether an inadvertent increase in speed or simply going with the flow of traffic. The occasional speeder is not the problem; the habitual speeder is.

Some drivers speed because they are constantly running late. Such drivers must 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 is comfortable driving fast. This person has a habit and is unfazed by the fact that the traffic s/he is passing seems to be sitting still. Such a driver must realize that in the event of a collision, the crash forces at impact double for every 10 mph of speed. If traveling at an excessive rate, surviving a severe impact is impossible.

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 well eliminate his/her ability to react in time to avoid a collision. S/he will simply crash (and likely die).

Safety managers must be aware of workers who are habitual speeders. 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. Provide training, impose sanctions, and involve the driver's manager and upper management.

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Fatigue

Some may not think of fatigue when discussing driving habits. However, many people drive while fatigued. Often, 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 resting.

Habitual sleep offenders use various tactics to keep themselves awake behind the wheel, such as slapping the face, rolling the window down and/or turning on the air conditioning, turning up the music and drinking large amounts of caffeine. Such tactics are short fixes at best. If these tactics must be used to avoid falling asleep while driving, the driver should not be on the road.

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

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

When faced with a long drive, plan to rest prior to the drive. Do not drive without enough sleep. Even when you have had enough sleep, stop at least every 2 hours to refresh. Get out of the vehicle, stretch, wash your face or get a beverage. This will help 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 the organization to identify and eliminate these risks.

Conclusion

Few things in life 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 left behind, are not recovered from in a lifetime.

We all have habits, both good and bad. This article points out some common bad habits exhibited by drivers. Driving is a skill that must be worked on each time drivers get behind the wheel. Drivers must be diligent in the effort to improve and must remember the four Rs: recognition, replacement, repetition, retention. Replace bad habits with good ones. It truly does come down to each driver making a decision to drive safely or unsafely.

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