Direct Supervisor Safety Coaching
You Cannot Automate Excellence

By Art Liggio

Big data for fleets is here: motor vehicle records, telematics, crash data, video tracking, electronic logs and more. As a result, fleet management and safety professionals have access to a wide and deep expanse of information that measures drivers' activities behind the wheel. Many of these data are formulated with risk severity intelligence built in so that fleet operators can identify at-risk drivers in a timely manner. When these multiple data sources are incorporated into a risk-level profiling mechanism, fleet operators are provided with valuable, actionable analysis.

Armed with this analysis, many firms attempt to automate the intervention process so they can readily remediate drivers with unacceptable risk levels. These automated interventions can range from pushing out an online alert to the driver about an infraction, such as speeding or hard braking, to automatically assigning online training related to an infraction.

Data-Driven, Command-&-Control Policy Enforcement Falls Short

In many ways, an automated process provides initial and short-term results, as long as the driver is aware that s/he is being monitored, in this case by technology. As the Hawthorne experiments in the 1920s showed, workers often modify their behavior and increase productivity in response to their awareness of being observed (Harford, 2013; Landsberger, 1958). Many subsequent studies found that the novelty of increased attention produces only temporary behavioral changes. For fleet operators, this is a cautionary tale that relying only on automated monitoring interventions will not likely lead to meaningful and sustainable results.

A command-and-control approach sees drivers as a problem to be controlled rather than as contributors to the solution. The premise is that drivers are the cause of incidents because they do not follow the rules. Over time, as safety procedures seek to control driver behavior and command change, performance will peak at a point where drivers begrudgingly achieve a level of compliance. Despite the short-lived re-sults, some fleet operators use a policy enforcement strategy that depends on automation to manage safety programs: Feed the business rules into the system, flip the switch, pull in driver data and let the system follow up with drivers.

Flip the Automation Switch, But Plug People In, Too

Technology has a role to play. Ideally, however, it should be a starting point in an organization's driver safety initiative, not the end point. To provide balance and deploy an end-to-end solution, safety administrators should adopt a people-centric focus as well. In this model, the organization engages all involved parties in a continuous communication process whereby individuals collaborate on shared goals to collectively and willingly contribute to increased performance levels.

Leveraging technology to support a people-centric approach can deliver exceptional results.

Leveraging big data and technology to support a people-centric approach can deliver exceptional results and nurture a culture of safety. So, turn the automation switch on, but plug in additional policies and procedures that engage people and vest them in superior results. A highly effective method is for immediate supervisors to take a central role in this process. Engaging the driver and supervisor in a safety partnership is an effective catalyst to personalize safety.

Using Direct Supervisor Safety Coaching

Direct supervisor safety coaching is designed to remove communication barriers between a supervisor and driver regarding safety issues that directly put that driver at risk. Building on the fleet's safety policy action plan, this method encourages personal integrity. It helps drivers become cognizant of behind-the-wheel decisions, draw objective conclusions about their performance and thereby achieve the self-awareness necessary to make positive, discernible changes in the way they operate a vehicle.

To be effective, this process must be simple enough for nonsafety personnel to implement, involve minimal time commitments and, along with results, provide a sense of personal accomplishment for all involved.

As the coaching process begins, the supervisor must be mindful that an employee may enter the session feeling stressed and wondering: "Why am I here?" "What have I done wrong?" "Is my position at risk?" So, before the process begins, the supervisor should explain that the company is concerned that all drivers arrive at their destinations safely; that the purpose of the meeting is to review current driving history to ensure that the information is accurate; and that the goal is to identify, together, opportunities for improvement. The supervisor must be nonjudgmental, help the driver build self-esteem, seek involvement, and facilitate communication by asking open-ended questions and listening empathetically, then confirm understanding of the driver's responses.

This coaching method will take the supervisor and the driver through a four-step process.

Step 1: Observe

To start, the supervisor should present the details under review and confirm with the driver that the information is accurate. Then, in a nonjudgmental manner, the supervisor should ask the driver to discuss what led to the incident(s) without feeling the need to edit the details.

For example, a driver receives a ticket for failing to observe a stop sign. As the driver explains the situation, the supervisor may learn that the driver slowed but did not stop before proceeding or simply did not see the sign. Recognizing these variations can offer important insight for use during the next step.

Using this feedback, the supervisor can help the driver understand whether s/he has a poor attitude toward traffic controls or perhaps suffers from distracted driving. Before proceeding, the supervisor should repeat the driver's key points to confirm understanding.

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Step 2: Gain Insight

In the second step, the supervisor asks the driver open-ended questions to further assess the incidents under review. The questions should challenge the driver to consider how inappropriate behaviors and actions can significantly affect his/her life and the lives of others on the road. Here is a potential scenario:

Supervisor: Let's talk about your ticket for failing to obey a stop sign. Any idea why you disregarded the sign?
Driver: I don't know. When I got stopped, I told the officer that I did not see a sign and asked if it was obstructed from view. He kind of laughed and kept writing the ticket. After the officer left, I looked and sure enough, the sign was clearly there. Not sure why I didn't see it the first time. Maybe I was distracted.
Supervisor: How do you feel about that?
Driver: Upset with myself. That was a $100 ticket.
Supervisor: What else bothered you?
Driver: Nothing at the time. But when I got home and told my wife she said I was lucky that I didn't get hurt or hurt someone else.
Supervisor: How do you feel about that?
Driver: She's right. I need to be more careful and pay attention.

In this example, the supervisor talks little but turns the brief exchange into concern for the driver on an emotional level. This is key, as the primary motivators for making important changes are often emotionally based. Before the next step, the supervisor should again confirm understanding of the driver's comments.

Step 3: Reach Agreement

So far, the supervisor has confirmed that the incident information is accurate, received a factual description of what occurred and helped the driver reach his own conclusions regarding the risk. The stage is now set to involve the driver in acknowledging the need to improve.

With some prompting and review, the supervisor should encourage the driver to reflect on the incident and personally reach a conclusion that a positive change is needed. It then becomes the driver's own goal to be safer behind the wheel. This is a more powerful and lasting motivator than fault being automatically assigned through data analysis alone. Let's see how this might play out:

Supervisor: Based on what you've explained, you are not intentionally ignoring traffic signs, but you may not always be focused on your driving responsibilities, such as staying alert and paying attention to what is happening around you. Is this a fair assessment of what you shared?
Driver: After talking through this today, I think it is.
Supervisor: Can you think of any other times when this problem occurs? How about when you're driving to a job and you have other guys in the cab? Does the same thing happen?
Driver: Actually, sometimes I can't recall the ride to the job. It's a blur.
Supervisor: So based on your observations of these events and other driving situations, would you say that you tend to be easily distracted?
Driver: This is tough to admit but, yeah, I think so.
Supervisor: This isn't a new issue among our drivers. Distracted driving, not paying attention to what is most important while operating your truck, is a major factor in about 25% of all crashes. Would you agree that it's important to avoid distractions while driving?
Driver: Yes, I do, but I guess I just never connected the dots and realized what I was doing.
Supervisor: So, in your own words, why do you feel it will be important to work on avoiding distractions?
Driver: Well, as you said, I don't want to be a crash statistic. Plus, I appreciate our company's philosophy that we need to arrive at our destinations safely each and every time.
Supervisor: Anything else?
Driver: I know my wife and kids depend on me, so ending up in a hospital or worse from a crash would be terrible. Plus, it would be awful if any of my crew got hurt because I missed something.
Supervisor: Good points. Why don't we develop a safety action plan to help improve your focus? I'd like to hear your suggestions regarding this.

Step 4: Action Planning

The final step in the coaching process is to have a two-way discussion with the driver about ideas for improving his/her performance. The company can layer in its fleet safety policies (e.g., completing a distracted driving e-lesson) into this final step. However, make sure the action plan is crafted so that it becomes the driver's own plan, is measureable and calls for regular reviews.

The four-step coaching method is now complete. A people-centric model can help an organization reach higher levels of safety performance. The fact that management demonstrates a genuine interest in employees' safety and commits time to the process will potentiate the results from a data-driven safety program. Turn on the data switch, then engage people for the brightest outcome.

References

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