

Beyond The Cab

The only safety management newsletter dedicated exclusively to addressing injury prevention and workers' compensation cost control for trucking companies.



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Beyond Preaching “3 Points of Contact”

“The driver fell while getting out of his truck.” Does this sound familiar? You or I can pick up the loss runs from just about any trucking company and see this exact scenario (often multiple times). It’s the most common workers’ compensation claim submitted from trucking companies. Some estimates suggest that 25% to 35% of all work-related injuries in the trucking industry are slips and falls from stationary vehicles.

However, the frequency with which these injuries occur is not the problem in a nutshell... there’s more. When a driver falls from his road unit or his trailer, he’s falling from a significant height. This often results in some sort of strain, sprain or even fracture for which the driver’s treating physician may prescribe time off work (or at least restrict the driver from operating a truck for a couple of weeks). Meanwhile, workers’ compensation benefits build-up, and potentially causes your future premiums to increase.

The traditional approach has been to either do nothing (believing that these accidents just happen and that there is nothing that can be done to prevent drivers from occasionally slipping and falling from their unit), or to routinely remind drivers to maintain “3 points of contact” when getting in and out of their truck.

Of course the latter is preferable. But is it effective? Have the companies that preach “3 points of contact” eliminated (or even significantly reduced) falls from trucks? If successful, has the initial effectiveness of this approach been sustained, or instead has it declined at the same rate at which safety directors realize that it is not the “silver bullet” and drivers simply tire of hearing it over and over?

Just as the advise, “*Lift with your legs, not your back*” has become such a cliché that it discounted as a trite and almost meaningless statement, so has “*Maintain 3 points of contact*” become a cliché for preventing falls from trucks.

Based upon the industry-wide prevalence of the problem and the existing widespread practice of preaching “3 points of contact,” it can safely be stated that this single-prong method of confronting the problem is at best insufficient.

Does that mean that there’s anything wrong with the message? Absolutely not... Without maintaining three points of contact, a driver who missteps or slips when getting out of his truck will only have one foot or one hand to keep him from falling. In such circumstances the driver is frantically trying to grab the door or handhold with his free hand, while the forces of gravity are causing his body to fall away from the truck. The result is typically a severely strained shoulder from attempting to hold a 200-pound falling object with one arm and only a split-second warning. For drivers who are not successful in preventing their fall a sprain, strain or even a fracture may result from the fall... not to mention a bruised ego (which is not compensable as a workers’ comp claim).

What’s needed is for safety directors to attack this problem like an enemy that must be defeated. Instead of relying upon a single-prong attack we must challenge ourselves to attack this problem from as many flanks as possible.

Start by assessing this issue within the context of new-hire safety training. Are you giving lip service to the topic or throwing in a safety video that addresses the issue? You know from your own experience in being a trainer (and in being a trainee) that both of these methods of training, although not too time consuming, yield limited results. We need to move beyond the superficial treatment of this topic while the new driver is sitting in our training room thinking about when he gets to go home. Get both the attention of the new driver and the results that come from interactive training by incorporating this training with each road test. That’s right. Instead of simply telling new drivers what to do, have them demonstrate to you how they enter and exit the cab, correct their deficiencies and have them repeat it until you are satisfied with their performance. If done with a serious attitude, this will stick in the mind of the new driver longer than any safety video.

Next consider the training that has been provided in the past to your existing drivers. Since the same results are desired, why not apply the same training methods? You may even consider training existing drivers to conduct this training in the future. Remember that we learn best when we are placed in the position of training someone else.

Another prong to this attack may be to observe drivers and provide feedback. If you see a driver doing just one thing right... such as facing the cab while getting out, or placing items in the passenger side floorboard before getting in... provide affirmation. In the same way provide drivers with immediate corrective instruction when you see them getting in or out of a truck improperly.

Yet another prong to the attack may be to use check-stuffers or newsletters to remind drivers about the means of preventing falls from stationary trucks. This can all be done without even mentioning “3 points of contact.” You can elaborate upon always facing the cab, never jumping, using both handholds, wearing shoes that don’t easily become slippery, ensuring that the ball of the foot is firmly on the step tread, testing the step to determine if it is slippery before getting out, keeping the floor of their cab free of things that could cause tripping, etc.

Want more ways to attack the problem? If you have drivers who have fallen from their truck in the past, capitalize on their misfortune. Encourage these drivers to explain to other drivers how or why they fell, what they could have done to prevent it, and what they have done to prevent this from happening to them since then.

To attack the issue from yet another flank, include having each driver point-out the positive and negative aspects of the equipment that he or she drives, such as the condition of handholds and steps and the characteristics of the step tread.

Of course this is not a comprehensive strategy for attacking the #1 workers’ compensation problem in the trucking industry. Many more prongs to the attack are possible. It does, however, demonstrate that we should no longer rely alone upon preaching “3 points of contact.” Instead, we should challenge ourselves to attack this problem from as many flanks as possible.