

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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Drivers ~~Defensive Driving~~

Each month, this newsletter addresses some aspect of injury prevention or workers' comp claims management specifically for the trucking industry. If you've been applying some of the things that have been recommended through this newsletter, you're probably no longer content with gathering the bare minimum information required to complete a claims form. In fact, you're probably no longer sitting behind a desk, listening to a driver tell you that he fell from his trailer; strained his back while pulling the tandem slider; or slipped while getting out of his truck. Instead, you're standing beside the driver on a gravel lot as he "demonstrates" what happened. You then probably follow-up with a series of questions that help you understand the circumstances that surround the incident, leading up to a question for which you're genuinely seeking an informative and useful answer.... *"What can be done to prevent a similar incident from occurring again?"*

If you're doing these things... GREAT! But if you and your drivers are new to this approach, there may be an unintended and undesired consequence. Drivers may misinterpret your what you're doing and become defensive.

Consider the following example: Harry Thomas, a 5-year employee of XYZ Trucking Company, reported a shoulder injury from pulling a fifth-wheel release. The Safety Director asked Harry to demonstrate how the injury happened (to the extent that he is able without aggravating the injury). Immediately, Harry threw-up a proverbial wall of defensiveness, claiming that he was pulling

the fifth wheel release properly and that he had done it thousands of times before. In short, Harry feels that the Safety Director is trying to find fault with him, and Harry has no problem expressing his feelings.

Any number of things could have contributed to making Harry defensive. Perhaps he had recently been made to feel targeted by a dispatcher or customer. Perhaps the demeanor of the Safety Director, or the words he used when speaking with Harry were poorly chosen. Or, perhaps XYZ Trucking Company has played the "blame game" for so long that it's what drivers expect.

Regardless of the factors that lead to defensiveness, understand that it presents a roadblock to cooperation and effective injury prevention efforts... particularly for trucking companies that must rely upon the cooperation of an unsupervised workforce. For that reason, it should be comforting to know that there are specific steps that can (and should) be taken to prevent a driver from becoming defensive when discussing a work-related injury.

First and foremost, before discussing an injury with a driver, take the time to put him at ease. Remind the driver that you are interested only in preventing a recurrence of the accident and that you can do this only with his assistance. Convince the driver that what you are seeking is a joint effort to prevent other accidents that could be far more serious.

Throughout the process, exercise caution not to make judgmental remarks. This will only put the person on the defensive and defeat the whole purpose of your inquiry.

Let the driver tell you what happened, in his own words. Don't interrupt to clarify ("are you saying that..."), interpret ("in other words...") or evaluate ("well now, in

my opinion..."). If you don't understand something, wait until the driver is finished and then ask. Then if you have questions, ask open-ended questions (ones that can't be answered "yes" or "no"). That will get you much more information.

If possible, try to gather the details you need without asking "why" type questions ("Why were you doing...", etc.), as "why" questions are likely to put the person on the defensive.

Then, repeat the story, as you understand it. This will accomplish two things. First, it will let the driver be sure you understood what he meant (not just what was said). Second, it gives the driver a chance to hear what he said. Strangely, many of us don't "listen to ourselves" while we are talking.

Lastly, end on a positive note. The best way to wind-up is by discussing corrective action that can be taken to prevent the incident from occurring again. Although you may have formed your own ideas of how to prevent future similar incidents, you will be well served to get the insight of the driver who was injured. Chances are, he has given it more thought than you have. However, the manner in which you ask for his insight will very likely have a bearing upon how thoughtful and beneficial his response will be, and whether or not he remembers your interaction with him as positive or negative.

Choose your words carefully. Don't ask, *"What could you have done to prevent this?"* Instead, consider a more diplomatic approach by asking something like, *"How can we use what happened to you to help new drivers avoid a similar injury?"* This re-affirms what you stated at the onset, that your inquiry is a joint effort to prevent other accidents from happening in the future.