

Beyond The Cab

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



www.midwesterninsurance.com

Issue 8, Volume 2004

Measuring Safety

How do you know if your company's safety efforts are effective? What measurements do you depend upon to evaluate the effectiveness of your safety program? Many trucking companies measure the miles or years without a chargeable accident, DOT violation, or traffic ticket. Relative to employee injuries, many companies look at the workers compensation experience modification factor or count the number and cost of workers' compensation claims to evaluate the effectiveness of their safety program

Each of the above-mentioned methods of measuring the effectiveness of your safety program makes perfect sense. After all, the mark of effective safety efforts is the absence of accidents, violations and injuries... right? Superficially, the answer to that (somewhat rhetorical) question is "yes." But there are some very real pitfalls to relying solely upon such measures to evaluate your company's safety efforts.

What the measurements presented above have in common is that they are each "trailing indicators." They measure outcomes without regard to how those outcomes are achieved. In that respect, they are analogous to the 'bottom line' in accounting.

One major flaw with relying upon trailing indicators as the sole measure of effectiveness lies in the fact that they are unreliable. To illustrate this point, consider a driver who repeatedly jumps from the top step of his cab and from his trailer as well. That driver could go years without ever being injured. In fact, he could go a lifetime without an injury resulting from



that "at-risk" behavior. If you were to look only to trailing indicators, you would conclude that your training of drivers in the prevention of non-driving injuries was a smashing success... no injuries!

However, in reality it was nothing more than 'luck.' In fact many companies, go for extended periods (sometimes years) without a workers' compensation claim as a result of nothing more than good fortune. These are the same companies who are perplexed a few years down the road when they have a rash of injuries that cause their workers' compensation premiums to skyrocket. However there's no reason for such companies to be perplexed. The explanation is clear. Their safety efforts were ineffective... and their luck ran out.

So how should the effectiveness of your safety efforts be measured? If trailing indicators (outcome based measures) are not the sole measure of effectiveness, what else is there?

The complement to trailing indicators, as you may have guessed, is "leading indicators." Whereas trailing indicators measure outcomes without regard to how they are achieved, leading indicators measure how the outcomes are achieved. In other words, leading indicators measure safety performance... the behaviors and conditions that directly impact the occurrence of future injuries.

To further contrast these two forms of safety measurement, consider the fact that leading indicators have a predictive value. They can identify shortfalls within your company's safety efforts without waiting for injuries to bring those shortfalls to light. Unfortunately, companies who rely upon trailing indicators must wait for an injury, accident, or some other negative event to

occur for a safety management deficiency is uncovered.

One broad category of leading indicator measures are those generated from observations. Within the trucking industry, this could include measuring (through observations) the percentage of the time that drivers enter/exit their truck using 3 points of contact. Another broad category of leading indicators are those generated from employee responses. This could include measuring (through a survey or post safety-meeting quiz) the percentage of correct responses drivers provide to questions pertaining to driver safety. Another type of leading indicator measure quantifies participation (such as measuring the percent of drivers constructively participating in safety meetings).

As evidenced by the few examples above, leading indicator measures require a little more creativity and a little more time than simply crunching the existing numbers on the workers compensation loss runs or OSHA log. But the rewards are greater and more long-term than relying upon trailing indicators to measure the effectiveness of your company's safety efforts.

Although this issue of *Beyond the Cab* was critical of using trailing indicators as the sole measures of your safety program, it is noteworthy that trailing indicators, such as injury rates and experience modifiers have value. They can alert you to areas where immediate attention to safety is needed, they are essential to understanding your workers compensation premiums, and even reveal what type of leading indicators should be measured. As such, it is not recommended that you stop using trailing indicators to measure your company's safety efforts. It is simply recommended that trailing indicators not be the sole form of measurement.