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5-minute safety talk

Driving Defensively

Whether your employees drive a motorcycle, a slow moving farm tractor, an 18-wheel tractor trailer, or a high-performance sedan, they all can learn something from the drivers around them. Those who do drive a number of vehicle types may be the safest drivers on the road.

Motorcycles are small, fast, and easy to maneuver on clean pavement. A motorcyclist can sometimes avoid potential collisions because motorcycles are easier to maneuver than other vehicles. However, motorcyclists also share the greatest risk of personal injury if they get caught in a collision. Slippery, wet, or gravel conditions can be hazardous, so drivers of other vehicles should give motorcyclists a wide berth. While slow-moving vehicles such as combines or tractors cannot react quickly, the vehicle's slow pace gives the driver the chance to plan how to react.

Seeing is believing

Car drivers and motorcycle drivers have better side vision than a truck driver. Truck drivers can see more than cars and motorcycles when they look forward because they sit higher up. But, the larger and longer the truck, the less the driver can see from behind.

Car drivers often have no idea how large the blind spots are on trucks. Just as a truck driver can blind a fellow motorist with his high beams in on-coming traffic or from behind, the driver of a car can blind a truck driver. Be aware of the effect bright lights may have on other drivers.

Cars have shorter stopping distances and, like motorcycles, greater maneuverability than trucks. With trucks, the heavier the truck, the more stopping distance it requires. If truck drivers try to stop suddenly, the weight of a heavy load can force a truck forward or worse cause a jack knife. This makes it impossible for even the best of truck drivers to stop in time. And because some trucks have a higher center of gravity, it's easier to roll a

truck than a car if the truck takes a turn too quickly. To eliminate these situations, all drivers should avoid tailgating.

Defensive driving puts you in control

Since riding a motorcycle is far more dangerous than driving a car or truck, the National Safety Council suggests drivers put at least one additional second of following distance between their vehicles and motorcycles. If the rider seems unstable, add even more time. It is important to be very careful around individuals who ride a cycle without a helmet or other protective equipment.

To drive defensively, keep the area around your vehicle open, make your vehicle visible to other drivers, and allow yourself time to make decisions.

When you drive near a slow-moving vehicle, the Defensive Driving Courses from the National Safety Council suggest three tactics to use:

- Stay back far enough to see around it
- Don't become impatient
- When it's safe to pass, give the vehicle plenty of room

Many trucks crash when backing. To avoid this, drivers should get out and check all sides to ensure there is ample clearance.

On the road, drivers of smaller vehicles should recognize that a truck turning one way will sometimes first swing the other way in order to make the turn. Truck drivers must also be aware of hurried drivers.

To drive defensively around large vehicles:

- Don't drive in their blind spots
- Don't tailgate or cut in too soon after you pass
- Don't crowd the vehicle
- Be prepared for wind gusts when you pass

Professional drivers of heavy trucks and tractor trailers know that their vehicles push a block of air ahead of them and around the sides, which causes

a slight vacuum of air behind. Truck drivers call this turbulence. Inexperienced drivers, especially drivers of rental vehicles, may not know how to deal with the turbulence and could veer off the road or into on-coming traffic.

Navigating around nonprofessionals

Nonprofessional drivers require special consideration by other drivers. This is especially true of drivers of rented vehicles, such as people who rent trucks when moving. Renters may not be familiar with the size and feel of the rented vehicle, and can become fatigued from driving long periods of time.

For instance, drivers of rented trucks may tend to operate the truck the same way the driver does a car. However, different rules can apply to trucks, as opposed to cars, when it comes to applying the brakes, necessary turning radius, and overhead clearance. Proper weight distribution and securement are necessary for starting and stopping safely. It is also a good rule of thumb that trucks should drive under the posted speed limit due to the increased braking distance needed.

If you drive defensively, know and respect your vehicle and give courtesy to other drivers on the road, you'll be able to share the road with vehicles of any size and drivers of all abilities.

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