

Communication: A Key to Achieving Results

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2008 presents some interesting challenges to fleet operators:

- The economy is fragile and threatens core revenues regardless of industry
- Fuel costs are at an all time high
- We remain affected by an ongoing driver shortage
- “English as a second language” continues to invade the transportation industry

Management teams can face these challenges “alone”, or enlist the help and support of their drivers to meet goals during trying times.

Business results, crash rates, turnover, tenure (loyalty), and attitudes can be directly affected by how we communicate with drivers and what message we choose to take to them. Even more importantly, their willingness to “step up” and help our companies meet the challenge may be dictated by how well and how sincerely we listen to them.

These interpersonal “soft skills” often get pushed to the side in the urgency of completing schedules, making inspections and completing audits. Merely meeting the technical requirements of managing drivers can only get us so far towards our goal of an effective operation.

When fleets practice a communication plan with their drivers (crews / job site teams, etc.) on a consistent basis, they can recognize benefits like:

- increased loyalty (tenure)
- decreased turnover
- better cooperation between drivers and dispatchers or supervisors
- the potential to convert "whine-ers" into "winners" by changing their attitudes or perceptions

There's little doubt that trying to make a driver feel like he or she is part of a larger team is a good idea.

While researching this article, I contacted several of our largest clients to ask how they communicate with their drivers. I wanted to learn what they think is important to influence favorable driver retention and what they felt was important to include in a driver communication plan. I also expected that they face the greatest challenges since they have a large number of drivers in many locations (complicating their communication plan), but that they would also have a greater pool of resources available to them. What I learned from them could apply to fleet operations of any size.

A large motor coach fleet with over 300 drivers said;

- “...the quality of the front line supervisory team is essential to the recruitment and retention of drivers. Drivers want to be treated with Dignity & Respect with consideration of their skills. Many “old line” dispatchers can not make “the transition”
- The other thing we all must do better is forget about taking care of the constant whine-ers. As management we can fall into the trap of spending 90% of our time on the 10% of the employees who are never happy. By doing so we ignore the best people and forget to recognize **them**.

Our largest client, an arborist with more than 16,000 trucks said;

- "...It's all about focus and not wasting the employee's time with a bunch of stuff that doesn't matter. Tell them what matters."
- "The big question is...what is that?"

One of our key contacts within the insurance industry had recently worked for the nation's largest school bus operator. She offered the following comments based on her time at the school bus fleet:

- "Communication with drivers can be challenging and I have found, to be effective, you need to do it frequently by multiple methods."
- "Periodic meetings - should have some type of recognition for drivers that perform well or made some type of improvement, give drivers updates and provide a brief time for drivers to ask questions. At subsequent meetings, management should have addressed these questions, or be able to give a status of previously submitted suggestions."

Other clients stressed the need to ensure drivers "feel the love" – that their supervisors and dispatchers "value" the contribution being made by the driver's consistent job performance. Some of the ideas included: placing notes on drivers windshields for them to find when picking up their equipment, or placing a letter for each day that they are on the road in separate envelopes (so that they get a fresh message each morning). Most of our clients stressed that it was important to demonstrate a simple sincerity in exchanging suggestions, concerns and ideas.

The Real Challenge

Drivers are largely isolated from the rest of the company due to the nature of their work. Even those who report to a specific location to start their day, spend the remainder of it on their own.

An author once remarked; "Isolation is a dream killer". If we substitute the word "goal" for "dream", it would be easy to see how letting drivers feel isolated could minimize their contributions to revenue, safety or other business goals. At the same time, if managers never attempt to understand what their driver's goals or dreams may be, the drivers will continue to feel isolated even with an aggressive communication plan.

Every company talks "at" their drivers, but does the "communication plan" extend beyond sending instructions? Tommy Lasorda, the major league baseball coach, once said; "I motivate players through: communication, being honest with them, having them respect and appreciate my ability and my help." Tommy's quote didn't end at clear communications "to" the players, it completes a thought by developing his player's trust *in him* by helping them and by demonstrating his abilities to them. He didn't demand their respect and trust, he took time to earn it.

It can be very difficult to "break the ice" with drivers. They tend to be fiercely independent and "love the freedom of the road". Is this a defense mechanism for dealing with being alone most of their days? Every driver I've ever met loves to talk, complain, or "give suggestions". I have to wonder whether it's their intent to incessantly talk or a psychological cry to want to be **heard**.

My suspicions have been formed from meeting with many commercial fleets to conduct driver training sessions while employed in the insurance industry. Immediately following the training session, I'd be swarmed with drivers asking me to carry messages back to their management team (who were standing less than fifty feet away). Most of these messages focused on trying to improve conditions or make managers aware of perceived injustices. As an "outsider" from the insurance company, they confided that I would be "listened to" by their management team (clearly implying their belief that they would not be heard by their own managers).

A colleague who continues to consult with fleets through his insurance career reminded me of these meetings with the following story. He participated in a driver's annual dinner and business meeting:

- "Like many companies, they are struggling with turnover. However, one branch has had essentially zero turnover, with very high driver morale.
- At the annual meeting; "...driver after driver, as they received their years-of-service awards, pointed to the branch manager...and they all said the same thing."
- They said; "...when they go into his office with a question, problem, or concern, they feel they are the most important and most respected person in the world."

That manager made time to listen to their dreams, concerns, frustrations, and, in turn, he earned the right to get them to listen to his (the company's). All I'm suggesting is that "communication" will require some key listening along with talking.

Dennis Hall, an Olympian said; "If I teach them nothing else, they will learn about teamwork, we do not leave anyone alone. If we don't do it together, we don't do it" Does your management team "leave anyone alone" or do you "do it together" with your drivers as a team?

Translation to Practical Steps

I'd imagine that everyone has some form of communication plan that they practice with their drivers. Even if the plan is informal, I believe that minor changes could help attain better results. There are a series of "diagnostic questions" that can be asked to help uncover areas that need attention.

The first question is; "How much of your company's dreams are shared with drivers?" For instance, do you routinely share your company's:

- Mission Statement
- Safety, Quality, Business Goals
- General Expectations & Disappointments

If drivers don't know your company goals/dreams, they can hardly be expected to help you achieve them by doing anything more than their specific job duties. For instance, if your quality team is struggling to reduce shipper complaints, drivers need to understand why that's important and how they can directly help achieve the goal. Keeping them updated on improvements is one way to involve them further and to recognize their assistance.

The second question is directed at dispatchers, supervisors and administration personnel who deal with drivers on a daily basis. That question is; "How would you complete the following sentence: 'If there was one thing I wish my drivers would do to help **our company**, it would be...'" It's important to stress "our company" and not let them change the sentence to "how can they help ME" (which could be an additional diagnostic question). I am always amazed at how staff members complete that sentence. In most cases, it uncovers some of the issues that cause tension or friction between "management" and "drivers".

The third diagnostic question for the management team is; "Do you know your driver's dreams?" If you're assuming you know, you may be sabotaging your results.

The best way to address this is to make the time to talk with drivers one-on-one. A survey may provide a quicker result, but it is impersonal and could mask their real interests. It will take time to get drivers to open up, but it can make a tremendous difference in results.

One way to get your drivers to open up is to ask them to complete the following sentence; "If there was one thing I wish the management team would realize it would be..." Variations work equally well (i.e. "If there were one thing the company could do to really help me be more productive, it would be..." etc.)

As you collect information from drivers you'll want to see if there are similarities or "shared dreams/concerns/hopes". When you find patterns, it will help you to address these common concerns openly and with urgency.

Finally, the manner in which drivers relate their expectations and past disappointments will help surface any communication failures or gaps: are they angry and upset or depressed and defeated? If they are expressing anger and frustration, an apology may be part of getting them to listen to your message (i.e. I am sorry that you feel so frustrated, and let me assure you that we are listening). If they are depressed, they may need reassurance to believe that "this time will actually be different".

Ways to Listen & Be Heard

Getting insight into your company's perceptions and the driver's perceptions gives you something to do and talk about that really matters. Structuring opportunities to discuss these issues and attempt to improve operations can be a big task.

Some tips from our clients on getting started:

- The best communication is face to face, but may not be practical unless the message is URGENT. Scheduling meetings with drivers may be part of the plan, but don't waste anyone's time by being ill-prepared.
- The Orientation/On-Boarding process may present an opportunity to communicate the company mission and goals. It's also a time to ask questions about their concerns starting at a new company and what they would have changed (if they could have) about their last job.
- Safety training sessions are focused on training, but there may be an opportunity at the start of the session to have a senior manager make introductions and reinforce the company goals and how things are progressing. This can be done in ten minutes or less.
- Some companies start with a small group of drivers as an informal "committee" to test these ideas and get feedback without involving all drivers initially. Of course, it would be important to set clear expectations that the "group" isn't setting policy (i.e. acting as management team) but merely offering recommendations
- Sometimes communication is used to "maintain" relationships: to build on existing messages; to build consistency in message (repeat, repeat, repeat); and to catch message "errors" (misperceptions, misunderstandings) before they spread out to the entire team.
- Scheduled letter to drivers about progress towards goals (dream fulfillment)
- Take time to solicit feedback and actually consider the feedback when provided (be sincere). The time you put into listening will encourage drivers

Topics to Cover?

Once you've invested the time to talk with your drivers and learned about their concerns, dreams and goals, you'll have plenty to talk about. The key is to maintain a balance between talking about your goals (the company's needs and concerns) and the hopes of the drivers.

Some of the most common topics we've heard that combine the concerns of both the company and the drivers:

- Learning from losses to prevent future ones – expressing compassion towards driver welfare, and highlighting concerns about company costs/disruptions
- Learning from customer complaints -- drivers don't want to be held responsible for anything out of their control so sharing feedback may lead to creative solutions and ways to satisfy customers.

- Compliance with regulations – it is everyone’s responsibility to do their part to comply with DOT, but sometimes each group forgets how they have to work together to schedule medical reviews, etc.
- Achieving annual revenue goal – the company must grow to be able to grant raises in rates to drivers, but drivers often hold the key to attracting/retaining profitable customers
- Upgrading fleet equipment – better equipment can cut maintenance and fuel costs, but drivers may need to help “make things work” with the older equipment before the company can upgrade.

Summary

Implementing a communications plan isn’t necessarily about publishing a company newsletter or emailing updates to drivers once a quarter (although those may become part of a larger plan).

A communications plan that helps you achieve goals starts with asking questions and sharing dreams. The plan comes into full effect when both groups decide to work together to achieve these goals by working together, and sharing progress updates on a regular basis.

Remember to keep communications clear and to the point. No one has a lot of time to write or read lengthy articles, and it’s important to “keep it simple” – make the point and move on.

Your drivers represent a tremendous resource. They can help your firm achieve its goals or merely collect a check. You have to decide whether to enlist their help to grow your business.

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