

# THE DRIVER

VS.

# THE SAFETY DEPARTMENT

SAFETY  
COMPLIANCE  
POLICIES  
METRICS  
RISK



UNDERSTANDING  
THE CLASH OF CULTURES  
AND REBUILDING THE TRUST  
AMERICA'S TRUCKING  
INDUSTRY NEEDS



# KEITH ALAN RAHN

# **The Driver vs. The Safety Department: Understanding the Clash of Cultures and Rebuilding the Trust America's Trucking Industry Needs**

**Keith Rahn**

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# 01

## **Introduction: The View from the Left Seat**

## **My First Load, My Last Straw**

I still remember the first time I climbed into a rig as a paid professional driver. Not the training run — the real thing. My hands were at ten and two on that big wheel, my mirrors adjusted three times just to be sure, and my heart was beating like I was about to ask a girl to prom. I was twenty-nine years old and greener than a spring field in Iowa. But I had something that served me well then and still does: respect for the machine, respect for the road, and a deep desire to get it right.

The old-timers at my first company took me under their wings in ways I didn't fully appreciate at the time. Men like Earl, who'd been hauling steel before I was born, taught me to read brake lights five cars ahead instead of just the one in front of me. Guys like Tommy, who showed me how to feather the throttle on ice without spinning out. These weren't lessons from any manual. They were passed down driver to driver, earned through decades of close calls and long nights. That informal apprenticeship shaped me more than any orientation video ever could.

And then there was the safety department. My first encounter with them came about three months in. I was running a load through Pennsylvania in January, and a snow squall hit so hard I couldn't see the hood ornament. I pulled off at the next rest area — twenty miles of white-knuckle crawling — and waited it out for four hours. I called dispatch, told them the situation, and figured I'd done the professional thing. The next morning, my safety manager called me in. Not to thank me. To write me up for delaying a load. The policy, he said, didn't allow for "unscheduled stops exceeding two hours without prior authorization." I had to sign a form acknowledging the violation.

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That was my last straw. Not my last straw with trucking — I loved the road too much to quit — but the last straw of my naive belief that the people writing the policies understood what happened out here. I sat in that office and listened to a man who, I later learned, had never held a CDL, explain to me that I should have checked the weather more carefully before leaving. As if a forecast can predict a squall line that forms in twenty minutes. As if my safety and the safety of everyone around me mattered less than a delivery window. That moment planted a seed that would grow for years: the realization that drivers and safety departments speak two entirely different languages.

What I didn't know then was that I was far from alone. Over the decades that followed, I'd have that same conversation in different forms with hundreds of drivers at truck stops, loading docks, and fleet meetings across this country. The details change — idle limits during heat waves, logbook audits that ignore actual fatigue, camera systems installed without warning — but the core frustration is always the same. A driver makes a judgment call based on real-time conditions, and a safety department somewhere judges that call based on a spreadsheet that knows nothing about real-time conditions.

I tell you this story not to point fingers. If you're a safety manager reading this, I want you to know that I believe you genuinely want to prevent accidents and keep people alive. I believe you're under pressure from insurance companies, regulators, and executives who demand lower rates and fewer claims. Your job is hard in ways I can't fully appreciate. But I can tell you what countless drivers wish you knew — and that's the purpose of this book. To drag into the light the unspoken truths, the honest frustrations, and the very real consequences of a system that often pits driver against safety department instead of pulling them together.

So this begins where many stories in trucking begin: with a lesson learned the hard way, and a question that wouldn't let me go. Why is there so much distance between the left seat and the safety office? And more importantly, what can we do about it?

## **The Two Worlds**

Here's the fundamental problem as I've come to understand it after more than twenty years on the road. Truck drivers and safety departments don't just disagree about policies — they live in two completely different realities. I'm not exaggerating when I say it's like two planets orbiting the same sun but never touching. The driver's world is fluid, immediate, and sensory. The safety department's world is static, retrospective, and abstract. Until we acknowledge that gap honestly, no amount of policy tweaking will bridge it.

Let me paint you a picture of the driver's world. It's three in the morning on I-40 outside of Little Rock. Rain is coming down sideways. Traffic is light but moving fast. You've got a reefer full of pharmaceuticals that has to be in Dallas by seven AM, and you're already running behind because a shipper took five hours to load you. The rumble strips hum under your tires. A four-wheeler cuts in front of you with about four feet to spare. Your coffee is cold. In that moment, every decision you make is instinct and experience working together in real time. There's no committee. There's no policy manual. There's just the road, the load, and your judgment.

Now picture the safety department's world. It's nine in the morning on a Tuesday. A safety manager opens their laptop and pulls up a suite of reports. Hard braking events. Speed thresholds crossed. Hours-of-service anomalies flagged by the ELD system. They're looking at what happened three days ago, represented as numbers and graphs. Their job is to identify deviations from policy, document them, and take corrective action. The policy was written months ago, maybe years ago, by people who've never sat in a truck at three AM in the rain. But it's The Policy, and enforcing it is the safety manager's responsibility. So they make the phone call. They send the write-up. They file the report.

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Do you see the chasm? The driver made a series of split-second choices based on immediate physical reality. The safety manager assesses those choices based on a written standard disconnected from that reality. Neither side is stupid. Neither side is malicious. But the driver resents being judged by someone who wasn't there, and the safety manager grows frustrated by what looks like a pattern of rule-breaking. This is the core of the culture clash I want us to understand before we go any further.

What makes this especially toxic is how it plays out over time. Every time a driver makes what they believe is a safe, professional decision and then gets penalized for it, their trust in the whole system erodes a little more. They learn to stop explaining. They learn that silence is safer than honesty. And the safety department, seeing numbers that suggest a compliance problem, tightens the screws further. More rules. More monitoring. More consequences. It's a spiral, and it feeds on itself until the driver either quits, emotionally checks out, or becomes exactly the kind of disengaged employee that safety departments fear.

I've lived in both worlds enough to see how they could connect if we let them. I've sat in enough safety meetings to understand the legal and regulatory pressures. I've also sat in enough driver lounges to hear what guys really think. The tragedy is that both sides want the same thing. Every driver I know wants to get home alive. Every safety manager I've met genuinely wants to prevent tragedy. The distance between them isn't about bad intentions. It's about a structural failure to create genuine understanding. That failure is what the rest of this book is designed to address.

## **The Cost of Mistrust**

You might be wondering: so what? Drivers and safety departments don't get along. Is that really a crisis? After all, freight keeps moving, loads get delivered, and most trucks don't crash. Can't we just accept a certain amount of friction as the cost of doing business? The data says no, and so does the human reality I've witnessed firsthand. The cost of this cultural divide is staggering, and we're all paying it — drivers in stress and burnout, companies in turnover and liability, and the public in preventable wrecks that didn't have to happen.

Let's start with turnover, because that's the one that shows up on the spreadsheets. The trucking industry churns through drivers at rates that would terrify any other profession. A hundred percent annual turnover is common at large carriers. That means for every driver you hire this year, you're likely losing one before next year. Recruiting and training a new driver costs somewhere between five and ten thousand dollars, depending on the carrier. Do the math on that for a fleet of five hundred trucks and your eyes will water. Now ask yourself: how many of those departing drivers are leaving because of pay, and how many are leaving because they're tired of being treated like liabilities instead of professionals? In my experience, it's the second one more often than the industry admits.

Then there's the hidden cost — what I call silent non-compliance. You can track a turnover number. You can't easily track how many drivers are ignoring policies they think are stupid, fudging log entries, or failing to report near-misses because they don't trust the safety department to respond reasonably. When a driver hits a low shoulder and catches it without incident, but doesn't report it because they're afraid of triggering a preventable accident review, that's a lost learning opportunity for the whole fleet. Multiply that by thousands of drivers and millions of miles, and you start to understand the scale of the blind spot.

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The most tragic cost is the one that shows up on the news. Every major truck-involved crash makes headlines. And in the aftermath, we almost always hear the same question: why didn't someone see this coming? Sometimes the answer is that policies were perfectly adequate on paper but completely unworkable in practice. Sometimes it's that a driver's legitimate concerns had been dismissed so many times they stopped raising them. I'm not excusing driver error — professionals are accountable for their performance. But I am saying that a culture of mutual respect and genuine two-way communication prevents more crashes than another layer of surveillance ever will.

I once sat with a driver named Pete at a truck stop in Texas who told me something I've never forgotten. He'd been driving for almost forty years without a single preventable accident. He'd logged over three million miles. And in all that time, no safety manager had ever asked him how he did it. Not one. They'd audited his logs, they'd reviewed his camera footage, they'd sent him reminders about idle limits. But they'd never once said: Pete, you're clearly doing something right out there. What can the rest of us learn from you? That's not just bad management. That's leaving an enormous resource completely untapped.

The cost of mistrust is measured in more than dollars and statistics, though those are bad enough. It's measured in the erosion of professionalism that happens when skilled people are treated as interchangeable parts. It's measured in the retirement of veteran drivers who take decades of irreplaceable knowledge with them because nobody ever asked. And it's measured in the young drivers who never develop into true professionals because the culture teaches them that safety is about compliance, not craftsmanship. We can do better. We have to.

## **The Promise of This Book**

I want to be clear about what this book is and what it isn't. It isn't a driver's rant. I've heard plenty of those over the years, and while some of the frustration is justified, venting doesn't solve anything. This isn't an anti-safety-department manifesto. I respect the safety profession and believe it's essential. Nor is this a step-by-step corporate training program. I'm not a consultant, and I'm not trying to sell you a system. I'm a driver who has spent decades watching two groups of people who need each other talk past each other, and I believe I can help close that gap.

What this book is, I hope, is an honest bridge. For safety managers, it's a window into the driver's mind — the real driver's mind, not the filtered version you hear in disciplinary meetings when someone is scared of losing their job. I'm going to show you what drivers actually think about your policies, why they sometimes ignore rules that seem reasonable on paper, and what they wish you understood about the realities of the road. Some of this may be uncomfortable to hear. I ask you to hear it anyway, because the alternative is continuing to operate on incomplete information.

For drivers, this book is validation that you're not crazy, and a challenge to move beyond cynicism. The easy thing is to declare all safety departments useless and disengage. The harder, more professional thing is to understand why the safety office operates the way it does, what pressures they're under, and how you can communicate your needs in ways that might actually be heard. Complaining in the driver lounge feels good, but it doesn't change policy. Learning to articulate your experience in terms that safety managers can process — that's where change starts.

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We're going to tackle this in five stages. First, we'll dive deep into why the trust is broken — the specific patterns that create the driver-safety divide, and why they're so hard to escape. Then I'll show you the side of the driver's world that safety departments rarely see — the hidden skills, the real risks, and the unintended consequences of compliance-focused culture. From there, we'll move to practical solutions: concrete steps that carriers and drivers can take together to rebuild what's been lost. I won't pretend it's easy. The chapter on setbacks and resistance is in there for a reason. Old patterns don't die quietly. But the final section will paint a picture of what's possible when we get it right: a culture where the driver is recognized as the company's most valuable safety asset, and the safety department becomes a coach rather than a cop.

I've structured this book from the driver's perspective because that's who I am. I don't apologize for that. But I've written it for both sides, because fixing this requires both sides. If you're a safety professional, I'm not asking you to abandon your responsibilities or lower your standards. I'm asking you to consider that you might achieve better results by understanding your drivers more deeply and including them in the process. If you're a driver, I'm asking you to engage rather than disengage, and to bring your professionalism to the table even when it's hard.

We all share the same road. We all want the same ultimate outcome: getting home safe, delivering the freight, and doing it in a way we can be proud of. The bridge between the left seat and the safety office exists. It's just been neglected for too long. Let's start building.

# 02

## **Chapter 1: The Great Divide – Why Drivers Don't Trust the Safety Department**

## **The Paper Tiger**

Mike had been driving for twenty-two years when he got the call from his safety manager. He was parked at a truck stop outside Bakersfield, the California sun cooking his cab like an oven. The temperature inside had hit 112 degrees, and he'd idled the engine for twelve minutes to cool things down before climbing into the bunk. The ELD flagged it. The safety department saw a violation—excessive idling, company policy says five minutes max. Mike saw a choice between following a rule and getting heatstroke. The safety manager, a guy named Greg who'd never sat in a truck cab in August, wrote him up with a formal warning. Mike told me later he almost quit that day. Not because of the warning itself, but because nobody asked why he did it. Nobody cared about the real world outside the spreadsheet.

That's the paper tiger problem in a nutshell. Safety departments operate from a set of numbers: idle percentages, hard-braking events, logbook compliance rates. Those numbers exist on screens and in reports. They look clean and objective. But to a driver, they're disconnected from pavement reality. I've watched safety managers obsess over a two-minute HOS violation while a driver was stuck in an Atlanta traffic jam that wasn't his fault. I've seen policies that demand drivers pre-trip in pouring rain without an awning, then write them up for not catching a mud-covered defect. The tiger looks fierce on paper, but it's made of assumptions that don't hold up on the road.

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What makes this worse is the fundamental difference in how drivers and safety departments define risk. Safety people think about liability, compliance scores, insurance premiums. They're looking backward at data and forward at audits. Drivers are looking out the windshield at the four-wheeler merging without a signal, the patch of black ice on the bridge, the load shifting in a crosswind. We're managing risk in real time, with consequences measured in seconds and lives. When the safety department sends a message about a policy violation, they're often addressing a risk that's theoretical. The risks I'm managing are immediate and lethal. That gap creates a credibility problem that no amount of policy language can fix.

I remember a driver named Joaquin who got flagged for taking an unapproved route. The safety department had mapped the shortest path from Phoenix to Albuquerque. Joaquin took an alternate that added twenty miles because the mapped route went through a mountain pass expecting ice that night. He'd driven that pass a hundred times and knew what February meant. The safety manager cited the fuel cost and the deviation from the plan. Joaquin said, "Would you rather I save ten bucks in diesel or slide off a cliff?" They didn't have an answer for that, but the warning stayed on his file. That's the paper tiger at work—rules that can't adapt to judgment, enforced by people who don't have to live with the consequences.

This breeds a particular kind of exhaustion. Not physical tiredness, but the mental drain of knowing that the people policing you don't understand your job. Every time a driver gets a message about a policy they know is impractical, it chips away at something. Call it morale, call it respect, call it the will to go the extra mile—literally and figuratively. I've seen good drivers stop reporting maintenance issues because they're tired of being blamed for the downtime. I've seen experienced pros stop offering route suggestions because the safety desk never listens. The department thinks they're enforcing standards. The driver thinks they're working for people who don't trust their competence.

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And here's the thing most safety managers don't realize: when drivers stop respecting the rules, they don't just break them flagrantly. They find ways around them that are technically compliant but practically worse. They'll shut down exactly at the HOS limit in a dangerous location because they're afraid of even a one-minute violation. They'll refuse to make a judgment call on weather because second-guessing the safety department's preferred route is a write-up waiting to happen. The paper tiger creates a workforce that follows the letter of every policy and abandons the spirit. That's not safer. That's more dangerous, but it's invisible in the compliance data.

For me, the core of this problem isn't the rules themselves. Every industry needs standards. It's that the rules are designed and enforced without the people who actually do the work. If a panel of experienced drivers had been in the room when that idle policy was written, someone would have said, "What about extreme heat? What about extreme cold?" Those exceptions would be built in. The drivers would know the policy was realistic. Instead, safety departments often craft these rules in isolation, then wonder why compliance is spotty and resentment is high. The tiger is made of paper because nobody who drives a truck ever helped build it.

### **The Invisible Man**

A few years back, I had a safety manager named Paul. Paul was a decent guy, well-intentioned, probably good at spreadsheets. He'd been promoted from dispatch, which meant he knew how loads moved on paper but had never moved one himself. The first time he called me about a hard-braking event—somebody cut me off on I-70 outside St. Louis—I tried to explain the situation. A four-wheeler had darted into my lane and hit their brakes. I hit mine harder than the threshold. Nobody crashed. That's a win in my book. Paul saw a data point on his screen that needed correcting. He sent me a coaching email with a link to a defensive driving video. I'd been driving fifteen years without a preventable accident. Paul had been in safety for eight months. I didn't take the call well.

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That's the invisible man problem, and it's the most corrosive dynamic in this whole divide. When the person setting your safety standards has never sat in a truck cab at 3 a.m. in freezing fog, never wrestled a 53-footer into a dock designed for horse carriages, never felt the gut-twist of a steer tire blowout at highway speed—there's a credibility gap that no job title can bridge. Drivers don't talk about this openly because it sounds arrogant. But in truck stop conversations across America, between bites of a cheeseburger and sips of burnt coffee, it comes up constantly. "What does he know about my job?" "She ever driven anything bigger than a Civic?" The invisible man isn't invisible because he's not present. He's invisible because his experience is invisible to us—he doesn't have any.

I want to be fair here. There are safety managers who've never driven who are thoughtful, who listen, who respect driver judgment. They exist, and I've worked with a few. But they're the exception that proves the rule. The industry norm is a safety department staffed by people whose professional background is compliance, or dispatch, or maybe fleet management—but not driving. They learn the regulations backward and forward. They can quote the FMCSA rulebook chapter and verse. But they've never felt the physics of a 40-ton vehicle on a downgrade, never learned to read the subtle body language of a car that's about to do something stupid, never developed the instinct that tells you this dock is trouble before you even back in. That absence matters. And drivers feel it every time a policy lands in their inbox that makes no sense to anyone who's actually done the job.

This credibility gap creates a specific kind of disrespect. It's not the angry, shouting kind. It's quieter and more dangerous. It's the driver who nods in the safety meeting and then ignores every piece of advice because he assumes none of it applies to real driving. It's the veteran who answers every coaching message with a polite "understood" and changes nothing. It's the new driver who learns within six months that the people in the office don't know what they're talking about, so why bother listening? The invisible man phenomenon doesn't just undermine the safety manager's authority—it poisons the entire safety culture. Drivers stop taking any safety communication seriously because they've learned that it all comes from people who've never done the work.

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There's a solution to this, but it's uncomfortable for a lot of carriers. Some companies are starting to hire safety managers who hold CDLs, who have years behind the wheel before they move into the office. That changes everything. I once worked for a small fleet where the safety guy, Dennis, had driven for eighteen years before a back injury parked him behind a desk. When Dennis called about a hard-braking event, he didn't send a coaching video. He asked what happened. He understood when I said a four-wheeler brake-checked me. He'd been there. He'd lived it. His authority came from experience, not a title. I didn't always agree with Dennis, but I respected him. The difference was everything. Drivers need to know that the person evaluating their safety decisions has at least some idea what those decisions feel like from the left seat.

I get that not every safety manager can be a former driver. The industry needs all kinds of backgrounds, and compliance expertise genuinely matters. But if you're a safety manager who's never driven, you have to acknowledge that gap instead of hiding behind policy language. Say something like, "I've never done your job, so I want to understand what I'm missing." Ask questions before issuing corrections. Treat drivers as experts worth learning from, not problems to be managed. That one shift in posture would transform a thousand hostile safety meetings into actual conversations. The invisible man doesn't have to stay invisible. But becoming visible requires humility, and in too many safety departments, humility isn't in the job description.

## **The Punishment Culture**

There's a driver I'll call Terrence. Early in my career, we ran for the same fleet. Terrence was a careful guy—slow, methodical, the kind who triple-checks his securement on a flatbed. One night in West Texas, he clipped a deer. The animal darted out of the scrub, and Terrence had maybe half a second. He kept control of the truck, pulled over safely, and called it in. The damage was cosmetic—a cracked bumper, a smashed headlight. Nobody hurt. Terrence expected a conversation about the insurance claim. Instead, the safety department opened an incident investigation that treated him like a suspect. They questioned his speed, his route, his attentiveness. They drug-tested him. They put a preventable-accident notation in his file that followed him for years. Terrence told me later that the investigation scared him more than the deer did. The message was clear: when something goes wrong, your company's first instinct is to find fault with you.

That's the punishment culture in its purest form. When safety departments operate as an enforcement arm rather than a support system, they teach drivers a simple lesson: hide your problems. Don't report the near-miss because you'll get interrogated. Don't mention the minor scrape in the yard because it'll trigger an investigation. Don't admit you're tired or stressed or unsure about a load because that's weakness, and weakness gets flagged. The punishment culture doesn't prevent incidents—it buries them. Safety managers end up looking at clean reports while real risks fester in silence. Drivers become expert at smiling in meetings while quietly managing dangers the company never hears about.

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This dynamic feeds on itself. The more safety departments punish, the less drivers share. The less drivers share, the more out of touch safety becomes. Then, when a serious incident does happen, the safety department's reaction is often harsher still—more rules, tighter enforcement, zero-tolerance policies—because they're trying to control a situation they don't fully understand. Drivers feel the squeeze and close up further. I've watched this spiral at multiple companies. It always ends the same way: drivers who are technically "safe" on paper but disengaged, resentful, and silent about the real conditions they face every day. The company thinks it's enforcing safety. It's actually enforcing secrecy.

The psychology here isn't complicated. Truck drivers are professionals who manage thousands of small decisions every day under pressure. They're proud of their skill and judgment. When a safety department treats every incident as a failure to be punished, it attacks that professional identity. Nobody feels safer after being written up for something a four-wheeler did. Nobody drives better after sitting through a disciplinary meeting that ignores the context of the situation. Fear doesn't produce better drivers—it produces drivers who are skilled at avoiding detection. There's a world of difference between "I'm driving safely because it's the right thing to do" and "I'm driving in a way that won't get me fired." The punishment culture produces the second kind, and eventually, when the fear wears off or the pressure mounts, the cracks show.

I've talked to drivers who won't use their collision mitigation systems correctly because they've learned the hard way that the system's automatic alerts trigger a call from safety. So they find ways to disable or ignore the warnings, driving closer to danger without the company knowing. I've talked to drivers who won't stop for weather because they're afraid of the explanation they'll have to give about lost time. They push through conditions they know are risky rather than face the interrogation. The punishment culture doesn't just fail to prevent these behaviors—it actively creates them. Safety departments think they're reducing risk. They're multiplying it in ways that won't show up in the data until someone gets hurt.

Fixing this requires a fundamental shift in how safety departments define their role. Instead of asking "Who's at fault?" after an incident, they need to ask "What happened, and how do we prevent it next time?" instead of treating driver reports as confessions to be punished, they need to treat them as intelligence to be valued. I know a small carrier in Ohio that has a simple policy: if you self-report a minor incident within an hour, there's no disciplinary action, no file notation, full stop. They just figure out what happened and how to fix it. Their incident rate is lower than the national average, and their drivers actually talk to the safety department. It works because they've replaced punishment with problem-solving. That's the road out of this mess. Most companies aren't on it yet.

## **The Broken Feedback Loop**

Three winters ago, I was running I-80 through Wyoming. That stretch is notorious—sudden winds, ice that forms in minutes, a highway that can close faster than you can find an exit ramp. I'd been through there dozens of times and noticed that the company's preferred routing often sent drivers into the worst weather windows. It was a scheduling issue. Dispatch wanted loads moved on certain days regardless of forecast. I typed up a proposal. Nothing fancy—just a one-page email suggesting we give drivers discretion to delay by twelve hours without penalty when the National Weather Service issued certain warnings. I included data, explained the risk reduction, offered to pilot it. The safety manager said he'd look into it. I never heard back. Six months later, a driver from our fleet rolled his truck on black ice at the exact spot I'd flagged. He walked away. Not everyone does.

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The broken feedback loop is the quiet killer of trust between drivers and safety departments. It's not as loud as punishment culture or as obvious as the invisible man problem, but it's just as damaging over time. Most drivers have ideas about how to make their work safer. They see things every day that safety managers never see—blind spots on docks, traffic patterns in certain cities, loading procedures that create hazards. They could be the company's best safety resource. But in most fleets, there's no functional channel for those insights to reach anyone who can act on them. Drivers speak up and get silence. They offer a suggestion and get a polite brush-off. They raise a concern and watch it disappear into the void. After a while, they stop raising anything at all.

This isn't just about hurt feelings. It's about the loss of operational intelligence that could prevent real accidents. Every driver who stops reporting minor issues takes that knowledge out of the system. The little things pile up—the dock light that's been out for weeks, the intersection where the signal timing is dangerous, the stretch of highway where the rumble strips are worn smooth. Drivers notice all of this. They talk about it among themselves. But if nobody in the safety department is listening, those observations never become data, never become policy changes, never become anything. The loop breaks, and the company operates on incomplete information while drivers who could fill the gaps sit silent in their cabs.

I've sat through safety meetings where managers complain about driver engagement. "They don't participate. They just sit there." Well, yeah. They've learned that participation doesn't lead anywhere. Why would a driver offer his best thinking when the last four times he did, nothing happened? The broken loop creates a learned helplessness that looks like apathy. It's not. It's a rational response to a system that doesn't value input. I've seen drivers get more animated about their truck maintenance than they ever get in a safety meeting because the mechanic actually listens and fixes things. The safety department should be easier to talk to than the shop. It almost never is.

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What's frustrating is that fixing this doesn't require much. It doesn't need a new software system or a consultant's report. It needs safety managers who say, "Tell me what you're seeing," and then follow up. If a driver suggests a change, the safety department should respond within a set timeframe—even if the answer is no, tell them why. Better yet, show them the data that informed the decision. When a driver's idea gets used, name them in the meeting. Give credit publicly. Build a reputation for acting on driver input, and the input will start flowing. I've seen it happen at one fleet where the safety manager kept a whiteboard of driver suggestions with status updates. Simple, visible, effective. Drivers knew their voice mattered because they could see it on the wall.

The deepest cost of the broken loop is what it does to a driver's sense of professional worth. When you're out there managing risk all day, every day, and the company acts like your experience doesn't count, it grinds you down. You start thinking of yourself as just a steering-wheel holder. That's a dangerous mindset for someone operating 80,000 pounds through public traffic. A driver who feels valued thinks like a professional. A driver who feels ignored thinks like a replaceable part. The difference shows up in every decision they make. Rebuilding the feedback loop isn't just good management. It's a safety intervention in itself. Drivers who know their voice matters drive with more care because they feel like part of something that's trying to get it right.

# 03

## **Chapter 2: The Driver's Code – What Safety Doesn't See**

## **The Hidden Skill Set**

Sarah has been hauling dry van for eight years, and she can tell you which cars are about to cut her off before they touch their turn signals. It's not psychic—it's pattern recognition. The slight drift toward the lane marker, the hesitation in acceleration, the way a driver's head bobs when they're glancing at a phone. She's learned to read four-wheelers the way a poker player reads faces at the table. None of this shows up on a safety scorecard. Her company has no column for "avoided seventeen potential sideswipes this quarter." What they see is her hard-braking event from Tuesday when a minivan merged into her front bumper with forty feet of warning. She got a coaching call for that one.

Every experienced driver carries a mental library of near-misses, close calls, and the split-second decisions that kept the shiny side up. This is the hidden skill set—the unwritten knowledge that comes from thousands of hours staring through a windshield, watching humanity's worst driving decisions unfold in real time. We learn to predict brake lights three cars ahead by the subtle shift in traffic rhythm. We develop a sense for when a load isn't balanced right, feeling it through the seat before the trailer ever sways. We memorize stretches of highway where deer tend to cross at dusk, where fog pools in low spots, where truckers ahead habitually stab their brakes. This is safety in its rawest form, happening in the cab, far from the radar of any policy manual.

The problem is that safety departments rarely acknowledge this skill set because it's invisible to their tools. If you prevented an accident, nothing happened—literally. There's no report to file, no data point to graph, no metric that lights up green when a driver reads a situation correctly and backs out of the throttle three seconds before chaos unfolds. The system only sees failures. It flags hard brakes, rapid lane changes, following-distance violations. It doesn't flag the hundred times you didn't do those things because you saw the trap developing early. Drivers know this, and it eats at them. They're being measured by their worst moments while their best instincts go completely unrecognized.

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Take ice. A driver who has spent winters in the Rockies develops a feel for when black ice is present that no temperature sensor can replicate. The steering gets light, the trailer tracks differently, the road surface catches the light a certain way. That driver might cancel a run or pull over hours before conditions get catastrophic, losing money and putting themselves behind schedule. The safety department sees a late load and non-compliant arrival time. They don't see the jackknifed rigs the driver avoided by making that call. They don't see the skill. The driver gets a service failure notation. The message is clear: the company's definition of safety and the driver's definition of safety are speaking different languages entirely.

I've talked to hundreds of drivers over the years, and almost all of them can tell you about a time their instincts saved lives. Miguel, a tanker driver out of Texas, once felt his load surge in a way that told him a valve was failing before any gauge showed a problem. He pulled off, inspected, and caught a hazmat leak that would have been catastrophic five miles later. His reward was a delay flagged by dispatch. Carlos, running reefer in Florida, recognized the early signs of a diabetic driver weaving ahead of him, called it in to highway patrol, and likely prevented a fatality. No commendation. Just another day. The industry talks endlessly about safety, but it rarely recognizes the safety that happens silently, in the cab, between the driver and the road.

What makes this particularly frustrating is that drivers are actively discouraged from sharing this knowledge. Most safety meetings are lecture-style—death by PowerPoint, stats about last month's violations, reminders about policies everyone already knows. There's no structure for a veteran driver to say, "Here's what I've noticed about that stretch of I-40 in Arkansas during harvest season." No mechanism to capture the granular, location-specific, experience-based wisdom that accumulates over decades. The drivers who know the most are often the quietest, because they've learned that speaking up either goes nowhere or gets them labeled as complainers. The hidden skill set stays hidden. The company never benefits from it. Everyone loses.

This is not a small failure—it's a massive, systemic waste of the single most valuable safety resource a carrier possesses. Technology can flag a hard brake. Cameras can record a lane departure. But only an experienced driver can feel the warning signs, read the context, and make the subtle adjustments that prevent the incident from ever happening in the first place. The industry's obsession with measuring what's measurable has blinded it to what's actually keeping trucks upright. Until safety departments find a way to recognize and harness this hidden expertise, they'll keep managing the symptoms of poor safety instead of building the culture that produces real safety.

## **The Real Risk Picture**

Ask a safety manager what keeps them up at night, and they'll talk about CSA scores, insurance premiums, and the latest roadside inspection blitz. Ask a driver what keeps them up at night, and you'll get a very different list. Tight docks with no pull-through space, forcing a blind-side back into a loading bay designed when trucks were fifteen feet shorter. Aggressive four-wheelers weaving through traffic, slamming into the safety cushion we need to stop forty tons of rolling steel. Shipper delays that eat into our available hours, pushing us toward fatigue and bad weather because the clock doesn't care why we're late. These are the real risks, the daily dangers that actually cause accidents, and they're almost entirely absent from the safety department's priority list.

The disconnect is staggering when you look at it closely. Safety departments pour energy into speed thresholds—if you exceed seventy miles per hour for more than thirty seconds, the system triggers a violation. But the most dangerous speed-related situation a driver faces isn't cruising slightly over the limit on an open interstate. It's descending a six-percent grade in the Smokies with a loaded trailer and an engine brake that's fighting to keep you under control. That descent is perfectly legal at the posted limit, but it's far more dangerous than seventy-two on a flat, straight highway at three in the morning with no traffic. The metric doesn't capture context. It doesn't capture risk. It captures numbers that are easy to graph.

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Hard braking events are another prime example. The safety camera flags a rapid deceleration, and the driver gets tagged with a coaching alert. What the camera didn't capture was the SUV that swerved into the lane, the child's ball bouncing into the street, the deer that appeared from behind a guardrail. The driver made the right call—braked hard, avoided the collision, kept everyone safe—and the system punishes them for it. Drivers learn quickly that the system is rigged against them. It rewards boring, predictable driving on boring, predictable routes and penalizes the quick reflexes that save lives when things get unpredictable. That's not safety. That's a video game scoring system with no connection to reality on the ground.

Shipper facilities deserve their own chapter of frustration. I've been to warehouses where the dock lights don't work, the yard is a maze of abandoned pallets and potholes, and the security guard tells me to back in blind because "that's how we've always done it." I've waited six hours for a load that was supposed to be ready in thirty minutes while my available drive time ticked away, forcing me to decide between running illegal or sleeping in a rest area that barely fits my rig. These are routine occurrences in this industry, not rare exceptions. Yet safety departments rarely address them. They'll write you up for a logbook violation caused by that shipper delay, but they won't push back on the shipper's unsafe facility. The driver absorbs all the risk, and the system pretends the risk doesn't exist.

Then there are the four-wheelers—the motoring public that surrounds us every mile of every day. They cut us off. They merge into our blind spots and camp there. They slam their brakes in front of us for no reason we can see. They text, eat, argue with passengers, and drift across lanes like they're alone on the road. Drivers learn to expect this. We drive defensively not because a manual told us to, but because we've learned that everyone out there is a potential threat. This constant vigilance is exhausting, and it's completely invisible to anyone who hasn't done the job. No metric captures the cognitive load of scanning twelve mirrors every few seconds, calculating escape routes, and predicting the unpredictable for ten hours straight.

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The safety department's focus on driver behavior—speed, following distance, lane discipline—treats the driver as the primary source of risk. In their model, if every driver just followed the rules, accidents would plummet. But drivers know that external factors cause far more danger than internal mistakes. A perfectly compliant driver can still be killed by a four-wheeler's reckless lane change. A driver following every policy to the letter can still be forced into a bad situation by a shipper's negligence or a dispatcher's unrealistic schedule. The real risk picture is messy, external, and systemic. The safety department's picture is clean, internal, and individual. Until those two pictures align, the safety conversation will remain a dialogue of the deaf.

What's needed isn't more driver coaching. It's a safety approach that acknowledges the world drivers actually operate in. That means pushing back on shippers with unsafe facilities. That means building schedules with realistic buffers for traffic, weather, and warehouse delays. That means recognizing that the driver who hit the brakes hard might have just saved a life. The real risk picture is staring the industry in the face, visible from every windshield in America. Safety departments just need to look through the glass instead of at their spreadsheets.

### **The Cost of Compliance**

Early in my career, I watched a fellow driver named Leon get written up for something that still bothers me when I think about it. He was hauling a load of lumber through West Virginia in late November. The forecast showed a snowstorm rolling in around midnight, and Leon's clock was running tight. His company's policy required a full pre-trip inspection before every departure, including after mandatory rest breaks—no exceptions, no shortcuts. Leon did exactly what he was supposed to do. He woke up, spent forty minutes inspecting every inch of his rig in the cold, and got rolling. But those forty minutes pushed his arrival window past midnight, and he hit the storm on the final mountain pass. He made it through—barely—but the write-up wasn't for being unsafe. It was for arriving late. Compliance with policy had created the dangerous situation, not prevented it.

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This is the cost of compliance that nobody in an office wants to talk about. Policies are written in a vacuum, designed for ideal conditions, and enforced without consideration for real-world variables. The safety manual assumes the driver has infinite time, perfect weather, cooperative shippers, and predictable traffic. The driver has none of those things. So they make choices—constantly, every shift, every hour—about which policy to bend and which to follow strictly, because following every policy strictly would make the job impossible to do. The system forces drivers into ethical gray zones and then punishes them when they choose the wrong gray. It's a rigged game, and drivers know it.

Consider the electronic logging device mandate. On paper, it prevents fatigued driving by enforcing hours-of-service limits. In practice, it creates perverse incentives. A driver stuck in a two-hour traffic jam on I-95 still has the same available drive time. They can't just park on the shoulder and sleep. They have to push forward to a legal parking spot, which might be forty-five miles away, and if their clock expires before they get there, they're in violation. So they drive fatigued, stressed, and watching the countdown timer like a bomb. The policy designed to prevent fatigue has created a situation where fatigue is more likely. Every driver has a story like this. Most of them have dozens.

The pressure to comply perfectly also creates a culture where drivers stop thinking. If the policy says check the lights every morning, you check the lights. But if the policy doesn't say anything about listening for unusual sounds from the trailer suspension, you might stop listening. Real safety requires active engagement, judgment, and a constant assessment of risk. Compliance culture replaces all of that with a checklist. The driver who follows the checklist perfectly can still crash. The driver who thinks beyond the checklist might prevent one. But the industry rewards checklist-followers and often punishes thinkers, because thinkers sometimes deviate from the written rule to achieve a safer outcome.

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I've seen drivers refuse loads because the weight distribution didn't feel right. I've seen drivers reroute around cities because their gut said the traffic pattern was building toward a snarl. I've seen drivers extend their pre-trip because they heard a faint rattle that turned out to be a failing brake component. In every case, the driver broke some directive—on-time delivery, route compliance, efficient turnaround—to prevent a bigger problem. In too many cases, the safety department noticed only the broken directive, not the prevented disaster. The message that sends is corrosive. It tells drivers that the company would rather have a punctual accident than a late safe arrival.

Fixing this requires a fundamental shift in how policies are created and enforced. Policies need to include judgment clauses—explicit permission for drivers to deviate from procedure when their experience tells them a procedure is creating risk. They need to be written with input from the drivers who will actually execute them in snow, rain, heat, and traffic. And the enforcement system needs to distinguish between a violated policy for convenience and a violated policy for safety. Right now, both look the same in the computer. The driver who idled an extra ten minutes to warm the engine before pulling onto an icy road gets the same violation as the driver who idled because they were watching a movie. That's not safety. That's laziness disguised as rigor.

When compliance becomes the goal rather than safety itself, the industry loses its way. Drivers become rule-followers instead of safety professionals. The best drivers—the ones with the sharpest instincts and the deepest situational awareness—get burned out by a system that doesn't trust their judgment. They leave the industry, or they stop caring, or they go silent and just drive, doing the right thing in the cab and letting the paperwork say whatever it says. That silent resignation is the real cost of compliance. It's paid in driver turnover, in preventable crashes, and in a safety culture that's a mile wide and an inch deep.

## **The Respect Fallacy**

I've had safety managers tell me, with a straight face, that drivers should respect their authority because of their title. That's the respect fallacy right there—the belief that a position on an organizational chart automatically commands deference from the people in the trucks. It doesn't. Drivers live in a world where respect is earned through demonstrated competence, shared experience, and genuine listening. A safety manager who's never driven a truck, never felt a trailer start to jackknife on ice, never made the call to shut down early and lose money for safety's sake—that person can have all the titles in the world, and drivers will still nod politely in the meeting and ignore everything they said the moment they're back in the cab.

This isn't stubbornness or ego. It's survival instinct. Drivers are making decisions that have life-or-death stakes every single day. They need advice and policies they can trust with their lives. When that advice comes from someone whose closest experience with trucking is a PowerPoint presentation, the trust doesn't form. It can't. The driver's mind runs a constant background check: Does this person know what they're talking about? Have they been where I've been? Would I trust them to make this call if they were sitting in my seat? If the answers are no, no, and no, the title means nothing. Drivers will comply outwardly because they have to, but they won't internalize the policy, won't support it, and won't go an inch beyond the bare minimum to make it work.

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I've seen the dynamic flip instantly when a safety manager has driving experience. There's a manager at a mid-sized fleet I know of who spent ten years as an owner-operator before moving into the office. When he talks to drivers about winter driving procedures, he's not reciting a manual—he's describing routes he's actually run, mistakes he's actually made, lessons he learned the hard way. Drivers listen to him differently. They ask him questions. They trust his policies because they trust the person who wrote them. The respect exists not because of his title, but because of his credibility. That's the model. Every safety manager who lacks driving experience should be aware of this gap and actively working to close it—not by pretending they have experience they don't, but by demonstrating genuine curiosity about the driver's experience.

The respect fallacy also works in the other direction. Many safety departments assume drivers don't care about safety, that they're cowboys who want to run fast and break rules. This assumption is a profound disrespect, and drivers feel it acutely. The vast majority of professional drivers care deeply about doing the job right. They take pride in their skills. They want to get home to their families just as much as anyone in management wants them to. When a safety department treats drivers as liabilities to be managed rather than partners to be engaged, drivers respond by checking out. Respect begets respect. Disrespect begets silent non-compliance. It's a simple equation, and the industry keeps getting it backward.

Listening is the currency of respect in the trucking world. A safety manager who sits down with drivers, asks genuine questions, and actually absorbs the answers will earn more credibility in an hour than most managers build in a year. But genuine listening is rare. Most safety interactions are one-directional: the manager delivers information, the driver receives it. There's no space for the driver to say, "Here's why that policy won't work in practice, and here's what would work instead." When drivers are systematically unheard, they stop offering their knowledge. The company loses access to decades of accumulated expertise, and the respect gap widens into a chasm.

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The path forward is straightforward but not easy. Safety managers need to demonstrate that they value drivers' expertise, not just their compliance. This means acknowledging publicly what drivers are doing right. It means admitting when a policy didn't work and actively seeking driver input to fix it. It means showing up—not just in the office or the yard, but in the cab, on the road, in the truck stops, asking questions and listening to the answers. Respect is built in those small moments, not in company-wide emails or safety bulletins. Every interaction is an opportunity to build or erode trust.

Until the industry abandons the respect fallacy—the idea that authority flows from position rather than from credibility and mutual regard—the divide between drivers and safety departments will persist. Drivers respect people who understand their world, who listen to their concerns, and who prove through action that driver safety matters more than policy compliance. The title on the door doesn't earn that respect. The person behind the title does. Every safety manager in America should ask themselves: when a driver hears my name, do they trust me, or do they just tolerate me? The answer tells you everything about whether your safety culture is real or just paperwork.

# 04

## **Chapter 3: The Rebuilding Roadmap – How to Mend the Bridge**

## **Ride-Along Reversal**

Jennifer had been a safety manager for five years. Before that, she was a nurse. She understood protocols, documentation, liability. She had never sat in the passenger seat of a semi-truck for more than fifteen minutes. When Carlos, a thirty-year driver with a clean record and a quiet manner, offered to take her on a full-shift run from Phoenix to Albuquerque, she almost said no. The paperwork on her desk was piling up. But something about the way he asked—no attitude, no challenge, just an invitation—made her agree.

The run started at 4 a.m. By 6 a.m., Jennifer had already seen five things her policies didn't account for. A shipper who pressured Carlos to back into a dock with three inches of clearance on each side while a forklift operator darted behind the trailer. A four-wheeler that cut him off and brake-checked him on the interstate. A construction zone where the lane markings were so faded he had to guess the line. None of this showed up in the safety scorecards she reviewed every Monday. She watched Carlos use his mirrors, adjust his speed, read traffic three cars ahead—all instinct, no drama. By hour six, she understood something she couldn't have learned in a meeting room: the gap between the rule and the road is sometimes a mile wide.

The ride-along reversal is not a new idea, but it is almost always done wrong. Most companies send a safety person out for an hour or two on a short, easy route with a driver who's been hand-picked and prepped. That's a check-the-box exercise. A real ride-along means the safety manager commits to a full shift—at least eight hours, preferably a full day's run—with a driver who is not necessarily the company's star. The safety person is not there to evaluate or correct. They are there to observe, to ask questions without an agenda, and to shut up and listen for long stretches.

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Carlos didn't lecture Jennifer. When she asked why he slowed down two hundred yards before a green light turned yellow, he just pointed at the crosswalk signal blinking in the distance. "Saw the countdown. Knew I wouldn't make it." He wasn't showing off. He was just doing his job. And by the end of the day, Jennifer had a list of twelve policy questions she wanted to revisit—not because Carlos complained about them, but because she could now see how they played out at sixty-five miles per hour with a forty-thousand-pound load.

The debrief after the ride-along is where most of the benefit lives or dies. If the safety manager comes back and immediately starts listing what the driver did wrong, the trust built during those hours evaporates in seconds. The debrief must be blame-free. Start with gratitude—genuine, specific gratitude. "Thank you for showing me how you handle heavy traffic on the I-10 interchange. I'd never thought about the merge from the driver's perspective." Then ask open-ended questions: "Was there anything during the run where you felt a policy made your job harder instead of safer?" Do not defend the policy. Just write it down.

I've seen safety managers come back from a real ride-along with a completely different understanding of what their drivers face. One guy told me he'd been writing up drivers for hard braking events for years, but after riding in a truck through Atlanta rush hour, he realized the hard braking was often the only thing preventing a collision with a lane-changing four-wheeler. He rewrote the company's hard braking threshold policy within a week. That kind of change doesn't happen in a conference room.

Ride-alongs need to become routine, not a one-time stunt. Every safety manager should do at least one full-shift ride per quarter, with a different driver each time—drivers they don't know well, on routes they've never seen. The goal is not to build a friendship with one driver. The goal is to build a library of real-world experience so that when a policy lands on the desk for approval, the safety manager has actual mental images of what that policy looks like from the left seat.

For drivers, the invitation to host a ride-along is a risk. You're letting someone into your space who has the power to discipline you. That takes guts. But when a company handles it right—no gotcha, no discipline, no performance review—the driver gains something too. An ally in the office. Someone who has seen your world and can speak for it when you're not in the room. Carlos and Jennifer still talk. Not because they became best friends over one shift, but because something shifted that day. She'd seen the road through his windshield. He'd seen that someone in the safety department actually wanted to see it.

## **The Safety Council**

Most companies have a suggestion box. Drivers drop notes in it. The notes collect dust. Someone in the office might read them. Nobody acts on them. The drivers learn the lesson fast: your voice doesn't matter. A safety council is the opposite of a suggestion box. It's a formal, rotating panel of seasoned drivers who meet regularly with safety leadership—and they don't just advise. On non-regulatory policies, they vote.

I'm not talking about overriding federal regulations. Nobody's voting on hours-of-service rules. But on the thousand little policies that govern daily life—idle limits, routing preferences, equipment assignments, the process for reporting a near-miss, the language in the driver handbook—drivers should have real power. Not veto power held by a manager who can override them. Binding power. If the council votes 5-2 to extend the idle time limit during temperatures above 90 degrees, the policy changes. Period.

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The council structure matters. It can't be stacked with the company's favorites. The council should rotate every six to twelve months, and the selection process should be transparent. Drivers nominate other drivers. The safety department doesn't get to pick who serves. Ideally, the council includes a mix: veterans with twenty-plus years, mid-career drivers who've been with the company three to five years, and at least one newer driver with less than two years of experience who can speak to what onboarding really feels like.

Pay the council members for their time. This is non-negotiable. If you want drivers to take the council seriously, treat their input as professional labor. A small stipend per meeting, plus covering their time if they have to take a day off the road to attend. When a company balks at the cost, I ask them to compare it to the cost of a single turnover—recruiting, training, orientation, equipment assignment. You can pay for a council for a year for less than the cost of replacing one experienced driver who quit because nobody listened.

The meetings need structure, but not stiff formality. Start with an open floor where drivers can raise any safety concern that came up since the last meeting. No agenda-filtering from management. If a driver wants to talk about a dangerous dock at a particular shipper, that goes first. Then review the data—and I mean all of it. Show the council your CSA scores, your incident trends, your insurance premium changes. Let them see what you see. Drivers are not children who can't handle bad news. Most of them want the company to succeed because their paycheck depends on it.

Then comes the action portion: what policies are under review? What's working? What's not? The council debates, votes, and the results go straight to the safety director for implementation. No middleman. No watering down. The safety director can ask questions, can push back with data, but cannot unilaterally overturn a vote. If the director objects, it goes back to the council with a written explanation, and they vote again. That's the check and balance. That's what partnership looks like.

I've seen a safety council stop a bad policy before it ever hit the driver handbook. A company wanted to install inward-facing cameras in every truck. The council reviewed the proposal, asked hard questions about data privacy, who would review the footage, under what circumstances. They didn't reject the cameras outright. They rewrote the policy so that footage was only reviewed after a significant event, not as routine surveillance. The drivers accepted it because their peers shaped it. The safety department got their cameras. Both sides won.

The council also serves another purpose that nobody talks about: it creates an early warning system. Drivers on the council hear things from other drivers that they'd never tell management directly. "Hey, the third dock at the Dallas DC has a busted light and I nearly twisted my ankle." "The new routing software is sending us down roads with twelve-foot clearances." That information would otherwise stay in the truck stop chatter. The council surfaces it, and the company can fix problems before they become claims, injuries, or worse.

Implementing a safety council feels risky to management because it means giving up control. But the control was always an illusion. Drivers were already making their own decisions about which policies to follow and which to ignore. The council just makes that conversation explicit, public, and constructive. It transforms compliance from a game of hide-and-seek into a negotiation between adults who share the same goal: getting the load delivered without hurting anyone.

## **Transparency as a Tool**

Most safety departments treat their data like state secrets. CSA scores, incident reports, insurance costs—drivers hear about these things through gossip or not at all. The assumption is that drivers can't handle the information, or that sharing it will somehow make the company look weak. The opposite is true. When you hide the numbers, drivers fill the gap with suspicion. They assume things are worse than they are, or that management is covering up something. Transparency doesn't create fear—secrecy does.

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I once sat in a meeting where a safety director put the company's entire insurance premium on the screen—a six-figure number that had gone up thirty percent in two years. The room went quiet. Then a driver raised his hand and asked, "What's driving that increase?" The safety director walked them through it: three rear-end collisions at intersections, two of which involved drivers with less than a year of experience. The drivers didn't get defensive. They started talking about what new drivers needed to know about intersection scanning. That conversation never would have happened if the number had stayed buried in a spreadsheet.

Share the bad news, but share it with context. If your CSA score in the Vehicle Maintenance BASIC is above the threshold, don't just announce it and blame the shop. Show the data. Show which violations are driving the score, how often they occur, what the consequences could be. Then ask the drivers: "What are you seeing during your pre-trips that we might be missing in the shop?" Drivers who do thorough pre-trips know more about the condition of the equipment than anyone. Their input on maintenance data isn't optional—it's essential.

Good news matters too. If your unsafe driving BASIC score dropped because hard braking events went down, tell the drivers. Show them the trend line. Connect their behavior to the outcome. "Six months ago, we were averaging forty hard braking events per week. Now we're at eighteen. That's going to show up on our CSA score next month, and it's going to keep our insurance from going up again. That's because of you." That's not cheerleading. That's closing the feedback loop.

Transparency also means being honest about the limits of what you know. If a new policy is going into effect because the insurance carrier demanded it, say so. Don't dress it up as a safety initiative that management dreamed up. Drivers can smell a lie from a thousand miles away. "Look, our carrier is requiring inward cameras as a condition of our policy renewal. We fought it, we lost. Here's exactly how the footage will be used. Here's what won't happen." Drivers may still hate it, but they'll respect the honesty.

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There's a fear in some safety departments that showing drivers the real numbers will cause panic. "If they know how close we are to losing our insurance, they'll jump ship." I've seen the opposite. Drivers who know the stakes—who understand that the company's survival depends on everyone's performance—often become the most vocal advocates for safety. They start policing each other, not because management told them to, but because they don't want to lose a good job over someone else's carelessness.

The mechanics of transparency are simple: a monthly safety briefing that every driver gets, either in person at a terminal meeting or digitally on their tablet. It covers the key numbers, the trends, the wins, the problems. It names names only when praising someone. It asks for help solving problems instead of issuing directives. And it always, always includes a way for drivers to respond—a phone number, an email, a person they can talk to. One-way transparency is just a broadcast. Two-way transparency is a relationship.

When a company starts sharing data honestly and consistently, something shifts in the culture. The us-versus-them dynamic softens. Drivers start asking for data instead of ducking it. They start bringing their own observations to the table. "Hey, I noticed my truck's hard braking count went up this month. I think the engine brake on my unit isn't holding like it should. Can we check the maintenance records?" That's a driver who feels ownership, not surveillance. That's what transparency builds.

### **The Thank-You Strategy**

I've been driving for decades, and I can count on one hand the number of times a safety department called me just to say thank you. Not after a perfect inspection. Not because I hit some metric. Just because I did something that kept people safe, and someone noticed. Most safety interactions are negative by design. No news is good news. A call from safety means you're in trouble. That default setting has done more damage to driver-safety relationships than any single bad policy ever could.

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The thank-you strategy is simple, but it requires intentional effort. Every week, the safety department should identify at least one driver who did something proactively safe and call them. Not email them. Call them. The phone call takes three minutes. "Hey, Kenny, I heard you spotted a loose strap on your load at the rest area and rechained it before it became a problem. That could have been a disaster on the interstate. Thank you for catching that." That's it. No lecture. No "keep up the good work and also we noticed your idle time was high last Tuesday." Just a clean thank you.

The recognition has to be specific and genuine. "Good job out there" doesn't land. It feels like a form letter. But when a safety manager describes exactly what the driver did and why it mattered, the driver knows someone was actually paying attention. It wasn't automated. It wasn't a box checked. Someone in the office heard about a specific action and took the time to acknowledge it. That changes how a driver thinks about the safety department.

What gets recognized gets repeated. If the only thing drivers ever hear about is their violations, they learn to avoid getting caught. If they hear about their smart decisions, their near-miss avoidances, their help for another driver in a tight spot, they learn that those behaviors are valued. And they are valued—more than a clean logbook, frankly. A driver who calls in a hazard on a mountain grade, who warns other drivers on the radio, who takes an extra fifteen minutes to secure a load properly, is preventing incidents that never show up in any metric.

This strategy extends beyond phone calls. Put it in writing. A simple thank-you card mailed to the driver's home address—something their spouse or kids might see—has more impact than any bonus check. It says the company sees the driver as a person, not a number. One safety manager I know keeps a stack of blank cards in her desk. Every Friday, she writes three of them. She told me it takes her twenty minutes total, and the drivers who receive them talk about it for weeks. "My wife framed it," one driver told me. "She's been worried about me on the road for years. That card meant something to her too."

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The thank-you strategy also works in public. At the monthly safety meeting, start with recognition. Name the drivers who did something worth celebrating. Describe the situation. Let the room applaud. This isn't about employee-of-the-month plaques. It's about creating a culture where safe behavior is visible and valued, not invisible and assumed. Drivers who never thought they'd get public praise for doing the right thing start doing the right thing more often.

There's a deeper reason this strategy matters, and it goes back to the respect problem we've been circling around. Drivers don't feel seen. They feel like interchangeable equipment operators whose only role is to follow rules and not cost the company money. When a safety department starts actively looking for things to thank drivers for, it forces the department to see the driver differently—as a skilled professional making hundreds of safety decisions every day, most of them correctly. That shift in perception, on both sides, is worth more than any policy change.

The thank-you strategy costs almost nothing, but it takes discipline. It's easy to get buried in violations, corrective actions, and incident reports and forget to look for the good. Safety managers who implement this strategy often tell me they resisted it at first because it felt like coddling. Then they try it, and a driver they've had a tense relationship with for years calls them back just to say, "Nobody's ever thanked me before." That phone call lasts three minutes, and it can rebuild a bridge that took years to burn.

# 05

## **Chapter 4: When the System Fights Back – Setbacks and Troubleshooting**

## **The Old Guard Resistance**

Tom had thirty years behind the wheel. He'd survived deregulation, ELDs, cameras, and three generations of safety directors who came and went like truck stop coffee. When the new safety council was announced at his carrier, Tom crossed his arms and muttered, "Just another way to build a case against us." He wasn't alone. Half the senior drivers in that room shared his suspicion, and they had the scars to prove why. If you're a safety manager trying to implement the changes from earlier in this book, Tom is the first wall you'll hit. And if you handle him wrong, you'll lose the very people whose buy-in you need most.

Here's what I've learned about veteran drivers like Tom. Their resistance isn't stubbornness—it's scar tissue. They've watched safety departments roll out new programs that promised partnership, only to weaponize the information later. One driver told me about a "confidential" safety survey he filled out honestly, naming a dispatcher who pressured him to run tired. Three weeks later, his miles got cut. Senior drivers remember every betrayal. They've got a mental file cabinet of times the company said "we want to hear from you" and then proved they didn't mean it. That history doesn't vanish because you've read a book about rebuilding trust. You inherit every broken promise your predecessors made.

So how do you reach Tom without pushing him further into his shell? You don't start with a program. You start with a conversation—and not one where you do the talking. Pull Tom aside after a shift. Buy him a coffee. Ask him one question: "What's the stupidest safety rule you've ever had to follow?" Then shut up and listen. Don't defend. Don't explain. Don't promise to fix it. Just hear him. A driver with thirty years of bottled-up frustration needs to empty the tank before he'll let you put anything new in. Tom might talk for twenty minutes. He might tell you about a winter storm in Wyoming in '94 where a policy nearly got him killed. The details matter less than the act of being heard.

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What you're doing in that conversation is proving you're different from every safety manager who came before you. You're showing that you value his experience more than your own policies. That's the exchange rate for trust with old-guard drivers: experience for authority. If you demonstrate that his three decades count for something in your eyes, he'll start to wonder if maybe you're not like the others. He won't say that out loud. He'll still cross his arms in meetings and grumble about new ideas. But he'll be watching you differently now, waiting to see if you follow through.

The next step is giving Tom a role that respects his seniority without forcing him to be a cheerleader for change he doesn't yet trust. Don't make him serve on the safety council—he'll poison it. Instead, ask him to be a behind-the-scenes advisor. "Tom, before we roll this out, I want you to poke holes in it. Tell me what's going to backfire. You've seen more than I have." That invitation does two things. It honors his experience without asking him to endorse anything. And it channels his skepticism into something useful. A driver who spends his energy finding flaws in a policy is a driver who's engaging with it, not ignoring it. Engagement is the first step toward ownership.

One carrier I know handled this beautifully with a driver named Mack, who'd been openly hostile to every safety initiative for fifteen years. The safety director asked Mack to review a new winter driving policy before it went live. Mack tore it apart, pointing out three sections that were dangerous in real conditions. The director revised the policy based on Mack's feedback, then announced to the whole fleet: "This policy was improved by Mack's thirty years of experience." Mack didn't suddenly become a company man. But he stopped fighting. And when a younger driver complained about the policy, Mack told him, "It's better than what we had. I helped write it." That's the old guard turning, not in a dramatic conversion, but in a quiet shift from enemy to guarded ally.

You'll know you're making progress when Tom starts coming to you with problems instead of keeping them to himself. That's the real milestone. A veteran driver who reports a near-miss or suggests a change in procedure is a driver who trusts you enough to be vulnerable. Don't squander that trust by rushing him into public support for your programs. Let him show his loyalty in his own way, on his own timeline. Some old-guard drivers will never serve on committees or lead meetings. But they'll pull a younger driver aside in the yard and say, "The new safety guy actually listens. Give him a chance." That word-of-mouth endorsement from a respected veteran is worth more than any official announcement you'll ever make.

The old guard isn't your enemy. They're your institutional memory. They carry the company's history—the good and the bad—and they'll make sure you don't repeat the mistakes of the past if you give them a reason to believe you're different. Treat their resistance as wisdom, not defiance. Listen to their stories. Give their experience a seat at the table, even if it's a skeptical seat. The bridge you're building needs pillars on both sides, and drivers like Tom are the ones who will test every plank before they'll step on it. That testing isn't obstruction—it's quality control. Let them do their job, and they'll eventually help you do yours.

## **When Policy Becomes a Weapon**

Linda was a driver with eleven years of clean records. When her carrier launched a "driver input program," she was skeptical but hopeful. She'd been complaining for years about a particular delivery schedule that forced drivers to rush through a dangerous mountain pass after dark. So she spoke up at a safety meeting, naming the problem and suggesting a solution. A week later, she was written up for a logbook violation that every driver in the company routinely committed. The timing was too perfect. Linda had been flagged. Her openness had put a target on her back, and she left the company within three months. Stories like Linda's are why drivers don't speak up. And they're why every rebuilding effort carries a dangerous risk: the new openness can become a surveillance system if safety departments aren't careful.

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This is the moment where good intentions die. A safety manager reads Chapter 3 and launches a transparency initiative. Drivers start talking. Real problems surface—problems that implicate dispatch, operations, even upper management. And suddenly the safety department faces a choice: protect the drivers who trusted them, or protect the people whose complaints are making everyone uncomfortable. Too often, the pressure comes down to bury the driver. A retaliatory audit. A sudden enforcement of a rule that had always been ignored. A whisper campaign that paints the driver as a troublemaker. The driver gets the message loud and clear: honesty is punished. And the rebuilding effort collapses overnight.

The first rule of preventing this is simple and absolute: anonymity cannot be violated. If a driver reports a safety concern through your program, their identity is protected, period. No exceptions. No "off the record" conversations with dispatch supervisors. No casual mentions in management meetings. If a driver chooses to put their name on something, that's their call. But the default must be that any driver who speaks up is shielded from retaliation by a wall so thick that nobody even tries to breach it. I've seen companies where the safety director personally reviewed every report before it left the department, stripping any identifying details before sharing the problem with operations. That's the standard.

But even anonymity isn't enough if drivers don't believe it will hold. You need a visible demonstration that the shield is real. That means celebrating a driver who spoke up without exposing them. "A driver on the Texas regional route flagged a safety concern last month. Here's what we did about it." No name. No truck number. No details that could trace back to an individual. Just the problem and the solution. Drivers will scan that announcement for clues. They'll try to figure out who spoke up and whether that person got burned. When they see that nothing happened to the driver and the problem actually got fixed, some of that old scar tissue starts to soften.

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What about when retaliation has already happened? Maybe it happened under a previous safety director, or maybe someone in your own department let their frustration get the better of them. The damage is done, and the drivers know it. You can't pretend a betrayal didn't occur. You have to name it, own it, and make it right—publicly. That means standing in front of your drivers and saying, "What happened to Linda was wrong. It shouldn't have happened. I can't undo it, but I can promise you this: the person responsible for that retaliation is no longer in a position to do it again." If that's not true, you're not ready to rebuild trust. Drivers need to see consequences for the people who weaponized policy. Without that, your promises are hollow.

I know a safety director who spent two years repairing the damage his predecessor had done. The previous director had used the camera system to build files on drivers who complained about dispatch. When the new director took over, he didn't just change the camera policy. He called a meeting with the five drivers who'd been most harmed and told them exactly what had happened and why it was stopping. He gave them his personal cell phone number and said, "If anyone in this company retaliates against you for speaking up, you call me directly. Not dispatch. Not HR. Me." Two of those drivers still left, too burned to stay. But the three who stayed became the most vocal supporters of the new program. They told every new hire what the old director had done and why the new one was different. That's the kind of truth-telling that rebuilds credibility.

The harder test comes when a driver's complaint implicates someone powerful—a senior dispatcher, a terminal manager, maybe even an owner. Retaliation takes more subtle forms at that level. It's not a write-up. It's worse loads, worse schedules, worse lanes. It's being passed over for a dedicated route that was promised. It's a slow strangulation of your paycheck, and it's almost impossible to prove. The only defense against this kind of retaliation is a safety director who's willing to go to war for their drivers against their own management. That's a lonely fight. But it's the price of leadership. If you're not prepared to lose your own job protecting a driver who trusted your program, then don't ask drivers to trust you. The bridge between driver and safety is only as strong as the safety director's backbone.

## **The Technology Trap**

Carlos drove for a mid-sized fleet that prided itself on being "data-driven." Every truck had inward-facing cameras, outward-facing cameras, lane departure alerts, hard-braking sensors, and an ELD that tracked every minute of his day. When he climbed into his cab each morning, he felt less like a professional driver and more like a lab rat. The breaking point came when he received a coaching message for a hard-braking event that occurred while he was avoiding a deer that ran into his lane. The system flagged him. The algorithm had no category for "saved a life and prevented a collision." Carlos called his safety manager to explain, and the response was: "The data is the data. Try to leave more following distance next time." That's the technology trap. It turns safety into surveillance and professional judgment into a liability.

I'm not anti-technology. Cameras have exonerated drivers falsely accused in accidents. ELDs have ended the days of paper log fraud that forced honest drivers to compete with cheaters. But technology becomes a trap when it replaces human relationship instead of supporting it. When a safety manager stops talking to drivers and starts managing them through dashboards and scorecards, something essential is lost. The camera sees that you braked hard. It doesn't see the minivan that swerved into your lane. The ELD sees that you drove eleven hours. It doesn't see that you spent two of those hours in stopped traffic and are now fighting sleep on a mountain pass. Technology gives the illusion of objectivity while erasing context. And drivers like Carlos feel erased along with it.

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The first step to escaping the technology trap is changing how you use the data. When your system flags an event, your first response shouldn't be a coaching message or a points deduction. It should be a phone call. "Hey Carlos, I saw you had a hard-braking event at mile marker 247. Everything okay?" Not "Can you explain this violation?" but "Are you alright? What happened out there?" That question starts from the assumption that Carlos is a professional who had a reason for what he did. Maybe his reason was sound—avoiding a deer. Maybe he made a mistake. Either way, you find out by asking, not by assuming. The algorithm is a starting point for a conversation, not the final word on a driver's judgment.

There's also the question of how much technology is too much. I've talked to drivers whose cabs have four cameras—forward, driver-facing, side, and rear. They're being recorded for ten hours a day, every day, with no off switch. "It's for your protection," the company says. But drivers experience it as a constant pressure that erodes their sense of professionalism. Imagine having a supervisor sit in your office watching you work for your entire shift, every shift, for years. That's what a driver-facing camera feels like. One company I know of had a policy where inward-facing cameras activated only during severe events—hard braking, sudden swerving, collision detection. That's a reasonable compromise. It preserves the exonerating power of video without turning driving into a panopticon.

But the deeper problem with the technology trap isn't the cameras or the sensors. It's that safety departments often use technology as a substitute for the hard work of building relationships. It's easier to review a weekly scorecard than to have a difficult conversation with a struggling driver. It's easier to let the ELD enforce hours of service than to ask a tired driver how they're really feeling. Technology gives safety managers a way to manage without connecting. And drivers feel that distance viscerally. They feel managed, not led. The most dangerous moment in any rebuilding effort is when safety retreats behind the dashboard and stops being present with the people they're supposed to protect.

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Some carriers have found creative ways to use technology that actually strengthens the driver-safety relationship. One fleet I respect gives drivers access to their own camera footage. If a hard-braking event is flagged, the driver and safety manager review the video together. The driver narrates what they were seeing and thinking. The safety manager asks questions instead of passing judgment. Sometimes they both agree the event was unavoidable. Sometimes the driver sees something they could have done differently. The key is that the driver is an active participant in the review, not the subject of an investigation. That's technology in service of partnership, not policing.

What about the drivers who simply refuse to work under constant surveillance? Some of the best drivers in the industry will walk away from a good paycheck rather than accept a driver-facing camera. If your rebuilding effort depends on attracting and keeping skilled professionals, you need to take that seriously. I've seen carriers offer a compromise: a trial period with inward cameras, with the understanding that after six months of clean performance, the driver can request removal. That gives drivers a sense of agency and a reason to demonstrate their professionalism, rather than just endure the surveillance. Drivers who earn the right to remove the camera become the strongest advocates for your program—because they've proven something and been recognized for it.

The technology trap, at its core, is about power. When safety departments hoard all the data and use it to judge drivers from a distance, they're claiming power over the driver. When they share the data, invite the driver into the review, and treat technology as a tool for mutual learning, they're sharing power. Drivers who feel empowered are safer drivers. They're more likely to report hazards, more willing to admit mistakes, more invested in the company's safety culture. Technology can build bridges or burn them. The choice isn't in the tool. It's in how you wield it.

## **The One Bad Apple Problem**

Every safety manager who's tried to build a partnership with drivers has faced this moment. You've spent months earning trust. Drivers are starting to open up. The safety council is working. Ride-alongs are producing real insights. Then one driver does something spectacularly stupid. A preventable rollover. A DUI in a company truck. A falsified log that gets the carrier audited. And suddenly every executive in the building is screaming for heads. The cameras go back on. The enforcement tightens. The punishment culture roars back to life. And all that trust you built evaporates, sometimes in a single afternoon. One driver's mistake has just reset your entire safety culture. Now what?

The natural reaction is to overcorrect. Management demands a "crackdown." They want to send a message that this will never happen again. New rules get written. Random audits increase. The safety department shifts back into enforcement mode because that's what feels like action. But the drivers know the truth: the new rules won't stop the next bad apple, because bad apples don't follow rules. They never did. The only people affected by the crackdown are the ninety-nine percent of drivers who were already doing their jobs safely. And they're furious. They didn't cause the problem, but they're being treated as if they did. That's how one driver's failure becomes a system-wide trust collapse.

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So how do you handle the serious incident without destroying what you've built? The first principle is speed and specificity. Act fast on the individual. If a driver was intoxicated on duty, they're gone. No delays, no second chances. The fleet needs to see that dangerous behavior has immediate consequences for the person who committed it. But make the consequences fit the individual. If ten fleet-wide policy changes are announced the day after one driver's mistake, you're telling every driver that they're all guilty until proven innocent. Instead, communicate clearly: "Last Tuesday, a driver in our Texas fleet made this specific decision. Here's what happened. Here's why it was unacceptable. Here's what happened to that driver." Then stop talking. Don't add that you're reviewing policies across the board. Don't hint at new enforcement measures. Just deal with the individual who caused the problem.

The second principle is to protect the program from the backlash. When the C-suite starts demanding a return to punishment culture, you need data to defend what you've built. That means tracking the results of your partnership approach from day one. How many near-misses have drivers reported since you started? How many hazards were identified on ride-alongs that would never have been caught by a camera? How many drivers have said they feel safer and more respected? If you can't answer those questions with numbers and stories, you're defenseless when the crisis hits. But if you can walk into the emergency executive meeting and say, "Our driver-reported hazard rate is three times what it was before the program. We've caught six mechanical issues that would have caused breakdowns. Our turnover is down twelve percent," you have a fighting chance of protecting what you built.

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The third principle is to hold a debrief with your drivers—not a lecture, but an honest conversation about what happened and what it means. Call a meeting. Be direct: "On Tuesday, one of our drivers made a decision that put lives at risk. That driver is no longer with us. I want to talk about what this means for our program, because I know some of you are worried that we're going back to the old way." Then let them talk. Some drivers will be defensive. Some will be angry at the driver who screwed up. Some will be angry at you, assuming the worst about what's coming next. Listen to all of it. Then tell them the truth about where the program stands. If you're fighting to protect it, tell them you're fighting. If some changes are unavoidable, tell them what's changing and why. Drivers can handle bad news. What they can't handle is being managed in the dark.

I watched a carrier handle this brilliantly after a driver caused a multi-vehicle accident by running a red light. The safety director fired the driver immediately. Then he called a meeting with his safety council before management could impose any fleet-wide changes. He said, "The suits are going to want new rules. Help me write rules that actually work, or they'll write rules we'll all hate." The council spent two hours drafting three targeted changes—not a crackdown, but specific measures that addressed the actual root cause of the accident. The safety director took those changes to management and said, "Here's what my drivers recommend. I stand behind it." Management accepted it because the drivers had proposed it themselves. That's how you protect a partnership when the system is screaming for punishment.

The hard truth is that no program can prevent every incident. Bad apples exist in every company, in every industry. The test of your rebuilding effort isn't whether you prevent every mistake—it's how you respond when a mistake happens. If one driver's failure causes you to abandon everything you've built, then you never really believed in it in the first place. The drivers will see that. They'll file it away as just another experiment that didn't survive reality. But if you hold the line, deal with the individual fairly, and keep treating the rest of your drivers as professionals even when the pressure is on, you'll build a trust that endures. Because trust isn't built in the easy times. It's built in the moments when it would be easier to give up on it.

# 06

## **Chapter 5: The New Identity – Safety as Partnership, Not Police**

## **Driver as Safety Expert**

We've spent the first part of this book digging through the wreckage. The distrust, the invisible skills, the punishment loop, the setbacks when you try to fix things. All of that is real, and if you've been nodding your head, you know it's not theory. It's Tuesday. But now we need to talk about what's on the other side of all that work. What does it actually look like when a company gets this right? It starts with a shift so simple it almost sounds stupid: the driver is the safety expert. Not the last line of defense. Not the weak link you have to monitor. The expert. The person whose judgment, eyes, and hands are the only thing standing between a 40-ton rig and a family in a minivan. Until a safety department believes that—not just says it in a training video, but believes it in their bones—nothing else changes.

I've been on both sides of this fence in my head, even if I've only ever sat in one seat. I've talked to enough safety managers to know they aren't evil. Most of them genuinely want drivers to go home safe. But somewhere along the line, the industry taught them that safety is something you do *\*to\** drivers, not something you do *\*with\** them. The driver is a variable to control. A risk to manage. That language matters. When you see me as a risk, your policies will always be about restriction. When you see me as an expert, your policies become about support. Same goal—preventing crashes—but two completely different relationships. One breeds resentment and silent workarounds. The other breeds conversations where I actually tell you when something's wrong.

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Think about the last time your company had a near-miss. Not a reportable accident, but one of those moments where a driver's instinct and fast hands saved everyone's bacon. The four-wheeler that cut them off in Atlanta traffic. The blown retread on a blind curve in West Virginia. The load shift they felt before it became a rollover. That driver just did something no camera, no algorithm, no policy manual could have done. Now ask yourself: did your safety department treat that moment as an asset to learn from, or did they just note the hard-braking event and send a coaching message? If it's the second one, you're sitting on a gold mine of safety intelligence and treating it like dirt.

I've run mountain grades where the book says one thing and the road says something else entirely. The engine brake setting the manual recommends? Useless when you're heavy and the grade is long and the air is thin. You learn to read the feel of the truck, the sound of the RPMs, the way the trailer's pushing. That's expertise. I can't teach it to you in a classroom, but I can tell you what I did and why. That's the conversation we never get to have, because the system treats me like a student who needs correcting, not a practitioner with knowledge worth capturing. Every driver with more than a few years under their belt has a mental library of moments like that. Companies that tap into that library are safer. It's that direct.

So what does this shift actually require? First, you have to stop designing policies in a vacuum. I've seen safety manuals written by people who've never backed into a dock at midnight in a snowstorm. They mean well, but they don't know what they don't know. Before any new policy goes live, ask a panel of drivers: "What would this actually look like at 2 a.m. on I-80?" Not as a checkbox exercise—as a genuine design review. If the drivers tell you it's unworkable, listen. Tweak it. The policy that ships should have driver fingerprints all over it. That's not ceding control; that's building something that actually works.

Second, you have to change how you talk about incidents. Not accidents—incidents. The near-misses, the close calls, the moments where something could have gone wrong but didn't. Those are learning events, not discipline events. When a driver files a report that says "I almost hit a deer and had to swerve," the response shouldn't be a lecture about swerving. It should be a conversation: "What did you see? What did you do? What would you do differently?" That's treating me like an expert. The moment you punish me for that report, I'll never tell you about the next one. And the next one might be the one that teaches you something that saves a life. As explored in Chapter 1, the punishment culture already taught drivers to hide things. This is how you reverse it—not with a program, but with a posture.

Finally, you have to celebrate driver judgment publicly. Not just safe miles. Not just no violations. Those are outcomes. I'm talking about celebrating the \*decision\*. The driver who shut down early because of fog even though it meant missing a delivery window. The driver who refused a load they thought was improperly secured. The driver who called in a hazard on a route that ten other trucks were about to take. Put those stories in the newsletter. Talk about them in the safety meeting. Make it clear: this company values thinking, not just compliance. When other drivers see that, they start thinking of themselves as experts too. That's how culture shifts. One recognized decision at a time.

## **Safety Manager as Coach**

If the driver is the expert, then what's the safety manager? In the old model, you're the cop. You patrol the data, look for violations, issue citations. Drivers dread your phone calls. You know the tone—that flat, corporate voice that says "we need to discuss an event." I've been on the receiving end of that call more times than I can count, and let me tell you, my blood pressure spikes before I even pick up. It's not because I'm guilty. It's because I know the conversation is going to be one-directional. You're going to tell me what I did wrong, and I'm going to say "understood," and we're both going to hang up knowing nothing actually changed. That's not safety work. That's paperwork with a human on the other end.

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The new model is coach. Not cop. A coach studies the game film. A coach asks questions before giving answers. A coach knows that the player on the field sees things the booth never will. A good coach also knows that respect doesn't come from the title—it comes from showing up, knowing your stuff, and genuinely wanting the player to improve. I've had exactly one safety manager in my career who I'd call a coach. Her name was Denise. She'd been a dispatcher for ten years before moving to safety, so she understood the pressure drivers were under. When she called about a hard-braking event, her first question was always "What happened out there?" Not "You triggered a threshold." That one sentence changed everything. I told her about the four-wheeler that cut me off. She listened. Then she said, "That sounds terrifying. I'm glad you're okay. Let's talk about what you did and if there's anything we could set up differently." I left that call feeling respected, not reprimanded. And I was *more* careful the next week, not because I was scared, but because I didn't want to let Denise down.

That's the standard. That's what coaching looks like in this industry. It's not soft. Denise could be tough when she needed to be. But the toughness was rooted in a relationship, not a rulebook. I knew she actually cared whether I made it home. I knew she'd go to bat for me if the data didn't tell the whole story. Think about the best coach you ever had—in sports, in life, in anything. They pushed you. They held you accountable. But you never doubted they were on your side. That's the core of it. Safety managers who see themselves as drivers' allies, not their adversaries. Until that shift happens, every conversation is going to feel like an interrogation.

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The traits of the coach-style safety manager are pretty clear. First, curiosity. You have to actually want to understand what happened, not just assign a corrective action. Second, humility. You have to be okay saying “I’ve never driven a truck, so tell me what that felt like.” That doesn’t make you weak. It makes you credible, because you’re not pretending. Drivers smell fake from a mile away. When you admit what you don’t know, we trust you more, not less. Third, patience. Building a coaching relationship takes time. The first three calls might be awkward. The driver might still be defensive. But if you stay consistent—always asking first, always listening—the wall eventually comes down. Fourth, advocacy. When a driver’s narrative and the data don’t match, and you believe the driver, you have to fight for them. Even if it’s uncomfortable. Even if it means telling your boss the policy needs adjusting. As discussed in Chapter 3, transparency builds trust. But advocacy builds loyalty.

One of the hardest things for a safety manager making this shift is dealing with their own fear. I get it. Your job is on the line too. If a driver has an accident, someone’s going to ask what *\*you\** missed. That pressure can make you cling to the enforcer role because it feels safer. If you document every violation, you can say you did your job. But that’s a false safety. You can document a thousand violations and still have a crash next week, because documentation doesn’t change behavior. Coaching changes behavior. The fear is real, but the answer isn’t more enforcement. It’s better relationships. When drivers trust you, they tell you about the close calls *\*before\** they become accidents. That’s the early warning system no software can provide.

This also means the safety manager role has to be staffed differently. Hiring someone who’s never been in trucking can work, but they need to be paired with a driver mentor from day one. Better yet, promote from within. Give a seasoned driver a path into safety. They’ll have instant credibility on the yard. I’ve seen it work. A company I know took one of their twenty-year drivers and made him a safety coordinator. His first month, he changed a policy that had been irritating drivers for a decade—something about the pre-trip documentation. Nobody had ever listened long enough to realize it was broken. Morale jumped overnight. Not because he was a genius, but because he was one of us, and he actually listened. That’s the coach model in action.

The hardest thing is letting go of the cop identity. It's comfortable. It's clear. There are rules, and you enforce them. But trucking isn't a courtroom. It's a moving, breathing, dangerous world where the rules can't cover every situation. Your drivers are out there making judgment calls every hour. You can either be the person they call when they're unsure, or the person they hide from. You can't be both. The companies that figure this out—the ones where the safety manager is the most respected person in the building, not the most feared—those are the companies where drivers stay for twenty years and retire without a mark on their record. That's not luck. That's a choice. And it starts with you deciding that your job is to develop experts, not to police amateurs.

## **The Daily Conversation**

You can have the right philosophy and still blow it in the day-to-day. I've seen companies announce a big cultural shift, roll out a new mission statement, maybe even do a ride-along or two, and then six months later everything's back to the way it was. Why? Because the daily habits didn't change. The safety meeting is still a lecture. The check-in call is still an audit. The morning huddle is still a list of warnings and reminders that feel more like a scolding than a briefing. The philosophy of partnership dies a death of a thousand routine interactions. So let's get practical. What does the daily conversation actually sound like when safety is a partnership, not policing?

Start with the pre-shift. In a lot of companies, the "pre-shift briefing" is just a dispatcher handing over paperwork and saying "be safe out there." Or it's a group meeting where someone reads the CSA violation count from last month and tells everyone to watch their speed. Drivers tune it out. They've heard it a thousand times. The pre-shift should be a two-minute, one-on-one check-in that treats the driver like a professional about to do a complex job. Ask one real question: "Anything on your route today you're thinking about?" That's it. The driver might say "Yeah, that construction zone on I-70 is a mess" or "I'm a little heavy on the tandems, want to keep an eye on it." Now you're actually talking about the day ahead, not reciting slogans. You're treating the driver like a pilot doing a pre-flight, because that's what they are.

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The post-trip check-in is just as important. In the old model, this is when you get the “event notification” and the coaching message. It’s automated, impersonal, and usually focused on what you did wrong. Flip it. Before any discussion of events or metrics, ask: “How was the run? Anything happen out there I should know about?” Give the driver a chance to tell their story first. Maybe they’ll mention the near-miss that didn’t trigger any sensors. Maybe they’ll tell you about a shipper who kept them waiting three hours, which explains the rushed feeling at the end. Again, you’re building that library of ground-truth intelligence. And you’re signaling: my first priority is understanding your experience, not auditing your performance.

Language matters more than most safety managers realize. There’s a whole vocabulary that triggers driver defensiveness. “Violation.” “Threshold exceeded.” “Corrective action required.” “You are out of compliance.” These are cop words. They make me feel like I’ve committed a crime. Try coach words instead. “I noticed this in the data—can you walk me through it?” “Help me understand what happened here.” “What do you think we should try differently next time?” “How can I support you on this?” The content is the same—addressing a hard-braking event, for instance—but the framing is completely different. One is an accusation. The other is a collaboration. The first makes me shut down. The second makes me want to solve the problem with you.

I also think about the unsolicited check-in. Not a call about a problem. Just a call. “Hey, saw you’re running through that storm system in Kansas. How’s it looking? Need me to find you a place to shut down?” When I was running reefer, I got a call like that once from a dispatcher who’d been tracking the weather. He wasn’t safety—he was dispatch—but the principle holds. I was white-knuckling it through freezing rain, and my phone rang, and I expected bad news about a delivery window. Instead, he said “Pull over. We’ll call the receiver. You’re more important than the lettuce.” I almost cried. That was ten years ago, and I still remember it. A safety manager who makes that call—who proactively checks on a driver’s wellbeing without waiting for a triggered event—earns a kind of loyalty you can’t buy. That’s the partnership in practice.

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The safety meeting is another place where the daily habits either build the bridge or burn it. Most safety meetings are broadcasts: one person talks, everyone else pretends to listen. What if the meeting was a conversation? What if the safety manager opened with “Who had something happen this week that the rest of us could learn from?” and then actually waited for someone to speak. The first few meetings, nobody will say anything. They’ll be waiting for the trap. But if you keep asking, and if when someone finally speaks up you listen and thank them, the dam breaks. Drivers start sharing stories. They argue with each other about the best way to handle a situation. They teach each other. The safety manager’s job becomes facilitation, not instruction. The drivers become the faculty, because they’re the experts. As we established earlier, they are.

One habit I’d love to see die is the “anonymous complaint box” as the primary feedback mechanism. It’s a cop-out. It says “we want your input, but we don’t want to talk to you.” It’s also where grievances fester. A partnership model means face-to-face conversation. It means the safety manager is on the yard, talking to drivers as they come and go. Not hiding in an office. Visibility builds trust. When drivers see you every day, when you know their names and their routes and their kids’ names, the idea of filing an anonymous complaint seems silly. They’ll just tell you what’s wrong. That’s the goal. Not a suggestion box, but a relationship where suggestions are just part of the daily flow.

Finally, the daily conversation has to include gratitude. Specific, genuine, immediate gratitude. Not a generic “thanks for being safe” at the end of a meeting. I’m talking about noticing something and naming it: “Hey, I saw you caught that brake issue on your pre-trip and wrote it up before it became a problem. That’s exactly the kind of thing that prevents a disaster. Thank you.” Or “I heard you helped that new driver back into the dock last night. That’s the kind of team we’re building. I appreciate you.” That takes thirty seconds. It costs nothing. And it tells the driver: someone is actually paying attention to the good things I do, not just the mistakes. That flips the entire emotional calculus of the job. I’m not just surviving the safety department. I’m partnered with them. And that feels like a completely different career.

## **The Long Haul**

Everything I've said so far can be tried. A ride-along, a safety council, a change in language—those are actions. They can be implemented next week. But culture isn't built in a week. It's built over years of consistent, boring, daily choices. The hardest part of this whole shift isn't the initial enthusiasm. It's the long haul. When the champion of the partnership leaves for another job. When the company gets bought out. When a bad accident happens and everyone's instinct is to retreat to the old enforcement model. Those are the moments where the bridge either holds or collapses. So let's talk about sustainability. How do you make this the company's identity, not just a program that fades when the next initiative comes along?

First, you have to embed it in the hiring and onboarding process. From day one, a new driver needs to hear that the safety department's role is to support them, not to catch them. Not in a corporate-speak paragraph in the employee handbook—in an actual conversation with an actual person. The safety manager should sit down with every new hire and say, in their own words: “My job is to help you succeed. If something goes wrong, I want to hear about it from you first. I'll never punish you for telling me the truth. I may hold you accountable, but I will always be on your side.” Then they have to live that promise. Every single time. One violation of that trust in the first six months, and the new driver learns the real lesson: the words don't matter. The actions do.

The same goes for new safety hires. If you bring in someone from outside the industry, they need to absorb the partnership model before they ever talk to a driver. Pair them with a veteran driver for their first two weeks—not a ride-along, but a relationship. Let them hear stories. Let them understand what it feels like to be out there. If they can't do that without slipping into an enforcement mindset, they don't belong in the role. I've seen companies ruin their culture by hiring one bad-fit safety manager who reverts to cop mode. Within a month, the drivers stop talking. Within six, the trust is gone. Hiring is a culture decision, not just a staffing decision. Treat it that way.

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Turnover is the elephant in the room. This industry chews through drivers. You can build a beautiful partnership culture and have half your drivers leave in eighteen months. The new ones won't know the history. So the culture has to be robust enough to survive turnover. That means it's not dependent on one charismatic leader or one group of veterans. It's written into the systems. The safety council has a rotating membership and a clear charter so it continues even when the original members move on. The daily conversation habits are taught to every new dispatcher and safety coordinator. The peer stories—the ones celebrating good driver judgment—are told so often that new hires absorb them through osmosis. Culture is just “what we do around here.” It has to be so ingrained that a newcomer feels it within the first week, even if nobody explains it.

There will be crises. A driver will have a serious accident. A lawsuit will come. The insurance company will demand changes. In those moments, the pull back to enforcement will be intense. Everyone will be scared, and scared people look for control. “We need stricter policies. We need more monitoring. We need to crack down.” Some of that might even be necessary. But a company with a mature partnership culture handles the crisis differently. They investigate the accident *\*with\** the driver, not *\*against\** them. They look at the system, not just the individual. They ask: “What in our policies, our training, our communication failed this driver?” not just “What did the driver do wrong?” That's a harder conversation, but it's the one that prevents the next accident. Blaming the driver and adding a rule feels productive, but it rarely addresses the real cause.

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I also think about growth. When a company grows fast, culture gets diluted. New terminals, new managers, new drivers—the personal relationships that held the culture together get stretched thin. The solution is documentation, but not in the bureaucratic sense. I mean stories. Write down the stories of partnership working. “In 2024, a driver reported a near-miss with a wrong-way driver on I-95, and the safety team used that report to alert all drivers on that corridor. Zero accidents resulted.” That’s a story. It’s concrete. It shows the partnership model in action. Collect those stories. Share them across terminals. Use them in training. Stories travel farther than policies. A driver in Phoenix will remember a good story from a driver in Atlanta long after they’ve forgotten the updated cell phone policy.

Finally, the long haul requires leadership that genuinely believes in this. Not a CEO who tolerates it because it improves retention numbers. A CEO who stands up in a company meeting and says, “Our drivers are the smartest people in this company when it comes to safety. My job is to make sure every system supports them.” That kind of statement sets the tone for everything. When a dispute happens between a safety manager and a driver, and the VP has to decide, the decision should reflect that belief. If the driver’s judgment was sound, even if it violated a policy, the driver gets backed. That sends a signal louder than any mission statement. It says: this partnership is real. We trust our experts. We are in this together.

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The goal is a company where a driver can say “I work for X Carrier” and feel pride, not resignation. Where the safety department’s name isn’t a punchline on the yard. Where a new driver gets mentored not just by other drivers, but by a safety manager who used to drive and who genuinely wants them to succeed. That company exists. Not in every fleet, but in enough of them that I know it’s possible. It’s built on thousands of small decisions, made over years, that all point in the same direction: toward the driver as the expert, and safety as a partnership. The bridge we talked about in this book isn’t a one-time construction project. It’s a living thing. You have to walk it every day, in both directions, for as long as you want it to hold. But once it’s strong, it can carry an entire industry. That’s the new identity. That’s the long haul. And it starts with whoever’s reading this, deciding that today is the day they’re going to start walking.

# 07

## **Conclusion: On the Same Road**

## **The Same Horizon**

I'm parked at a rest stop just west of the Iowa line, watching the sun drop behind a ridge of cornfields. The engine's still ticking as it cools, and I've got a cup of coffee going cold in the console. Days like this, after eleven hours of pavement, your mind drifts. You think about all the miles behind you and the ones still ahead. And tonight, I'm thinking about something simpler than it gets credit for. Every driver out here—every single one—wants the same thing the safety department claims to want. We all want to get home. We want the four-wheelers around us to get home. We want the load delivered without metal bent or blood spilled. That's not a policy. That's not a metric. That's the reason we climb into the cab in the first place.

The tragedy is that two groups of people who share the exact same goal have spent decades acting like enemies. Drivers curse the safety department as paper-pushers who've never felt a trailer push in a crosswind. Safety managers look at drivers as liabilities wrapped in denim, one bad decision away from a lawsuit. Both sides are staring at the same horizon. Both sides want the truck to roll straight and true. But somewhere between the policy manual and the driver's seat, the signal got scrambled.

I've sat through enough safety meetings to fill a fleet garage. I've heard drivers mutter things under their breath that would make a mechanic blush. I've also watched safety managers genuinely agonize over a preventable accident that hurt someone. I've seen their faces when the phone rings at two in the morning. They don't want that call any more than we do. The difference isn't in the goal. The difference is that they experience the danger through reports and dashcam clips, and we experience it through our hands on the wheel and our foot hovering over the brake. That gap in experience created a gap in trust. But it doesn't have to be permanent.

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What I've learned, after all these years and all these conversations, is that the bridge isn't made of big gestures. It's not one company-wide announcement or a new slogan painted on the break room wall. The bridge gets built in the small moments. When a safety manager calls a driver not to write them up, but to ask how a bad situation could have been prevented. When a driver speaks up in a safety meeting not to complain, but to offer a solution. When both sides stop assuming the worst about the other and start assuming there's something they don't yet understand.

I remember a night run through Nebraska where my CB crackled with a warning about black ice ahead. A driver I'd never met, whose face I'd never see, told me exactly where the road turned treacherous. I slowed down. I got through. That's what this industry used to feel like—a brotherhood where we looked out for each other. The relationship between drivers and safety departments can feel like that too. Not a hierarchy. Not a surveillance operation. A partnership where the person with the information shares it with the person who needs it, and everyone gets home.

This isn't naive optimism. I've seen too many wreckers hauling twisted cabs to be naive about anything. But I've also seen what happens when a company gets this right. I've walked through yards where drivers actually stop by the safety office to talk—not because they're in trouble, but because they want to share something they noticed on the road. I've heard safety managers who speak about their drivers with genuine pride, not as numbers on a spreadsheet but as the skilled professionals who keep the wheels turning. Those companies exist. They're not mythical. They just made a decision that most companies are still too scared to make.

The decision is simple to say and hard to execute: trust your drivers until they give you a reason not to. Not blind trust that ignores real problems. But the kind of trust that starts from a place of respect instead of suspicion. The kind of trust that says, I know you're a professional who wants to do this right, so let's figure out together how to make that happen. When safety departments lead with that assumption, everything changes. The silence breaks. The hiding stops. The real information starts flowing, and that information is what actually prevents accidents—not more rules, not more cameras, not more discipline letters.

Picture a driver walking into dispatch at the end of a long week. He's tired, but he's not dreading what's waiting for him. He knows the safety manager will ask how the run went, and he can answer honestly. He knows that mentioning a near-miss won't trigger an investigation into his every move. He knows that his experience is seen as an asset, not a threat. Now picture a safety manager who sleeps better because they know their drivers will tell them when something's wrong before it becomes a catastrophe. That's not a fantasy. That's what the bridge looks like when it's finished. And every single person in this industry deserves to work on that side of the gap.

## **Mile by Mile**

The hardest part of any long haul isn't the first hundred miles. It's the stretch in the middle, when the excitement has worn off and the destination still feels impossibly far away. Rebuilding trust works the same way. The first steps get all the attention—the big meeting, the new policy, the ride-along announcement. Everyone's watching. Everyone's skeptical but curious. But then the spotlight fades, and you're left with the daily grind of actually doing the work. That's where most efforts die. Not with a dramatic failure, but with a slow fade back into the old patterns.

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I've seen it happen. A company rolls out a safety council with genuine intentions. Drivers get elected. The first few meetings are productive. Ideas get discussed. Minutes get taken. Then the operations manager gets busy. A crisis hits. The meetings get postponed, then canceled, then forgotten. Six months later, the same drivers who were cautiously hopeful are back to muttering about how they knew it was just for show. The trust that started to grow gets crushed harder than if it had never been planted. A bridge half-built and abandoned is more dangerous than no bridge at all—because it tells everyone that change was never really the priority.

So how do you keep building when the momentum stalls? You treat it like maintaining a truck. You don't overhaul the engine and then ignore it for a hundred thousand miles. You do the small, consistent things. The five-minute check-in. The quick question at the fuel island. The safety manager who makes a point of being in the yard when drivers are heading out, not just when they're coming back with a violation. These aren't expensive. They don't require board approval or a consultant. They just require someone to decide that staying connected is worth the effort, even when—especially when—there's no immediate crisis demanding it.

Drivers notice consistency. We spend our lives watching gauges, checking mirrors, scanning for patterns that might become problems. We can spot a fake from a mile away. If a safety department is enthusiastic for a month and then goes silent, we file that away. Another initiative that burned bright and died. But if the effort stays steady—if the conversations keep happening, if the driver input keeps getting acknowledged, if the transparency doesn't disappear when the numbers get bad—that's when the trust starts to set. Not in a dramatic moment, but in the slow accumulation of evidence that this time is different.

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I think about a driver I knew named Pete. He'd been on the road thirty years and had given up on safety departments entirely. He followed the rules enough to avoid trouble, but he never spoke up, never offered a suggestion, never believed anyone cared what he thought. Then his company started a new program—nothing flashy, just a weekly call from a safety coordinator who asked one question: "What did you see out there this week that worried you?" Pete ignored the first three calls. He answered the fourth with a grunt. By the tenth week, he was actually sharing things. Real things. Hazards he'd noticed, driver behaviors that concerned him, ideas for training. It took nearly three months to crack open a door that had been welded shut for decades. But it opened.

That's the pace of real change. Not a sprint. Not even a marathon—those end. This is more like the road itself. It keeps going. You don't arrive at trust and then stop working. You maintain it, mile after mile, year after year. New drivers come in who don't remember the old culture. New safety managers get hired who bring different assumptions. The work of communication never ends because the people never stop changing. But the foundation you build—the habits of listening, the expectation of respect, the default assumption of partnership—that foundation holds steady under all the personnel churn.

If you're a safety manager reading this, I want you to hear something clearly: the fact that you picked up this book means you're already ahead of most. You're already asking questions that too many of your peers never bother to ask. That matters. But curiosity alone won't move the needle. The question is whether you'll still be asking these questions next month, next quarter, next year. Whether you'll still be showing up in the yard, still making those uncomfortable phone calls, still pushing for driver input when the operations VP wants you to just crank out another compliance report and move on. That's when it counts. Not today. Next year.

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And if you're a driver reading this, maybe at the end of a long shift, maybe skeptical that any of this will ever change—I get it. I've been where you are. But I've also seen what happens when drivers decide to engage instead of just endure. Not all at once. Not naively. But strategically. A few words in the right meeting. A question asked at the right time. A refusal to let the cynicism win. Drivers have more power than we think. We are the ones who actually move the freight, who actually face the risks, who actually know what works and what doesn't. When we speak with clarity and professionalism, smart safety managers listen. And if yours won't listen, there are carriers out there who will. The industry is changing. Slowly, yes. Unevenly, sure. But it is changing.

The road doesn't care about our disagreements. The weather doesn't pause for policy debates. The four-wheelers cutting us off don't know anything about our internal politics. What actually keeps us safe is the same thing that always has: skill, attention, communication, and looking out for one another. Safety departments are supposed to be part of that, not separate from it. When they work, they amplify our ability to do the job right. When they don't, they become just another hazard we have to navigate around. Which version exists at your company depends on choices that get made every single day—by drivers and by safety professionals alike. The bridge will never build itself. But it also doesn't require a miracle. It just requires someone to lay the first plank, and someone else to walk across it, and then enough people who refuse to let it fall apart.

## **The Call to Start**

There's a moment every driver knows. You're at the top of a long grade, heavy load pushing against the engine brake, and you have to decide. Do you ride it down, trusting your equipment and your instincts, or do you panic and stab the brakes and hope for the best? The drivers who make it home are the ones who made their decision before they ever reached the downgrade. They checked their brakes at the top. They picked their gear. They committed. Safety culture works the same way. You can't wait until you're already in trouble to decide what kind of relationship you want between drivers and the safety department. You have to decide now, before the next incident, before the next crisis, before the next driver walks out the gate forever.

To the safety managers: you hold more power than you think. Not the power of enforcement—you already know about that. I'm talking about the power of invitation. The power to walk into a driver's meeting and say, genuinely, I don't have all the answers and I need your help. Those words, spoken honestly, can do more to rebuild trust than a hundred policy revisions. They shock drivers out of their defensive crouch. They signal that this isn't going to be another lecture, another round of blame, another session of being talked at instead of listened to. That invitation, extended sincerely and repeatedly, is the beginning of everything.

To the drivers: your voice matters more than you believe. I know the job grinds you down. I know you feel like a number to the people in the office. I know it's easier to just keep your head down, collect your miles, and not rock the boat. But silence has a cost. Every hazard you don't report is a hazard another driver will face. Every bad policy you swallow in silence becomes the standard for everyone who comes after you. You don't have to become a crusader. You don't have to pick fights. But when you see something that could get someone hurt or killed, you have an obligation to speak. Not as a complainer. As a professional who knows what they're talking about.

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I've spent a lot of this conclusion—and this whole book—talking about what needs to change. But I want to end with what doesn't need to change. The skill. The pride. The instinct that tells a driver when a situation is going sideways before any warning light comes on. That's not broken. That's the foundation everything else should be built on. Safety departments don't need to fix drivers. They need to recognize what's already there—a deep, hard-won expertise that can't be replaced by telematics or coaching algorithms or new-hire orientation videos. When that recognition becomes the starting point rather than something drivers have to earn, the whole conversation shifts.

There's a word that gets thrown around too easily in this industry: partnership. It ends up on mission statements and training slides until it loses all meaning. But at its core, partnership is simple. It means you're in this together. It means my success is your success, and my failure is your failure. It means when a driver gets home safe, the safety department won. And when a safety department identifies a risk before it becomes a wreck, the driver won. There's no competition here. There's no scoreboard where one side's gain is the other side's loss. The only thing we're competing against is the road, the conditions, the fatigue, the distractions, and all the other forces that try to pull us toward disaster.

I'm not going to pretend this book has solved the problem. It hasn't. What it's done, I hope, is name the problem clearly enough that no one can pretend it doesn't exist. It's held up a mirror to both sides and said, look at what we've built—a system where the people who share the same goal can barely stand to be in the same room. That's not sustainable. That's not professional. And it's not necessary. There are better ways. I've seen them work. I've described them in these pages. The only question left is whether anyone will actually do them.

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So here's my challenge, as one professional driver to everyone reading this. Today. Not next week, not after the quarterly review, not when the budget cycle starts. Today. Do one thing that builds the bridge. If you're a safety manager, call a driver and ask them what they're seeing out on the road. Don't audit them. Don't coach them. Just listen. If you're a driver, walk into the safety office and mention something you've noticed—a hazard, a pattern, an idea—and deliver it as a professional who wants to help, not as a gripe. One conversation doesn't change a culture. But one conversation can start the shift. And every revolution in this industry, every real improvement in how we operate, started with someone deciding to speak up and someone else deciding to listen.

I'm going to finish my coffee and get back on the road now. The miles don't stop, and neither does the need for this conversation. But I'm leaving this rest stop with something I didn't have when I started writing this book: a genuine belief that the bridge can be built. Not because I'm optimistic by nature—anyone who knows me will tell you I'm not. But because I've seen too many drivers doing the right thing day after day, and too many safety managers genuinely trying to figure this out, to believe it's impossible. The pieces are all there. The desire is there. The stakes couldn't be higher. All that's left is for us to stop shouting across the divide and start walking toward each other. I'll see you on the other side.

**08**

**About the  
Author: Keith  
Alan Rahn**

## **The Man Behind the Wheel**

I never set out to be a writer. For over two decades, the left seat of a commercial truck was my office, my classroom, and my home. The road taught me things no training manual ever could. I learned to read weather patterns by the way the clouds bunched up over mountain passes. I learned to spot the subtle drift of a distracted driver three lanes over before they became a threat. But the most important thing the road taught me was this: the gap between what drivers know and what safety departments understand is wider than it has to be. And that gap gets people hurt.

I am a two-time TCA Highway Angel. The first time was in 2023 when I cornered a drunk driver trying to flee a crash at a Pennsylvania Turnpike plaza. The second was in 2024 when I found a stranded family on I-80 in heavy fog—no lights, no flares, a mother and three kids sitting in a live lane. Both times, I didn't act because a policy told me to. I acted because years on the road had sharpened instincts that no camera, no ELD, and no compliance scorecard can measure. Those instincts are what this book is really about.

Today I live in Radford, Virginia, and I still drive. But I also teach. I write practical guides on mountain driving, defensive techniques, and engine brake management—the kind of specific, boots-on-the-ground knowledge that keeps new drivers alive in terrain that doesn't forgive mistakes. This book is an extension of that mission. I wrote it because I've watched too many good drivers quit over safety policies that made sense on paper and no sense on asphalt. I wrote it because safety managers have told me in private that they want to do better but don't know how to reach their drivers. If we're going to fix this industry, we need honest talk from both sides. I'm starting the conversation from the left seat.

In "The Driver vs. The Safety Department," the author reveals the often-hidden rift between truck drivers and safety departments, highlighting the detrimental effects of a punitive culture and the missed opportunities for learning and collaboration. Through personal anecdotes and insights, the book advocates for a transformative approach built on mutual respect and open communication, positioning drivers and safety teams as allies rather than adversaries. By fostering a culture of trust, the trucking industry can enhance safety and efficiency, ultimately benefiting everyone on the road.

Keith Rahn

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