



Small Accidents, Big Trouble:

Five Steps for Reducing
High-Frequency Accidents



An **accident** is an event no one had any control over. **High-frequency accidents** are crashes that could have been prevented

Many carriers are constantly dealing with high-frequency accidents, such as accidents that occur during turning and backing. Each of these accidents is going to need to be investigated, losses will need to be paid, preventability determined, and corrective action taken. In other words, they are costing you time and money. Therefore, as a carrier you need to adopt the mindset that there is no such thing as a small accident, and all accidents must be prevented.

Preventing these accidents takes a disciplined approach by the carrier. Here is a five-step process that can be used:

1. Define high-frequency crashes
2. Understand the consequences of these crashes
3. Investigate every high-frequency crash and look for common causes
4. Take steps to prevent these crashes
5. Conduct specific training to prevent these crashes

Notice the use of the term “crash?” That’s because these incidents are not true accidents.

1. Defining high-frequency crashes

The first step is to **define and identify your high-frequency crashes**. This will involve reviewing your crash and loss data using the correct definition of a crash.

The best definition is, “Any unplanned incident that led to a loss or a potential loss, excluding breakdown-only incidents that did not result from driver action or inaction.”

Trainer Tip “Conducting training that prevents crashes is enhanced by the use of **narrative driving**. By asking the driver to narrate “What if?” questions and having them focus on defensive driving techniques, trainers can help drivers increase their time to make good decisions regarding their speed and space around other vehicles or hazards.”



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Once you have defined a crash, next look for crashes that fit the same profile, either by description (such as fixed object or two-vehicles at low speed) or driver activity at the time of the crash (turning, backing, low speed forward maneuvering, etc.), and start grouping them. Once the crashes are grouped, look for the crashes that are happening most frequently.

2. Understanding the consequences

To develop a return on investment that justifies action, we first need to look at what the consequences are, so the cost of inaction can be quantified.

Here are the consequences of these crashes:

- **Vehicle damage.** Even if there are no injuries and no damage was done to other property, many of these high frequency crashes result in vehicle damage. Here are a couple of examples:
 - A driver curbs a tire on a right or left turn, damaging both the tire and rim on the front axle of the trailer. The curb did not sustain any damage, but your vehicle required a \$1,000 on-road repair.
 - A driver backs into a trash dumpster while trying to back into a dock and sheers the right door off the trailer. The dumpster is undamaged, but repairing the door, hinges, and door frame cost over \$2,000 in parts and labor.
- **Property damage.** Many of these crashes result in damage to another person's property. Buildings, vehicles, poles, signs, lawns, and trees are examples of property that can be damaged as the result of one of these crashes.
- **Customer relations.** Doing damage to a customer's property leads to a challenging situation. You want a happy customer, but you do not want to settle the claim for more than it is worth. Arguing with a customer about the two drivers that backed or turned into something at their facility while asking for a rate increase could be challenging.

Do not be surprised if you discover that **50 to 75 percent** of your crashes involve low speed maneuvering situations (such as turning and backing incidents).





- **Damaged reputation.** In our social media world, mistakes are magnified. When one of your drivers takes down a pole on a right turn or backs into another vehicle at a dock, the world is likely to see it. Each one of the views of such a crash on social media is lowering your reputation within the industry.
- **More serious crashes in the future.** A lack of skill or knowledge, or a bad driving behavior is what got the driver into the crash. If these are not corrected, the driver is likely to repeat the crash, if not be involved in a more serious one. The difference between a small accident and a big one in many cases was luck. Had the driver above not only curbed the tire but also hit a power pole with a transformer, a car, or worse a pedestrian, the consequences of the same crash could have gone up exponentially.
- **Loss of drivers.** If the behavior that led to the crash is not corrected, and the driver is involved in additional crashes, you will have no choice but to cut the driver loose.
- **Liability.** If you had a driver that was involved in a series of minor crashes involved in a serious crash (injury or fatality), the fact that you did not correct the driver will become a major issue.

3. Investigating these crashes

When one of these crashes occurs, a standard accident investigation protocol should be followed. A typical protocol involves:

- **Gather all available data.** This includes any on-scene reports, driver statements, witness statements, pictures, police reports, the driver's logs, the driver qualification file and training record, vehicle inspection and damage reports/estimates, an overhead view of the crash area, diagrams, engine ECM downloads, etc.
- **Vet and interpret the data.** This involves verifying the accuracy of all data sources and dealing with any conflicting information.
- **Reconstruct the crash.** Put yourself into the situation and determine how the crash unfolded. If there were multiple vehicles involved, repeat this for each vehicle. Look at issues such as driver visibility, decisions, reactions and actions, etc.
- **Look for the root cause and causal factors.** Once the reconstruction is complete, determine the root cause of the crash and the causal factors. The root cause is the one action or inaction that set the event into motion. Causal factors are other links in the chain of events that led to the accident.
- **Determine preventability.** This involves using your judgement to locate actions, that if they were taken or not taken, would have prevented the crash from occurring. There are two broad areas when it comes to preventability,

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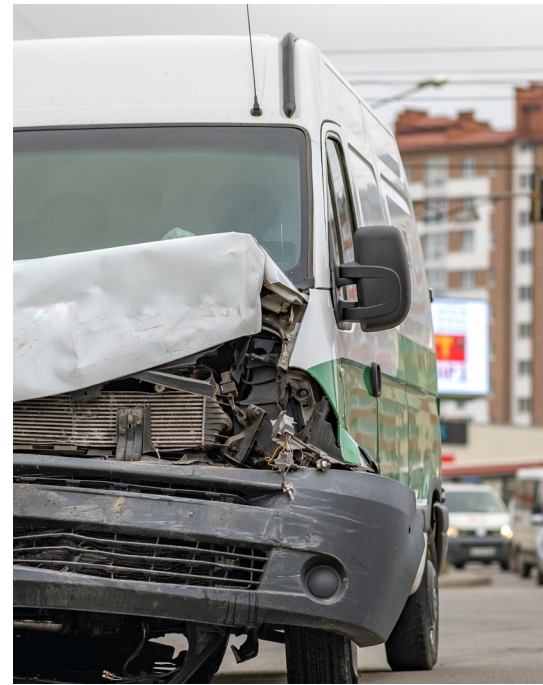


driver actions (or inactions) and company actions (or inactions). Driver actions include turning the vehicle short, not getting out and looking, or not checking the mirror or cross traffic at a key moment. Company actions could include putting a driver on the road that was not ready (inadequately trained), providing the driver with a faulty vehicle, (inadequate or damaged mirrors), or asking the driver to do too much (operate fatigued).

4. Taking preventive steps

So how do you prevent these crashes? It's not easy, but it can and has been done.

- **Vehicle Inspections.** The process begins by making sure drivers are doing vehicle inspections. If the driver has a vehicle defect that is affecting either the visibility or stability of the vehicle (such as a mirror, window, steering or suspension defect), the odds of a high-frequency crash go up considerably. Locating such defects during a vehicle inspection and having them addressed is how the odds are brought back down.
- **Driver Readiness.** As well as making sure the vehicle is ready to go, drivers should know to make sure they are ready to go. This includes planning the trip so they are in problem areas during non-peak periods, avoid roads their vehicles should not be on, and approaching docks from the correct directions. They also need to plan the trip so they will not be fatigued when they arrive in high-risk areas.
- **Situational Awareness.** Next, drivers need to adjust their driving to match the situation they are in. As an example, a driver that is moving through a congested yard or making a turn will need to be moving at a significantly reduced speed, be continually aware of the vehicle's position within its surroundings, plan steering movements early, and be continually checking mirrors and clearances, and making steering corrections.
- **Look & See.** If the driver is backing, the driver will need to understand blind areas and "get out and look." The driver should have the habit of always getting out of the vehicle to check and become familiar with the surroundings, and then get out and look as necessary to verify the location of anything that is not visible in the mirrors. Also, the better the driver is at maneuvering the vehicle, the less the chance of a crash, so drivers should be encouraged to develop their skills in the areas of turning and backing.
- **Train, Coach, Correct.** Finally, the company needs to make sure the driver is ready to go. This involves verifying the driver has the necessary skills and knowledge. This is done by training and evaluating drivers. The training provides the driver with the knowledge and skill necessary to operate effectively in the situations in question. Coaching and correcting is how skills are developed, and evaluation is how knowledge and skills are verified.



Carriers that have focused on using their preventability information to develop an end-to-end systematic approach have seen significant reductions in their high frequency crashes. **If you have done the legwork of defining these crashes, investigating them, and determining preventability, you already have your roadmap.**



5. Conducting specific training

As these crashes are normally caused by a lack of skill or knowledge, or a bad driving behavior, training is your greatest tool in preventing these crashes. When building or using a training program to address high-frequency crashes, consider using the following:

- **Classroom training.** Use the classroom to teach your policies, procedures, practices, and expectations when it comes to the situations that are leading to your high-frequency crashes.
- **Vehicle inspection training and testing.** This will make sure that the driver knows how to inspect the vehicle and what to do if the vehicle is not up to your standards. Also, by training and testing on this you will convince your drivers that this topic (and the others you take the time to train on) matter to you.
- **Range driving and testing.** Setting up a training range that matches the situations your drivers encounter (and seem to be having trouble with) is the next step in training to prevent your high-frequency crashes. Incorporating your policies, procedures and practices into realistic scenarios that include tight right and left turns, sight-side backing and blind-side curve and offset backing, and/or straight-line backing, and providing active coaching is how you do this effectively. Once the driver has learned your policies, procedures, and practices, and mastered the skill, testing is the next step. Testing is how you see the change in skill or behavior the training was intended to produce.
- **Road training.** Taking the driver on the road and determining if the driver can transfer what was learned in the classroom and on the range is the final step in the process. This involves using a road test route that incorporates tight maneuvering situations and realistic turns. It should also include backing the vehicle into a parking space that was not practiced in, to verify the backing knowledge and skills can be transferred to a different situation.
- **Remedial training.** If a driver that has completed training on the skills involved in the high-frequency crashes is involved in a crash, immediate retraining should follow (sometimes referred to as remedial or corrective action training). If this is not done, the lack of skill or knowledge, or bad driving behavior that led to the crash will not be corrected.
- **Effective trainers.** Trainers are the key to any training program. The trainers need to know how to teach, demonstrate, coach, correct, motivate, and evaluate drivers. In the case of training on high-frequency crash prevention, trainers need to be able to do this with complex topics and skills. Consider turning a large commercial vehicle.



The trainer will need to be able to **teach, demonstrate, coach, correct, motivate,** and **evaluate** the driver on everything from how to approach a turn, reducing to the correct speed, being in the correct lane and correct lane position, using the turn signaling correctly, using the mirrors and doing traffic checks on the approach and during and after the turn, dealing with traffic at the intersection, knowing when and how to actually turn the vehicle, deciding on mid-turn corrections, determining which lane to complete the turn into, positioned correctly on the new road, and checking traffic on the new road.

This skill involves a lot of teaching, coaching, correcting, evaluating, etc., in a short period. To do it successfully, the trainer must have specific training, knowledge, and skills. Now consider this: Turning is only one skill your trainers need to be competent at teaching.

When executing this step, if you do not have the expertise on staff to develop such a training program or do not have drivers that you believe could become good trainers, then looking outside of your company for help may be the way to go.

Don't leave it to luck

Too many carriers view high-frequency crashes as either bad luck or something that cannot be avoided. Hopefully, after reading this you have reached a different conclusion. If you define the problem, understand the consequences, investigate, find preventability issues, and take steps to address the findings, including having an effective training program, you can have an impact on your high-frequency accidents!

Trainer Tip “One of the best tools of a good driver trainer is the obstacle course. It offers an opportunity to expose complacent behaviors, such as proceeding without the driver fully recognizing the hazards that exist.

Drivers who are overconfident may struggle with common driving skills, such as close-quarter maneuvering, or with making good decisions whether it's safe to proceed.”



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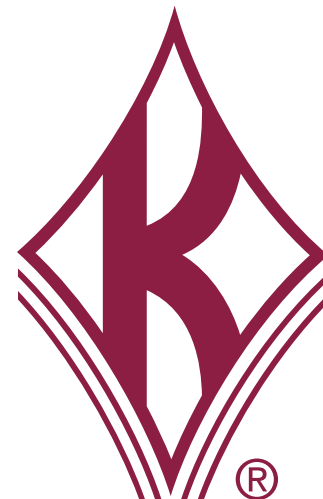
Tom Bray is a Sr. Industry Business Advisor in the Editorial Resources area at J. J. Keller & Associates, Inc. He specializes in motor carrier safety and operations management. In addition to the many publications he supports at J. J. Keller, Tom has been a frequent contributor to industry publications and websites, including Heavy Duty Trucking, truckinginfo.com, Transport Topics, Fleet Maintenance and Work Truck, among others. He has authored whitepapers and presented webinars on a number of key transportation subjects. He is also a frequent speaker at transport safety seminars and conferences on topics such as hours of service, vehicle maintenance, cargo security, and driver fatigue. Prior to joining J. J. Keller, Tom worked in the trucking industry for 22 years, with responsibility for DOT compliance, policy development, driver human resources, driver training, training program development, CDL testing, claims management, and accident and injury prevention. Tom is active in the Wisconsin Motor Carriers' Safety Management Council and the Wisconsin Motor Carriers' Safety Director/Supervisor Development Committee.



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