

Let's Talk Fleet Risk - Episode 4

Phil Hitchen, Belle Vue Manchester

Simon: Welcome to Let's Talk Fleet Risk - a podcast for those who manage drivers and their vehicles, and who want to reduce road risk in their organisation. I'm Simon Turner and I'm the campaign manager for Driving for Better Business - and my guest in this episode is Phil Hitchen, who's the Managing Director of Belle Vue Manchester, an award winning and quality branded transport provider. In this episode, Phil and I discuss the importance of driver personality to good service and maintaining high standards across multiple locations. We talk about reducing driver stress and recognising and rewarding good driver performance. And finally, we look at why awards are so important to the business, helping to drive a culture of consistent high standards.

(transition)

Simon: Hi Phil, and welcome to the podcast.

Phil: Morning Simon! Pleasure to be here.

Simon: Phil, most businesses only have to worry about the risks to their drivers or other road users, yet your vehicles are generally full of customers as well, which could be quite a daunting challenge. What's your view on work-related road risk at Belle Vue?

Phil: I think from a transport point of view... if you train your people right, your drivers right, do your safety checks and health and safety announcements, and show passengers what to do in the event of an emergency... I think if that comes second nature and ingrained in the way they just reel it off every job... I think if your maintenance team follow the operational guidelines and procedures, it just runs like clockwork and it's no fluke that your insurance claims records stay low, your MOT pass rates stay at 100%, when it comes to vehicle inspections... the traffic commission and DVSA alike with their inspections every 6 weeks; we like to do ours every 4 weeks because we operate from an ethos of 'a stitch in time saves nine' and it keeps the fleet running at optimum level.

Simon: So what's the biggest challenge you think you face in running a safe service for customers?

Phil: I think in 2019/20/21, it's evident there's a shortage of PCV and HGV drivers in the UK. I think we're quite proactive on training drivers to basically meet a service charter which requires things (to be a little higher standard) than the average. We have to recruit more numbers now to get the quality of driver we want, whereas 10 years ago they'd come flooding through the doors, you've got a nice fleet, you pay good wages, you're a nice company to work for and you look after your team. Right now, after a pandemic, coach drivers have gone into other trades... there is a huge shortage.

So for me, the biggest challenge at the moment, which has gone on for about 3 or 4 years since the CPC really kicked in, where older drivers retired and didn't want to go through the CPC, and there's a shortage of young drivers coming through, so I think the biggest

challenge to the industry and certainly our business is getting the right calibre of drivers through the door in the first instance.

Simon: And how do you then look at ensuring they've got the capabilities and the right attitude? How much effort do you put into driver assessment and training to ensure that they do deliver the level of service that you expect from them all?

Phil: We probably do a lot more than your average company, and we probably do some things differently than some of the top companies in the UK. My philosophy is we recruit personalities and we teach them to drive later. So, what we do is, straight from the offer and application form, we measure people's personalities. Once that's done, they do a driving assessment. If they get offered the position, they then do anything that could start from a 1 day to 5 day induction training, depending on experience. About 10 years ago, I knew our business could do a lot better, and I knew our drivers could drive better. I knew that as a business, the directors and the board and the management team could perform better - so we decided to put tracking systems on all of our fleet; what that did was tell us how drivers accelerate, how they brake and how they corner. We decided to use a system called Traffilog, because I perceive that to be the market leading system - National Express favoured that. Operators who work for National Express only seem to use the basics that National Express wanted to use, whereas we used everything. We literally drove peak performance driving, and then when we'd done that and we were saving copious amounts of fuel, which was about £63,000 per annum, we decided to use this personality tool to measure people so that we could get them to respond to passengers and give better service.

Simon: So with the tracking system then, that would typically give you a lot of data on driver behaviour - how much time do you spend analysing that data and how do you use that to improve performance and improve the service?

Phil: So, any bus or coach operation has key performance indicators. The accounts department, they have certain KPIs that they look at - the bank balance, the direct costs, the sales, the overhead. They're always looking at their dashboard of figures. In operations - in tracking our drivers let's say - we have people in compliance, whether it's watching CCTV or watching the tracking system, we have people watching the idling times. Basically, it's on a scoring system, and if you visualise a scoring system from 0-200... when we first set out, we had drivers averaging between 40 and 100, so 0-20 would be really good, it's what we call "The A Team". 20-50 is good, and 50-100 I class as average. Over 100-150 is inefficient, and 150-200 is technically dangerous. We made it company policy to get all our drivers under 50. When we achieved that, we had 1 or 2 stragglers, lurking around 60-70. And some of these guys were experienced, we're not talking about somebody who's just passed the PCV licence and is a bit of a novice. Just regarding accelerating, braking, and cornering. Imagine a coach going down a main road at 30mph, about a quarter of a mile away they see the lights turn to red - an educated driver will take his foot off the accelerator, cruise down to about 20mph, they'll see the lights change and he'll put his foot to feather the accelerator and he'll build that back up. And if you imagine you saw a chart where people are driving erratically, it would go up in the air and then drop down when he brakes, it would go like a zig-zag. When you get tracking education into drivers, those sharp points become smooth ridges, like a wave on the ocean. And I had drivers saying to me, "...what are you going to teach me about coach driving - I've been driving 20 years", and I say - this is science, let's just go with it. They say "...well the girl who's monitoring it doesn't even have a PCV licence - what's she going to teach me?". And then suddenly they did get all these notifications about over-accelerating, cornering incorrectly, and braking. We educated them - we'd send supervisors and operations managers out with them. And literally in a 2 month period we'd get all our team under 50. Then we got a league table; we have a bus league, a school bus league, and a coach league. And what we do is we have £300 worth of prizes, so basically the top performing driver gets £150 a month, the second and third placed drivers get £75

each. And it's not because of the money, but it's a bit like soldiers - you've got Dad's Army, the regular army, the paratroopers, the SAS... Coach drivers are the same. They want to be in the SAS. They want to walk in their driver room knowing they're a top performing driver. When we got the league tables going - and it wasn't just for the money, although that did influence people - they would compete with their colleagues to get the top scores, and that's driving with a 0 score. That means no events, no harsh braking, no over-accelerating, and those KPIs that our compliance team see, if they go above the 20 which we class as 'The A Team', what happens is, when people are driving efficiently, they drive safer, passengers get a comfier ride, there are less roadside RTAs, there are more vehicles on the road rather than in the garage being repaired. If you invest in that system, and you invest in the right supervisors and compliance team tracking, drivers do perform better. When they don't, you know there's education/training to get them where they should be. And if they haven't got the desire to improve, you replace them.

Simon: I love the idea of the SAS of coach drivers. How have the drivers responded to that then? That seems like a fairly comprehensive driver recognition system, where you really are rewarding the right attitude and good behaviours. How did the drivers respond to that?

Phil: Well in the early days, if you look at coach driving over the 60s and the 70s, throughout the North-West of England for example, you had streets and streets of neighbours getting on a coach and going on a jolly to Blackpool for a week. Then the motor car came along, and drivers used to have this situation with the passengers, where they'd go on holiday and, while everyone's having their dinner, they'd swap all the pyjamas of everyone on the first floor with those on the second floor, and cause chaos. Once they were out of that coach depot, they were very much a law unto themselves.

Fast forward to 2020, a driver's now got a tracking system monitoring his every move, any operations manager's mobile phone can see where any fleet vehicle is at any time, they can see whether the engine's on or off, we have live CCTV on the vehicles to see what's moving - so they're very much controlled. When that came in, over the last 10 years, drivers were a little bit negative towards it. But once they realised that if they have an insurance claim against them that's not their fault, it's non-fault, we have 8 cameras all over the vehicle - 4 inside, 4 outside - those cameras support the evidence of the story of the drivers, and we have non-fault claims. At first drivers were a little bit negative, but in this day and age now we live in a transparent world, it's just second nature to the driver, they take it on board and they quite like it really. They've got cameras there covering them, operations can support them if there were any hostile events on the road, which are very rare. We do live in a busy society now on the motorway, and local and regional roads - you do get unsavoury behaviour sometimes with motorists, and I think drivers feel a bit more secure now.

Simon: Yeah. It's quite clear that you put a lot of effort into this, and I know that on the website you've got not only your safety policy but also your core values on safety. So what do those core values mean to you, as the managing director of that business?

Phil: What they mean to me is, if I went to a restaurant and I see a nice menu, and there's a star with the core values about where the food is sourced from, how the chef is passionate about cooking certain ingredients in a certain way to give a certain flavour... that would really enthuse me to buy into that brand. Everybody has favourite brands - I buy clothes from Hugo Boss, or there are certain Italian restaurants that I frequent in Manchester. But when it comes to coach travel, there are people who pick up the phone once a year and want a jolly to the seaside, or to the Christmas party. There are other corporate organisations and

schools and education centres that have passengers moving every day. With our core values, it's not something we're playing at; it's our livelihoods, it's something we've done for decades. We like people to understand our ethos on coach travel, and our ethos is every school trip should be safe - and not only that, it should be fun-packed, it should be a carefree adventure. I remember when I was about 10 years of age, I had a coach trip to Chatsworth House. I haven't got a clue who the driver was or who the company was, I just went to a nice stately home. If somebody said to me that they went on a Belle Vue coach trip and they didn't know the driver's name, and they didn't know it was our company I would be horrified, because we like our drivers to present to the passengers in a certain way. I think values are very important for any business.

Simon: You operate obviously across the country, from London right up to Scotland, and I think you operate throughout Europe as well, and you subcontract to other companies and you've got a really broad operation geographically - and I think you've grown quite rapidly too. So how do you ensure those standards are maintained across all the locations in which you operate?

Phil: If we do a deal with a customer, or we take on a new member of staff, or we subcontract to another company, we like to communicate well, and the deal has to work for both parties.

So, if we take on a new member of staff, we promise to pay every month on the 7th of the month, we promise to pay bonuses for peak performance, and there are other perks and benefits which I won't bore you with that we promise to do. What we expect in return in that contract of employment is to be smart and well-groomed, to carry out safety checks, to act in the company's best interests, and to be on best performance day-in, day-out. When it comes to dealing with subcontractors - so we operate from Manchester and the North-West of England, we operate all around the UK, mainly in the North-West, a little bit in London and around certain cities like Glasgow and Edinburgh, we do tours into Europe - all those tours into Europe are not from operating centres in Europe. They're all trips that have come from the North-West of England, or in the Midlands, or occasionally down South. They'll go all around Europe, and they are for tour operators or private hire groups, with the strategic partners we have located. So we have an array of operators, and I think about 8-10 years ago, somebody phoned me up and said "I want 5 coaches in London, I want you to do it", and we didn't have any fleet in London, so we started getting industry partners with our same ethos of quality, vehicle presentation, maintenance standards, we'd obtained their licences and insurance, their operational guidelines, we'd get them to sign paperwork... we'd do a cross-deal, so if they represent us in London, we represent them in Manchester, and then that happened with other cities. Occasionally - very, very occasionally - you might get a slight poor performance with one operator, and we'll drop that operator. Normally we just marry up with drivers who want to work with our ethos, and other subcontractors who work on that. We promise to pay at the rate agreed, and have a working relationship that works, really, and is reciprocated.

Simon: I know you subcontract work out to partner companies as you said, but equally you're effectively a subcontractor to some corporate clients. One of the things I wanted to delve a little bit deeper into was, where you're an outsourced provider for a business, and that business effectively still has a duty of care to its staff - you might be running a minibus shuttle service for a business, or a coach trip to take business directors or clients out somewhere - so your client has a duty of care to ensure the safety of all those staff, and that the transport service is provided in accordance with the law, it's done safely, the vehicles are all well-maintained and all of that. So how importantly do you think your clients take that, and

how importantly do you take that responsibility to ensure that you can prove to that client, that business customer, that you do all of these things to such a high standard?

Phil: Well, everything we do is audited, whether it's vehicle presentation, driver service, driver presentation, driving skills, etcetera. And they can leave comments; they can leave negative comments for improvement, they can leave praise, they can give an overall driver summary in a testimonial. So when we get those after-sales reports round the table every Friday afternoon, tens and tens of after-sales forms, sometimes hundreds - we will look at those, and we're not looking for the 10/10 and the glowing testimonial, although that's very good; we can use those testimonials on websites. What we're looking for is somebody who says something like "everything was 10/10, the service was great, however the coach was 5 minutes late". We think it's really important to get a great start on any journey; if you're late, if there's a breakdown, if the customer's frustrated... It takes hours out of that day to pull that back. And it can be pulled back, but our philosophy, just like preventive maintenance, is to look at the after-sales forms, look where we can improve the business, and it's evolving all of the time.

Simon: I find that bit really interesting actually, because fatigue and stress and things like that are significant contributors to collisions and such like, and actually what you're doing - you called it preventive maintenance - what you're actually doing is removing some of that stress from the drivers, because they're all more prepared, aren't they? They're in earlier, they know what to expect - it's taken a lot of that stress away from drivers, which just makes them calmer and less likely to have an accident, doesn't it?

Phil: Very much so. If you look at a pyramid of an organisation - your board of directors at the top, then the senior management, then the operations team, then your garage staff, and then your valeters, and then your drivers - in any normal organisation you would see the pyramid with the directors at the top and the drivers at the bottom. Really, you need to reverse that so the drivers are at the top and the directors are at the bottom. Because really, drivers are out there battling through traffic; congestion these days is far more serious than it was say 30 years ago. Drivers need every resource to be able to execute their job to a high standard. They feed things back, and I think listening to the drivers and changing things means people feel more valued. I think in terms of taking details, and being thorough on bookings, rather than the driver being a bit blind, it all makes for a calmer day. It's all down to the planning really Simon.

Simon: Yeah. And you clearly do that well. I know you've got your safety policies on the website as well, you're proud of those, and they clearly work extremely well in practice. And you've got a whole load of UK coach awards as a company. You've been awarded 'Best Coach Company', 'Best Business Coach Company', 'Best Business', 'Best Customer Service', Innovation Awards... and it's not just the business, it's individual staff as well - your staff have received industry recognition. Not just the drivers, you've got engineers, customer service staff, office staff - you've obviously created a really fantastic culture in the business where everybody in Belle Vue follows the values of the business - they mean as much to the individual staff as they do to you. So, has that translated into benefits for the business, in terms of higher performance, lower crashes, lower costs? What are the business benefits from operating the business as you do?

Phil: What the benefits are... we have a very, very strong people culture. Around 7 years ago we invested in 5 brand new Mercedes-Benz Turismo coaches. And Evobus - who we

bought them off, the Mercedes-Benz dealership - invited us over to Turkey to watch the coaches being made. And then they invited us to Petronas Formula 1 team, and we had a tour around one of their factories. My co-director, who's a bit of a petrolhead, saw Nico Rosberg's Formula 1 racing car - I wasn't particularly interested in that... But what I was interested in was the ethos of Mercedes-Benz Formula 1 team. When you see Nico Rosberg shake the champagne when he wins a race, everybody thinks he's the man. What they don't realise is, when he goes in the pit, there are 12 engineers there, one with an earpiece. And in that earpiece are 42 engineers back in Northampton with a computer connected to some part of that car. So the moral of the story is, it's a team game. Coach driving is exactly the same. If we're going to get a 10/10 performance during a coach tour or corporate trip, those mechanics have to be on board, the operators have to be on board, the accounts and compliance and HR teams... they're all part of that. So, we really get across a great team ethos. We want people who are passionate about what they do. When we look at industry awards, we think "who are the best performing people in our business?". We encourage our people to compete, because what we like them to do is have a taste of success. There are all sorts of awards for Unsung Heroes - someone who goes around, does a great job, and never gets any thanks or recognition, a bit like a defender or midfielder in a football team, not the guy who gets all the goals. We like to decorate our people, and once they get a taste of that, success breeds success. And when somebody sees that we're working with the UK Coach Driver of the Year, they all want a taste of that. The only reason we do that, is that after that accolade, they have to maintain a high standard of service - customer service - on that coach. And that just brings more business in.

Simon: I was going to ask that actually - delivering to that level, and the staff culture, and the awards - that requires a lot of effort as a team to put all that together. Does that actually translate into a high level of business? Does it make a difference when you're pitching for work?

Phil: Of course it makes a difference. If you were going to hire a coach to transfer your staff or guests or clients, and you've got a company who not only invest in modern vehicles but have got all these safety standards and KPIs that are quite impressive, and they've got a team who clearly demonstrate that the customer is number one and king, and they communicate more effectively - I don't know any other passenger transport business in England who teaches their drivers to communicate with their passengers in that way.

Simon: I think it's one of the biggest benefits I see, when it's clear that a company is operating at that level it really does translate into a better impression with the potential clients, it helps retain business, it helps win new business, so I think you've proved that again. You've been running Belle Vue in its current guise now for around 25 years I think. So I've got a final question for you, which is what's the most important thing you've learnt around managing drivers and managing vehicles in that time?

Phil: I think it's learning to light people's fire really. People have different passions - I mean if you want somebody to perform at a certain level you need to find their switch that turns them into someone who's got desire. Desire to perform. The biggest thing I see across the industry, when you go to coach parks, you go to Alton Towers - you see different levels of desire of drivers. Some are there just for the sake of it; some are there just to earn a living; some drivers will do the minimum they have to do to get through the day; and others just exude customer service. So, I think it's finding people's desire, trying to line up their personal goals, and wants and needs for their aspirations, and lining them up with the company's business model. And when that happens, fantastic things start to happen. We've won

Engineer of the Year in our garage, we've had other people take silver and bronze, and I'm talking young people here, not people who have been experienced for decades. We've had Unsung Heroes in operations, we've had UK Coach Driver of the Year, 2 years ago. I think for me, the biggest thing I've learnt about the business is nothing mechanical or operational. It's about human behaviour, and how we can get the peak performing teams.

Simon: Fantastic final pearl of wisdom, thank you Phil. Thank you so much for being on the show and sharing your insights with us, really appreciate it.

Phil: You're very welcome Simon, I wish you all the best.

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Simon: If you manage drivers and their vehicles, and you face similar issues to those discussed in this podcast, there are links in the show notes to some useful resources on the Driving for Better Business website. And these are all free to access. If you enjoyed the conversation, please don't forget to hit subscribe - so you know when the next episode is released - and please also give us a 5 star review as this helps us to get up the podcast rankings and makes it more visible to others who might also find it useful. You can follow us - **that's @DrivingforBetterBusiness on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn**, and most importantly, please help us to spread the word. All our resources are free for those who manage fleets, and their employees who drive for work. Thank you for listening to Let's Talk Fleet Risk, and I look forward to welcoming you to the next episode.