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All Hands on Deck: Managing and Mitigating Risk in a Crisis

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Assessing and Managing Risk in an Evolving Transportation Industry

From trucking to aviation and busing to rail, the transportation industry has never been under more pressure from internal and external forces.

In trucking, fuel cost volatility has never been higher due to ongoing turmoil abroad. In aviation, the focus is often on Transportation Security Administration (TSA) employees adversely impacted by all-too-frequent government shutdowns. In both industries, worker shortages are leaving trucks idle and aircraft grounded because drivers and pilots cannot be hired, trained, and retained quickly enough to keep pace with turnover and an aging workforce.

These challenges also can have a direct impact on how organizations are judged on safety. Accidents and incidents are routinely captured on smartphones and quickly spread across social media, fueling public concern about the reliability of critical transportation systems. Meanwhile, charter bus operators serving schools, tours, and private events must operate within a heavily regulated environment, often with limited resources to conduct the kind of detailed investigations that lead to meaningful safety improvements.

Against this backdrop, transportation leaders must find ways to manage risk while maintaining efficient and profitable operations. The following best practices can help operators across trucking, aviation, and bus transportation strengthen safety and resilience in a rapidly changing environment.

Strengthening Safety Culture

Safety performance begins with organizational culture. While regulations provide an important framework, they cannot replace a workplace environment where employees feel responsible for identifying and mitigating risks.

Leading transportation companies encourage **open reporting of hazards and near-misses**, allowing operators, mechanics, and dispatchers to flag concerns before they escalate into incidents. Non-punitive reporting systems, similar to those used in aviation safety management programs, can help organizations identify patterns and address systemic issues.

Equally important is leadership commitment. Employees must consistently see that management prioritizes safety over operational pressures such as schedules or delivery targets.

Addressing Workforce Shortages

Labor shortages continue to affect every corner of the transportation sector. Many experienced drivers, pilots, and maintenance professionals are reaching retirement age, while recruiting new talent remains difficult and expensive.

Organizations that succeed in this environment tend to invest heavily in **training, mentorship, and long-term career development**. Apprenticeship programs and structured onboarding, while common in these industries, are critical in helping new hires transition into demanding operational roles more effectively.

Retention is equally critical. Competitive compensation, improved scheduling practices and opportunities for advancement can significantly reduce turnover—an outcome that benefits both operational stability and safety performance.

Leveraging Technology for Risk Management

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in transportation safety and operational oversight.

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In trucking and bus operations, telematics and fleet monitoring systems provide real-time data on driver behavior, vehicle performance, and route conditions. These tools can help identify risky driving patterns, improve fuel efficiency, and support proactive maintenance, but they are not always popular with employees or unions.

In aviation, flight data monitoring and safety management systems allow operators to regularly analyze operational data and detect potential risks before they lead to incidents. Similar approaches are increasingly being adopted in other transportation sectors.

Predictive maintenance systems are another valuable tool. By analyzing vehicle or aircraft performance data, organizations often detect early signs of equipment failure and schedule repairs before breakdowns occur.

Improving Incident Investigation

When accidents or near-misses occur, the investigation process should focus on identifying underlying causes rather than assigning blame.

Effective investigations analyze operational data, maintenance records, and human factors to determine what conditions allowed an incident to occur. This approach helps organizations implement corrective actions that reduce the likelihood of similar events in the future.

For smaller operators, particularly charter bus companies with limited internal safety resources, partnering with outside consultants or industry associations can help ensure investigations produce meaningful insights.

Preparing for Economic Volatility

Transportation operators must also manage financial risks associated with fluctuating fuel prices, supply chain disruptions, and broader economic uncertainty.

Strategic planning can help mitigate these challenges. Many companies leverage fuel hedging strategies, diversify supplier relationships, or invest in fuel-efficient equipment.

Operational flexibility is equally important. Cross-training employees and developing contingency staffing plans can help organizations maintain service levels during periods of workforce disruption.

Maintaining Regulatory Compliance

Transportation safety regulations exist to protect passengers, workers, and the public. Compliance with federal agencies such as the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) remains a core responsibility for operators.

Regular internal audits, compliance training, and up-to-date documentation can help organizations avoid regulatory violations and maintain strong safety records.

More importantly, companies that treat compliance as a foundation for operational excellence rather than a simple administrative requirement often achieve stronger long-term performance.

Navigating the Road Ahead

Despite the pressures facing the transportation sector, opportunities remain for operators willing to take a proactive approach to risk management.

By strengthening safety culture, investing in workforce development, adopting advanced technology, and

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maintaining disciplined operational practices, transportation companies can position themselves to meet today's challenges while building a more resilient future.

For trucking fleets, aviation operators, and bus companies alike, managing risk effectively is no longer simply a regulatory obligation, it is an essential business strategy for sustaining safe, reliable, and profitable operations.

A Few Thoughts on Crisis Communications

In today's digital environment, transportation incidents can quickly attract widespread public attention. A single video recorded on a smartphone can reach millions of viewers within hours.

Organizations should therefore be prepared to respond with **clear and transparent communication** when incidents occur. Providing timely updates, cooperating with investigators, and demonstrating a commitment to corrective action can help maintain public confidence.

Another important component of crisis preparedness is ensuring visibility into online commentary via social media monitoring services such as Muckrack and Sprout Social. Any good PR agency can provide these services on an as-needed basis and they should be part of your preparedness package.

Finally, conducting executive training and drills can be a difference maker when it comes to an actual crisis. Getting prepared in advance of a crisis is the best time to do that; trying to do it in the middle of a crisis is the worst. Doing this training and showing contingency plans that result from comprehensive risk assessments is an easy and cost-effective way to have your Board (and you!) rest easier at night.