

Roads Culture and Driving Behaviours

I have recently had the good fortune to travel, once again to India. I always enjoy visiting this amazing country mainly because the people are so friendly and welcoming but also because it is just so different.

One of the most striking differences that anyone who has been to India will recognise is the collective behaviour on the roads. Whilst this is not something that I necessarily relish, it is certainly fascinating to observe and has many parallels with the work in which I am involved because it is all about the culture and the resultant behaviours. Sadly the WHO report that more than 100,000 people are killed on the roads in India every year. The largest group is, unsurprisingly, the most vulnerable: pedestrians, cyclists and the drivers of 2 and 3 wheelers – motorbikes, scooters and auto-rickshaws.

What I find most interesting is the collective mindset of drivers. Everyone wants to be in front; every opportunity to gain an advantage and fill a gap is taken; nobody willingly gives way or lets another driver in. It certainly appears to be a case of every driver for themselves and the resultant disorder almost certainly slows everyone down. On a 3-lane road you could expect to find 6 vehicles across. At intersections the right of way appears to be dependent on the existing flow of traffic – until someone from a different direction manages to squeeze in thus allowing those behind them to follow-on with the new-found advantage. Once in a lane the tendency is to stick with it which results in overtaking routinely occurring on both sides. Throw in for good measure a vehicle going the wrong way up a dual carriageway and of course the ubiquitous cow wandering blissfully across the road and you have, in short, complete lack of order and discipline.

India is full of really intelligent, sensible and resourceful people, so why does everyone behave like this on the roads? Simple –it is because everyone behaves like this on the roads. It is the driving culture and as is so often the case, it is a culture in which it is almost impossible for any one individual not to conform.

How could we possibly deal with a situation like this? Is it a lost cause? No, it does not have to be like this although let us not pretend that it would be easy to change.

What is required is a structured, systematic approach.

First we must ensure we have the right conditions and infrastructure in place. In the workplace this would be the tools, equipment, guarding, barriers, workplace layout, segregation and other engineered controls. On the roads this would include: road design, and layout with adequate capacity, signage, routing (e.g. avoiding new roads going through small villages); fencing and barriers to keep animals and pedestrians off the carriageway with dedicated crossing points; and control measures such as traffic lights, roundabouts and clear stop/give way delineation.

Once the infrastructure is in place the next step is to work on implementing the systems. In the workplace this would include: policies, procedures, risk assessments, permits-to-work, lock-out-tag-out; training and assessment of competence; audits and inspections. For the roads this might include: regular awareness campaigns, testing, licensing, a highway code, vehicle maintenance and road worthiness tests; all accompanied by a strong and consistent

enforcement regime. Getting all the above in place would be a long and painful process, especially with the implementation of a robust enforcement policy.

Having established all of this the emphasis can then switch to working on the hearts and minds of the people so that they are not just following the right behaviours because they are afraid of being caught, but because they genuinely recognise all of the potential consequences and the impact these would have on them and their families. We have seen this to a large extent with drink driving and seatbelts in the UK over the past 20 years. Eventually most people will come to follow the rules because they believe it is the right thing to do. And it is only most people that we need to convert. Once the majority have implemented a better approach it is easier for others to join in.

Of course we don't really go through this whole process in such obvious steps; they overlap and complement each other. One thing is for sure though, if we do not see strong leadership from the top, in this case a willingness from the authorities to invest in infrastructure, send out regular, strong messages, and take firm action when people chose to behave unsafely, nothing will change. Just as in a workplace if managers walk past unsafe acts you can never hope to see real change.

I will finish with an observation I made whilst sat in a queue for a toll booth in Gurgaon near Delhi. I looked to one side to see the driver of an auto-rickshaw pull up in the adjacent queue. As soon as he stopped his head lolled forward as he fell sound asleep!