



Mind Your Driving

By Guy Bird

Some of the freshest ideas on risk management are contained in a new book published last week called Mind Driving. The most dangerous thing you can do is not read it.

'Driver safety' and its sometimes evil twin 'risk management' can be the most deadly dull subjects on earth – not because we all care less about dying on the roads – but because many of those that teach and promote them have lost sight of how to make those subjects interesting and truly engage people into becoming better drivers.

Government scare tactic campaigns on how your tendency to drive a fraction over 30mph makes you a potential killer don't help. And humourless driver training experts preaching the virtues of virtual hazard spotting in dull PowerPoint presentations that cost your company time and money but don't necessarily make your drivers safer are almost as bad. The targeted driver in both cases can often just be made to feel naughty about their perceived shortcomings (and often ends up telling those in power what they want to hear, not what they actually do, when driving).

Even the programmes geared up to spot such fibbing still don't make them better drivers – they just identify the bad drivers who then get packed off to driver training camp, like a day at borstal, and return unreformed.

In the end, the avalanche from the supposed moral high ground engulfs many normal individuals who lose motivation to do better and just switch off to all advice (even the good stuff) – potentially creating an even more dangerous driving mindset.



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Where's the sex?

The reason why I consider a new book out this month called *Mind Driving* by Stephen Haley 'sexy thinking' is because of its attractively honest and non-partisan approach to changing that mindset without sounding like another rule book. He starts the book just wanting to uncover what it is that makes safer drivers, so we can learn from their experiences to become better ourselves and then reignite a passion for driving – a process that should hopefully be fun as well as rewarding.

Haley – an engineering graduate and retired IBM employee – had no road safety campaigning background or driver training heritage when he started the project. Instead, he says he just had two kids close to motoring age he wanted to explain safe driving to.

He recounts his voyage of discovery as to what safe driving is in a tone infused with simple science-based logic. He never preaches but merely shares his thoughts with the reader as he tries to understand the subject. In the process, he talks about the questionable strategy of the recent speed kills campaigns and the absolute need for drivers to take responsibility for their actions.

Loud plaudits for the book have already come from all quarters of the road safety industry – from members of the House of Lords, RAC, the AA and Drive & Survive – to more radical organisations like Safe Speed. Part of the reason is that Haley's humility on the subject is infectious.

For instance, early on he realises good drivers are safe more as a result of thinking skills rather than physical ones: "Driving is actually a mainly thinking task. The physical actions simply carry out what the thinking has carefully decided to do. So safety or danger is in the decisions about what to make the car do – well before the action is taken. This makes driving a 'thinking task with physical involvement' not the other way around.

It is a bit like chess, where the pieces must be physically moved in order to play, but the outcome lies in the mental skill. The key is that when the thinking is right, the right actions will follow".

Safety and danger

Yes, Haley's thoughts might sound a bit overblown to our cynical world, but all he is doing is applying some logic to a subject that is all too often clouded by high emotion. Take his musings on whether expert driver thinking can actually 'create safety'. When struggling over a point he often reaches for the dictionary to help clarify:

"'Safety' is defined as 'freedom from danger'. It exists only as the absence of danger. So nothing increases safety directly, instead it acts to reduce a danger. From that it didn't take long to realise that handling danger on the road happens in four parts that work in a cycle:

- Spotting where the danger is
- Assessing how serious it is
- Deciding what to do
- Taking the necessary action.

These are also the steps in any basic risk management process, so this tells us that safe driving is in fact an exercise in actively managing risk."

From this fundamental point he positions risk management at the heart of the individual driving process – not just something to be administered from afar by a fleet manager – and works out what affects driving in a relatively easy to follow flow diagram identifying eight skills sets (see previous page).

His book focuses much more heavily on the five of those eight skills – 'Beliefs', 'Sense of danger', 'Learning from experience', 'Observation' and 'Risk assessment and control' – that he believes have not had enough emphasis in traditional books and training before, rather than the three already more widely covered – namely 'Rules and regulations', 'Fitness check' and 'Car control'.

Haley is at pains to stop drivers thinking that risk management decisions of 'how fast', 'how close', 'when to go', 'when not to' and so on are so straight forward, as he puts it: "It is reckless to assume that good decisions are just 'common sense' or are bestowed on drivers through rules and regulations."

Much emphasis is also paid to the need to master all eight skills equally: "The overall standard is set by the weakest component and our aim is to improve not just the parts that seem most obvious or easiest to do, but the skill in total. An unbalanced ability can be actually dangerous. For example, if being brilliant at just 'Car control' leads you to believe you can handle any situation you meet."

Once the skills needed have been defined within the framework, the biggest chapter is devoted to working out how to gain such skills. But even here Haley is at pains to point out that Mind Driving is not just another driver training manual.

"It is not trying to invent a new 'driving system' or more lists of instructions to follow. It will simply reveal what is going on and show more of what drivers are really doing. It is not even something you need to learn. Just understanding the framework is enough, and being able to refer back to it readily later."

Each section includes examples of what each skill means.

The very first is the potentially woolly 'Beliefs'. Unsurprisingly, it's about considering the best 10 beliefs to create a 'mindset' that helps you control risk but it's also how to actually believe in them rather than pretend you do, as Haley sagely expounds: "The more of them you are able to genuinely adopt, the safer you will be, and it is your decision. If there are any you hesitate over, try asking yourself if you would like other road users to have the belief and see if it helps convince you."

The first and most important belief – "arriving safely" is something few would disagree with on the surface and obvious enough – but only if you put it above everything else.

As Haley says: "In truth everyone will have their own priorities. Yet every day you will meet drivers who seem to be getting them wrong, and it helps to give your own objectives some thought. Although your list may change from day to day, or even during a journey there is one aim that should always be at the top. And it will help you position the others. It is simply to arrive safely. Because there is little point in setting out without this as the most important thing, it should be easy to accept. No objective in a journey is more vital, and this becomes therefore, your own simple pre-condition for everything you do."

Enjoy driving again

His tenth and last belief – "to take pride in your skills and enjoy driving" – is much more unusual and sets the tone for the whole book: namely that feeling good about what you do well will make you better at it. Again there's a practical motive for this.

"Allowing yourself to feel good is vital in anything you want to do well. It is hard to give your best to something you would rather not be doing. Driving is probably too much of a part of your life to accept it as just a tedious chore. Let's also break the irrational taboo that some people would put around fun. Enjoyment is not another word for recklessness. Indeed the expert control of risk is a far better buzz than anything about losing it, because the highest thrill is in mastering what we do."

By mastering driving we are also taking responsibility for it and our effect on others around us. Time and time again Haley talks about not just spotting potential hazards but acknowledging that you are a hazard too – that the whole process starts with you – how you think, prepare, observe what's going on round you and then place yourself in the road to avoid risk.

Over and over again – the useful examples of best practice ring out from the pages – and you can hear yourself saying "of course, that's so obvious" – but it is the way it is all said and framed that makes it so fresh – and it is exactly what made me read on (to the end of the 200-page book). I truly hope it will make thousands more of you do so too. This book should be essential reading for anyone interested in reducing deaths on the road – and (hopefully) once you're converted it should be every fleet manager's responsibility to make ALL your drivers read it too.

That's a tough call but it's your call. Speech over.