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Opinion: Bird's eye view

Haley's comet

By **Guy Bird**

If the Government reads the most important new book on road safety for years it could have an earth-shattering impact on its policy.

If you are in management and have even a passing concern for the safety of your workforce, then you need to be aware of a new book promoting a fresh approach to driver skills.

Mind Driving by Stephen Haley is an absolute must-read. And don't take my word for it. The acclaim from all quarters of the road safety industry for a book that was only launched last week has been incredible. Here are a few highlights:

"Brilliant. This is the book we wanted to publish eight years ago. I found myself agreeing with every paragraph." (Drive & Survive)


"A new approach like this is urgently needed. Driver skill is the biggest untapped potential in road safety." (RAC)


"For any driver these new skills will change the way they think - and definitely build better safety." (AA)

"In years to come Mind Driving will be remembered as a milestone in the history of road safety. Much of the content is known to the safest drivers but has never previously been seen in print. The single best thing we could do for road safety right now is stop all work at the DfT for a day and require everyone there to read the book. At the end of the day there will be light." (Safe Speed)

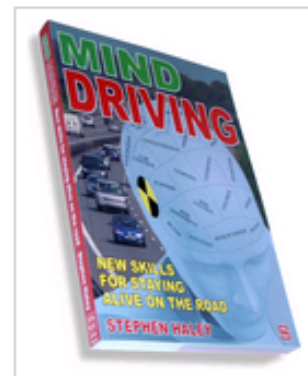
Okay, you get the point. Apart from the excellent thinking (see our risk management feature devoted to the book on page 13), it is the non-preachy tone that makes it so refreshing. Road safety books are not usually best sellers or rip-roaring reads, yet I finished the whole 200-plus-page book in my spare time over a weekend. It really is a good read that doesn't over-moralise and finger wag.

Its biggest hurdle, however, is being opened in the first place. As Steve Johnson of Drive & Survive worries, "it's a bit of a heavy tome. Even if issued free of charge to all drivers I think it could end up collecting dust on a shelf".

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Powerful

A whole industry has grown up around trying to scare businesses into action - "driving is more dangerous than coal mining"; "don't be a bastard, drive slower regardless of the situation"; or "go on my safety course for only £400 per delegate, think of the duty of care brownie points". The message is: follow our rules and you'll be okay, or at least you can say you tried when the duty of care police come calling. What Mind Driving does, however, is make you think for yourself and enjoy the process, which is much more powerful.

It's not perfect - ideas are often repeated and sometimes Haley takes too long to reach a point. On the first criticism, Haley would argue this makes the book easier to dip into rather than read from cover to cover, but still.

The endless use of clip art - often badly drawn and sometimes just plain odd - poorly illustrates many of the good points.

One particular stinker is a weakly rendered cartoon of Sherlock Holmes, replete with magnifying glass, looking at a bunch of miniature cars to illustrate how drivers need to decide where to direct their attention on the road. And the colour-coded picked-out sentences are helpful, not so much in the way the author intended, but by breaking up the monotony of what would be otherwise endless black and white text.

But these are petty gripes. I even find myself forgiving and (almost) ignoring the scattergun use of exclamation marks (Stephen - if you ever re-print you could easily lose about 99% of them without weakening your point). The Government's Think! ad campaigns are far slicker, but have less impact because their endless shock tactics ceases to work through their very repetition - like a Hollywood movie that thinks more guns and killings will find more viewers. At some point you need a plot that holds together, and this is what Mind Driving has.

Hidden agendas?

There's no hidden agenda to this book, unlike many driver training companies that need to sell you their vision of safety to stay in business.

Haley is retired and claims he only started the project because he was worried about his children learning to drive, and has only then pursued the project beyond its initial (free) website offering to influence Government policy. The fact the web advice is no longer online now the book is on sale was, says Haley, at the behest of his publisher.

Mind Driving, however, isn't ever likely to be a best seller - what it should be is in the hands of every one of your company car drivers. But how you make them read it is a tough one.

If you really want your drivers to read the book, you must incentivise the process. Buy the book for all your drivers (you're sure to get a fleet discount if you buy enough) and then maybe formulate an online quiz relating to having read and understood its content. Find the budget, too, to give the driver with the most right answers a trip to a performance driving day, or a sports car for the weekend, or whatever you think will work for your staff - but get them to read it.

One thing is certain: annual UK road deaths have not fallen for over a decade after a strong and steady decline since 1970. Maybe it's time the Government stopped fixating on speed reduction and placed more emphasis on better driver skills instead - without preaching. I think this book can help.

