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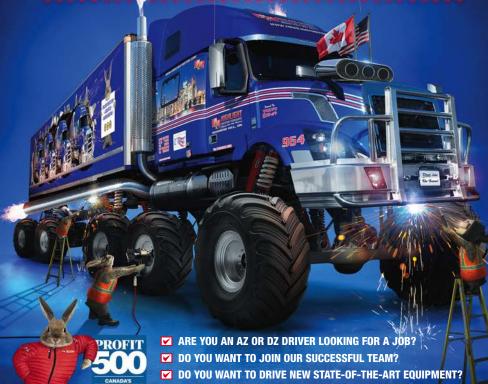


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# MAKING YOUR MILES COUNT Robert D. Scheper



# Evaluating Your Personal Attitude

Deciding to be an operator is more than just a flip of the coin. I don't want to imply that people actually make that choice by flipping a coin but in some circumstances, it would have been better to let the coin call the shots.

I was talking to a couple who came to my office late one afternoon. They were in trouble; more trouble than they had ever been in before. They had expected their choice to purchase a tractor and become independent operators to solve their financial problems, because they had heard that operators make much more money than company drivers do. They saw that the only difference between entrepreneurs and 'employees' was that entrepreneurs took risks. So, they took a risk and bought a new truck. That was three years ago and now they are having serious financial problems. The maintenance is killing them and all their credit cards are maxed out.

Three years is a short time for a financial crisis on a new truck. I started asking them broad financial questions and found myself being led down rabbit holes that had nothing to do with answering the questions asked. It took me three tries to find all of the details before the story started to make sense.

Here is what happened: Within six months of owning their new truck the couple bought a new car (actually an SUV). About a year after that, they bought a slightly used half ton to drive back and forth from the storage unit that they rented for their truck when he got home from his runs. Their drawings (take home) from their corporation jumped by 45-50% per year and their personal debt level didn't go down as they had hoped for but instead, increased. After a set of tires and some other non-warranty items, they were having trouble meeting their monthly bills. They began complaining that the assumption that operators make more money was actually a lie. I have learned that the difficulty with counseling people in financial matters is that too often, emotions overrule facts. Then, when facts become irrefutable, people begin blaming others.

The truth was they were making more now than when he was a company driver. In fact I showed them that he actually was making about \$9-10,000 a year more and doing slightly less work. The problem was they were spending \$16-17,000 more than they were before. They spent their maintenance savings on "necessities" such as down payments for their newer vehicles and on

"emergencies" such as new furniture, appliances and vacations.

When I write this story in the words I use it is simple to understand who is to blame. It's always easy to point the finger at others and say... "Boy were they foolish... they never set aside for the future. They never calculated the cost of their decisions. They probably deserve what they have to go through to get themselves out of trouble". Those thoughts may be true but they probably shouldn't be said (at least in that way). The only way to truly help people is to help them to see their own faults and failures in the context of humility.

Though I may not have the problems others do, I can guarantee I probably have problems others don't. The best way for me to handle my problems is to never abandon an attitude of humility. I find pride and arrogance or even somehow implying I'm better than others to be an emotional trap for me. I may understand numbers, risk/return ratios and financial self-restraint but I can assure you without hesitation... I have my set of devastating vices. More than likely you do too. If I am to keep my vices under some form of restraint, I must first be able to humbly acknowledge them.

I am personally convinced that most of the time my only advantage in remaining humble is my wife... who diligently and gently keeps my mind clear of pride. I also have a close friend who has jointly

traveled with me through some very difficult times. We have equally shared life's lows and highs. We have earned long term mutual respect for each other to the degree that we can directly present the truth to each other so we can face our personal vices. My friend is great, but my wife is the best. May 21st was our 29th anniversary. I would be nowhere near where I am today without her. She is my greatest helper.

#### About the Author:

Robert D. Scheper is a leading Accountant and Consultant to the Lease/Owner operator industry in Canada. His first book in the Making Your Miles Count series "taxes, taxes, taxes" was released in 2007. His firm exclusively serves Lease/Owner Operators across Canada. His second book "Choosing a Trucking company" is the most in-depth analysis of the operator industry available today. He has a Master degree (MBA) in financial management and has been serving the industry since he and his wife came off the road in 1993. His dedication, commitment and strong opinions can be read and heard in many articles and seminars.

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## SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

Ray J. Haight



# **Needs and Wants**

I heard a phrase the other day and it set my mind to digging deeper into the thought. The individual I was with was talking about his wife's shopping addiction. He said that she was a 'want person and not a need person'. Some time back I actually did some research on the internet on this subject of compulsive shoppers and found that there is actually evidence that suggests that a small amount of endorphins and dopamine is released into the brain when something is obtained or purchased; a feeling of accomplishment that is felt by most of us. Unfortunately, some of us enjoy the feeling so much and it is so short lived that they get hooked on it and become compelled to have the feeling over and over again. It can be very destructive.

Hearing that phrase immediately sent me to a flash back situation. I was at a truck dealership some time ago and while there, I began talking to a driver who was out shopping for a truck. This fellow, just new to the industry as a licensed AZ driver, was determined to become an Owner Operator ASAP. As we chatted, I noticed he was eye balling a year old conventional that was tricked out the wazoo. Beside the beautiful beast was a more conservative aerodyne truck that was obviously going to be a far cheaper truck to operate and had much less bling.

Having been through the bling time of my life when it comes to large cars, I felt compelled to impart my years of wisdom and inform the newbie in no uncertain terms what the best decision would be for him at this point in his career. I went so far as to suggest that the net profit of the more aerodynamic vehicle, with less chrome, would pocket the same net dollars in four years that it would take him to earn in five years in the bling mobile, if he was lucky.

As I have said in the past, I am no sales person. I do not have that skill and I admire those that do. I mention it because this person endured all of the things I could throw at him that were designed to shed light on this decision. I went at him with things like 20% better MPG, ease of maintenance with less bling and less unnecessary repairable gadgets, less capital expenditure, better cash flow and a lighter vehicle that will allow more payload. He looked at me and said: 'Ya but I have a young son and I'd like to enter into some of the show and shine events with him this summer'. What could I say? I wished him well, that I hoped he would have great success as an Owner Operator and I went on my way. This person knew what they wanted; the fact that it was way more than they needed meant nothing to them.

So what type of person are you: a need or a want person? Let's look at the famed Psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs; he designed a five tiered pyramid. You start with food and shelter, then move up to things related to safety and security and then onto belonging, esteem and finally self-actualization.

#### Self-actualisation Personal Growth and fulfilment

#### Esteem needs

Status, responsibility, reputation, respect and confidence

#### Social needs

Belonging to a group, trust and acceptance

#### Safety needs Security, structure and stability

Physical needs Shelter, warmth, food and drink

#### Maslow's hierarchy of needs

It is an interesting flow of thoughts here as I overlay this line of thinking onto the current situation of driver turnover. It seems to me that many companies with high turnover struggle to simply supply what a driver of today needs in tier one.

Let's break it down a little. According to Maslow, the base of his hierarchy pyramid is the need for food and shelter. To me, that means a steady income. With that steady income a driver buys food and shelter for his family. It's not too complicated, if you don't give me work or miles, I don't stay here because you can't satisfy my basic needs. The next level is safety. Can you provide a safe vehicle for me to drive and a safe work environment for me to work in with lanes. customers, fuel spots terminal etc.? If I don't feel safe and secure, I'm out of here! Why stay? I have options that won't put me in harms way, that pays the same as this or better.

If you're a company that does not have the first two driver needs nailed down and nailed down hard, then you are likely a company that has very high turnover. I would guess that it is likely over two hundred percent! You over promise and under deliver, you don't pay at minimum market rate and your safety record is in question. Also, your trucks are likely being pulled over regularly by DOT because of it.

It is the next few steps that I believe eludes the majority of trucking companies. The next step is Social Needs or Belonging. Does your company make folks feel like they belong to a community? How do you create that sense of community? Do you communicate through newsletters, social media etc. and what do you communicate? Do you try and involve the driver's family? Do you have functions and opportunities for them to participate in? If you do, I'm going to guess that you feel your turnover is manageable. You feel like this because your turnover rate is at or around the published industry average.

If you're a company that has mastered the first three steps and are also valuing your people and recognizing them on a regular basis, I'm betting that you're on the low side of the turnover equation. If you're past this point and actually assisting your folks to be everything they can be in their careers, lives and relationships, then you're likely best in class. Your employees and your entire management team have built a company whose strategic advantage in the marketplace is it's people. Congratulations to you and I'm sure that your dealing with best in class numbers; about 20% and lower would be my guess.

The basic need in driver retention is income and safety; these are the hard things. Transitioning from here to fulfilling the totality of needs, belonging, esteem, and finally self-actualization is where the game is won by best in class companies.

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# Insurance Premiums are Going Up

Insurance premiums are going up, and when I say up, I don't mean by just the rate of inflation. Oh no! Not just two or three percent. No No No. I see rates going up in some cases by one hundred percent! I'm seeing trucking insurance rates doubling in many cases and I see more and more situations where insurance is just not being offered. And no renewal terms are being offered. Why is this happening? Why are some trucking companies not even getting offers on renewal terms?

To explain, I recently discussed this with a well-connected insurance underwriter. And although the answers didn't surprise me as I worked in the insurance industry for 15 years, I hope this information will help you.

In the discussion, I got right down to the meat of the matter. Why are rates going up twenty and thirty percent for good companies and going up as much as one hundred percent for other companies?

I was told that insurance companies have not been making a profit for years and therefore, rates need to rise. Ok, no surprise in that answer. But by comparison, trucking companies have not been making a profit for years and yet the trucking companies have not been able to raise their rates.

Not relevant says my underwriter. He explained that recently, a major insurance company decided to leave the market. They

decided that because they were losing money in the trucking market, that they would be better off not being in the trucking insurance industry at all. I was told that it is never just one thing for an insurance company to leave a market segment. Claims settlements are still rising by huge numbers on both sides of the border; more in the USA but on both sides.

If you're reading this, you see an insurance company leaving the market and claims going up and companies not making a profit for years. But why are the actual rates going up by such a large percentage? What was said next was revealing. This underwriter told me that if his company soon doesn't make a profit, that they too would consider leaving the trucking industry. So this underwriter now feels lots of pressure to deliver a profit. In his company, if the parent closed the trucking insurance division it would likely mean about one hundred and fifty people being laid off. This underwriter is fearful of being on the street and looking for a job as a trucking specialist. If companies are leaving the industry, then the underwriter will be hard pressed to find a job. So the staff at most insurance companies are under lots of pressure.

So now I asked, how do you pick the trucking companies that receive a twenty percent increase and those that go up by one hundred percent (and more)? The answer

should not surprise you. "Simple", he said, "claims and safety scores".

Let's look at claims first. Do you as a trucking company calculate your 'Loss' Ratio?' If you don't, you really should. This is what the insurance companies are doing and it likely has the greatest effect and impact on your insurance rates. There is much more to the calculation but for brevity let me say sixty percent. If your claims ratio is above sixty percent for the past three years, I'll bet your rates are going up and, going up by a lot this year.

Safety scores affect how the claim gets handled and the amount that will be paid out. Clearly, a trucking company with poor safety scores will have their claims settled at higher prices than a company with good scores. So if you have a poor safety rating, you need to get it fixed. Alerts on the SMS affect your insurance premiums and a "Conditional" on the provincial profile affects the rate that you will pay for insurance.

Those two items are the ones that affect your premiums the most. Claims and Scores. Simple to say but difficult to fix.

So what can you do to have a positive effect on your premiums and perhaps keep the coming increase small? Firstly, have fewer collisions. Easy to say isn't it? One way to have fewer crashes is to change driver behavior by training and using technology. An example is Dash-Cams, as fewer incidents will affect the claims and safety scores directly. Less bad situations

have the greater impact on insurance rates because it affects both the claims ratio and safety ratings. Secondly, lower your safety scores. Again this comes down to driver management and driver behavior.

Well, there you have it. Insurance rates are going up and you need some ways to mitigate the increase. If you would like to discuss your solutions, please feel free to call me

Please be safe out there.

#### **Chris Harris**

Top Dawg, Safety Dawg Inc. 905-973-7056 chris@safetydawg.com @safety\_dawg (twitter)



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