



## How Yellow (formerly YRC Worldwide) Made Safety a Priority Even During a Pandemic

If you were to meet Darren Hawkins, CEO of Yellow you would quickly figure out he is approachable and cares passionately about the employees of his company. He might be in blue jeans or a business suit; he has the unique ability of being able to talk with both his drivers as well as those in the C-suite. Hawkins is a hands-on leader. He considers his 30,000 employees “the heartbeat” of the company and he intends to do whatever he can to make safety a priority at every location they work.

“Safety is in the way we lead and it’s in the way we set expectations for the leadership of the company,” he said.

“You can talk a lot about being an asset-based business, but it’s not about the trucks or the trailers or the terminals,” he added. “This business is driven by people and people are the strongest and the best resources we have. And protecting them and making sure we are evaluating and training them and doing everything in our power to promote their safety is the only way we’ll be successful in the long term.”

### The Desire for Sustainable Improvement

Hawkins says Yellow had successes in safety but they weren’t sustainable. The turning point was when he noticed the positive results one of his major rail clients was achieving from a safety improvement initiative they had implemented. He realized that sustained improvement would require sustained effort. Improvement had to start with managers becoming better leaders. Hawkins’ leadership team invited a member of the rail company to explain the transformation they were

making and the commitment required. While some team members had skepticism, everyone knew that focusing on employee safety was the right thing to do.

Hawkins said one of the “a-ha learnings” was that to have sustained improvement, Yellow had to change its focus from preventing injuries to reducing exposure. He learned that success is giving employees at all levels the capability to identify exposure; making sure they know how to both control and ultimately finding ways to eliminate exposure.

“That empowers employees,” he said. “That’s how I want to lead.”

In 2016 and 2017, the recordable incident rates at YRC Freight were on a statistically significant rise. Hawkins knew he had to take action. He made the decision in early 2018 to partner with the Organizational Safety and Reliability group within DEKRA.

DEKRA started by forming a governance structure. Next, managers and supervisors began safety leadership development that included both a classroom experience and on the dock coaching and mentoring. The safety leadership work started at the executive level and cascaded to the front-line supervisors. Finally, pickup and delivery drivers received specialized training on Making Safe Decisions®, given the unique challenges associated with their jobs. The partnership has expanded from working with just YRC Freight, to including the three regional companies.

Skepticism surrounded much of this effort. Leadership hadn’t experienced sustained success in safety, nor had they seen a sustained commitment by their leadership. Finally, the organizational momentum was toward a rise in injuries not a reduction. As one leader described the situation: “It is like

being in a canoe, trying to go upstream, you are fighting against the current.”

In this way, the organization had to look for quick wins. Leaders had to be patient and understand that change was only going to occur through slow and steady progress. There were also potential distractions along the way. During this period, YRC re-aligned the regional structure and was involved in a major contract negotiation. The four entities that made up Yellow became a single unit. On top of all this, the last several years have been a tough period financially for the trucking industry.

## Along Comes a Pandemic

If the challenges Yellow was facing wasn't enough, along comes the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic adds another layer of uncertainty for the entire trucking industry, but also creates a new challenge in how to protect employees from this unseen hazard. Given similar circumstances, some leaders might have given up, but not Hawkins. He knew that the organization was no longer paddling upstream in safety. The momentum had changed, exposure was reducing, leaders were bought in so that they could be successful, and fewer people were getting injured.

Hawkins said the experience has been transformational for his company.

“The DEKRA process is the best I've seen,” he said. “and that's why we are staying the course, regardless of external circumstances. This is a very charted course we are on right now and we are sticking to it.”

Hawkins sees reducing exposure as not just an obvious way to protect workers, but also an important method to reduce fear. Understanding the concept of exposure and having an exposure reduction orientation allowed the organization to address this new and unexpected hazard. Employees knew they needed to eliminate the hazard, you need to make sure people were separated from the hazard.

Yellow quickly pivoted some of its safety leadership activities to COVID-19 prevention. The pandemic is a new exposure, Hawkins says, and it needs to be treated as such to make sure the health and safety of his employees, and the public they serve, are not put in harm's way. That's why safety matters now more than ever.

Because of Hawkins decision to take action, there are 600 employees who will not get injured in 2020, that the statistical models predicted would. Taking action, staying the course, being patient and allowing the strategy to work, means a better year for these 600 people. Hawkins is confident the momentum is in the company's favor and the pace of improvement can accelerate.

“Our determination around safety only becomes stronger through times like these,” he said.

## Success in Many Ways

Besides reducing exposure and engaging the workforce, Hawkins says another sign of success is seeing workplace morale increase. That's not easy during an economic downturn and a global pandemic, but he says the safety improvement efforts have been well-received across the board. “There may be other things that we can't always get full agreement on in a large worker population, but everyone sees that the contributing factor to our consistent progress is definitely our unwavering commitment to safety,” he said.

Hawkins believes that companies like Yellow connect the dots between prioritizing safety and business success that they will see their way out of the current crisis.

“Communication brings calm and certainty. When there is a structured process that connects people, it keeps people centered when there is chaos and it's easy to get distracted,” he said. “When you make safety your number one priority, it can't be absent when you are strategizing your way out of a crisis. It's the one ingredient that has to be there every time.”