

Highly Skilled Driver Team Managers

The OPC shares some reflections and extracts from interviews with outstanding driver team managers (DTM); the special leadership skills needed to do this pivotal safety-critical role and what the industry might do to better support them

Following on from the OPC's article in the March issue of Rail Professional about Future Leaders Who Love the Railway, this feature focuses on the crucial, pivotal and special role of the managers responsible for crews of train drivers. Depending on the train operator these roles may sometimes be done by an individual manager, or some operators split the role in two, each with a different focus – driving competence or people management. Titles vary, but they might be known as driver managers (DM), driver train managers (DTM), competency development managers (CDM), driver line managers (DLM) or driver standards managers (DSM).

It takes experience and special skill to be in a leadership role looking after a team of drivers. Some team leaders may have moved direct into the role from being a train driver, others may have spent time as driver trainers or driver mentors/instructors, and some may have taken the long and winding road of wide industry experience gathered in station roles; being an on-board crew member; a guard or driver roster clerk, and some bring expertise from roles external to the railway. What is amazing in all cases is the passion with which they do the job and love their teams.

What's so important about driver management?

It may be perceived that moving from a safety-critical role as a driver into a team managers' role that they're no longer in a safety critical job. But that's far from true. Regardless of differing structures, getting the best from a driver to ensure driving competence or developing their Non-Technical Skills (NTS) after an incident or tenaciously managing a difficult conversation with a 'human' touch are all important skills that can impact on a drivers' safe and consistent performance.

The OPC has undertaken hundreds of Post Incident Assessments (PIA) with



drivers who may have had an incident. The manager driver relationship is crucial to a driver's return to safe and effective driving performance going forward. In many cases it's only a positive, productive and trusting relationship between a driver and their manager that means the implementation and adherence to a competency development plan or an NTS development. So, the DM's role, skills in their job and driver support can have a massive impact on safety.

Highly skilled people management

Fundamentally, it's a tough job! Being the leader of a driver team and being responsible for them is critical in the rail industry. Whether a split or combined role, there's a need to balance the key aspect of delivering safe and effective driving alongside keeping a team of drivers happy and motivated, thus ensuring trains run on time for customers. It can be a role that is very undervalued and unappreciated. Driver training is costly and can take up to two years to full qualification.

For some time thereafter, they have a high degree of support with competency assessments, ongoing training, mentor or instructor driver support and lots of contact with their DM or CTM. Yet DTM don't always receive the same level of training support. Their role may require technical and analytical skills, behavioural and performance management skills and most importantly communication and people skills, which all take time to learn and hone – but sometimes they start in the role with little or no formal training.

What special skills make a really good driver team manager?

For a long time, OPC psychologist have worked closely with lots of train operator's DTM, across numerous projects. These have included NTS training, Post Incident Assessments and Investigation training. They also undertook research with industry experts to form an in-depth understanding of a Driver Standards Manager (DSM) role.



These experts helped OPC Psychologists to prepare a competency profile for the role. Additionally, OPC Assessment's development work on the recently launched Leadership Potential Indicator Test (LPI) has informed what competencies are crucial to any of the roles responsible for leading a team of drivers. The OPC team also undertook some face-to-face interviews with some DMs, and their line manager to hear what made the job special and the skills needed to do it.

Some key leadership skills and what that really looks like for some DMs:

- Leading others.
- People skills.
- Thinking skills.
- Strong customer focus.
- Driving improvements.

Leading others

Leading others to deliver results may include managing and directing others through confident and assertive behaviour. Influencing and persuading people to take action. Effective communication through verbal, face to face or written methods.

A DTM said: 'Building that strong rapport with a driver takes time. It's not a 'glancing' relationship. You have to be in it for the long haul and you have to earn your stripes.'

'Regardless of whether the role is split, it's really necessary that the manager is skilled at building a high level of engagement with a driver to get the very best from them. You have to give more of yourself away to get the best in return.'

An operations manager said: 'We have to achieve standards and safe performance through a low threat, high target approach.'

It's no good punishing a driver for an incident, saying you didn't achieve X, therefore you'll be disciplined. It's much better to say, this is the target, and we'll strive to get there together.'

People skills

People skills that build positive relationships and successful teams by using personal emotional intelligence, empathy and understanding. These leaders are good at motivating others. They can demonstrate independence and fairness when dealing with difficult situations, particularly when questioning drivers to establish facts and evidence during an investigation.

A DTM said: 'Managing the driver team is the biggest delight but also the hardest challenge. We feel the pressure to make sure we're doing our jobs properly, but that's when we'll sound ideas off or check each other's work. You know the team have got your back.'

A DM said: 'When we need to put a competency development plan or NTS development plan in place after a safety incident, it's essential that drivers are nurtured and cared for. There needs to be proper consideration for the driver's welfare to help them, and make sure the plan really works.'

Thinking skills

Thinking skills for effective problem-solving decision making, and planning. Managers are able to prepare and implement effective plans, using analytical skills to make informed decisions. They are flexible and can prioritise effectively as the job needs change – sometimes constantly!

'When you first get into the role, it's a massive ocean and it's pretty quick to drown out there!'

A DM said: 'Sometimes things snowball in the job. You need to be flexible and adaptable without being wedded to your day's tick list. You could be implementing rules and procedures, doing a driver's development plan, or admin for a return to work after long-term sickness. Then there's a safety incident. That takes priority and everything else goes on hold.'

Strong customer focus

DMs have a strong customer focus with external and internal customers.

A DTM said: 'I find it really rewarding, especially working with a driver who may be quite challenging. I love to work with someone who may have been struggling; help turn things around alongside them; change their attitude and see their driving performance improve – it makes me so proud of them.'

Driving improvements

Another important factor is driving improvements in themselves and others, particularly in relation to competence and performance.

A DTM said: 'It's hard to make standards match and work the same for each and every driver in the team. As a manager, you



need to be able to translate them to fit the scenario and the person – that takes a lot of competence, skill and a gentle touch to deliver a front-line change.’

A DM said: ‘I love helping to grow a person, training and developing them – whether that’s about enriching their current role performance or helping them develop for a future opportunity.’

A DTM said: ‘Things that help us develop away from the day to day are continuous training and development opportunities, like signal sighting courses, risk assessment or special projects.’

Finding and recruiting the best

When thinking about recruiting the best candidates for this skilled and varied role, the OPC have a number of assessment tools and exercises available that cover a range of competencies and abilities. Some of these have been designed bespoke for the driver manager role. They would recommend including the Leadership Potential Indicator Test (LPI) that can help to measure leadership potential, and assess for key management competencies. The Investigation Exercise (InEx) can help provide evidence of a candidate’s ability to gather information and establish facts through a systematic and thorough approach – a significant skill requirement for this role. The Rules Acquisition Aptitude Test (RAAT) can help assess the ability to understand and reason with basic written rules, regulations and procedures which would be necessary when driving or implementing standards. As the role relies heavily on interpersonal skills to motivate people, deal with conflict, as well as persuading and influencing skills, it’s important to see how a candidate may behave in a face-to-face situation. Therefore, in addition to an interview, it may be useful to include a role play exercise in the recruitment process. Other assessment tools measuring planning, organising, or communication skills could also be considered as part of a recruitment process.

Growing talent in-house

Whether the role is split or combined, a potential new driver manager may not necessarily have all the skills to make a good team leader straight away – particularly if they need help developing communication and people management skills. Managers interviewed by the OPC reflected there’s sometimes a lack of formal training prior to starting in role and that there is considerable up-front hours investment to get a good handle on the role. In most cases, unlike drivers’ training, there is little or no ongoing development for a DTM once in post.

A DTM commented: ‘When you first get into the role, it’s a massive ocean and it’s pretty quick to drown out there!’

In some cases, there’s a lack of formal induction training linked to standards or even simple ‘how to’ tech. This would include training in how to operate key assessment software or undertake and interpret an OTDR download. The current IR issues have also highlighted the need for more robust and informed learning in this key area so managers feel more prepared and protected.

One leading train operator mentioned offering short-term secondments for drivers into their DTM role, to learn particular skills and shadow an existing DTM. However, this can be quite draining on an already stretched team, plus it creates a driver gap. But it did prove most beneficial for those who took part with one subsequently moving into a DTM role and others into leadership posts too.


Another option may be to consider a Leadership Development Centre (LDC) for individual driver managers or groups of managers. An LDC can either support the transition of those potential managers into their new role, or up-skill managers who may have been in post for some time and need additional development. The OPC can run development centres that are a hybrid mix of personal self-assessment and learning, online learning and face-to-face skills development and practice. These can include

‘Driver team managers can sometimes be seen as a ‘Jack of all trades’ however, they are probably the most skilled managers in the business.’

leadership skills, coaching and mentoring skills development; communication skills; giving positive, relevant and empathic feedback, personal leadership styles and learning interpersonal skills.

Why can’t we find people willing to fill these roles?

Laura Hedley, Occupational Psychologist at the OPC said: ‘When listening to those who lead these rare and crucial teams of managers, it’s easy to see why it may be hard to fill some of these gaps in the industry. Regardless of whether the role is split or combined, the job is extensive. The breadth of tasks is wide, needing an ability to multi-task, prioritise and self-manage, whilst coping with the stress of the position. The role can indeed be challenging and this might explain why some managers either don’t stay in this leadership role or return to driving. It takes a special, very skilled manager to take on this pivotal and safety critical role for the industry. With more secondments, a robust selection process, effective induction training and ongoing coaching and development we might be able to encourage more managers to stay and flourish in this vital role.’

An Operations Delivery Manager concluded saying: ‘Driver team managers are under huge pressure every day. They have very strong competence and extensive knowledge of what it really takes to drive a train safely and get the best out of their drivers. They rapidly flex and adapt their plans to whatever the day throws at them; what’s the highest priority and which of their drivers need them the most. Driver team managers can sometimes be seen as a ‘Jack of all trades’ however, they are probably the most skilled managers in the business.’ 



the occupational
psychology centre

Tel: +44 01923 234646
Email: admin@theopc.co.uk
Visit: www.theopc.co.uk