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Safety vs. Service in Railway Business

~ What is service in the railway industry? ~

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Introduction

Crews cannot stop trains --- such a situation is happening at East Japan Railway Company (JR East). JR East gave conductors who could successfully activate the brakes immediately the prize called "Sokusho," which one can receive immediately by the judgment of the head of the workplace. I suppose the background behind why crews cannot stop trains is that "Safety and Transport Stability" and "Safety and Service" are dealt with on an equal footing.

For instance,

- (1) Drivers cannot switch on the train protection radio equipment even when they violated red signal.
- (2) Even when the conductor suddenly got sick, the driver did not call an ambulance and what is even worse, operated switch of train door.
- (3) Despite the fact that the emergency train stop warning system in the station was working, the conductor could not stop the train.

It is not an exaggeration to say that obviously, the scheduling of trains is exceeding safety limits. We need to analyze the background factors that lead to serious accidents according to Heinrich's law.

Twenty-two years have passed since JR East started with the highest priority to safety. JR East put the "Safety" rank beside "Stability" and attempted to improve them in a mutually spiraling fashion to upgrade the quality of train service in its 5th 5-year safety plan, under the title of "2013 Safety Vision." However, this means that JR East lumps safety, transport stability and service together, and the "safety first" spirit has lost substance. As a result, the above stated events have occurred and excess service and public addressing to passengers on the train are becoming conspicuous. I think the railway industry needs a concept of service that is different from the service concept in

the hotel, restaurant and department store industries. We have been seriously discussing the issue of safety with JR East for a long time. I would like to suggest “real service” for the improvement of safety in the railway industry.

I. Incidents wherein the crew could not halt the train

1. Crew member did not take measures to stop the train, though that crew member recognized an umbrella was caught in the door of the train

Date: 26th August 2008

A conductor recognized that an umbrella was stuck in the doors in the rear of the 4th coach when the doors closed at Mitaka station. After the train started running, even though the conductor should stop the train in this case, the conductor asked the driver to go slowly at nonstop stations.

2. Crew member could not stop the train when the train ran over the speed limit of the turnout and the crew member sensed danger

Date: 2nd May 2009

After departing from Hirosaki station, the driver of the 9660M overran a turnout with the speed limit of 25 km/h by a speed of 56 km/h. The driver did not stop immediately on site and ran about 1 km, though he did operate the brake when he felt a strong impact.

3. JR East let a driver continued conveyance of passengers during train trouble

Date: 7th May 2009

The 564S stopped between Yokohama and Shinkawasaki station because the wire for the pressurization relay equipment for emergency braking in the conductor’s switch unit was disconnected. Urgent measures were taken for the train, and it was ran by emergency drive to the nearby Shinkawasaki station. In this case, the train should have been run without passengers. However, the train was continually operated in emergency operation mode with passengers to the rail yard station.

II. Why the crew cannot stop trains

1. It is easy to understand that if an umbrella was sticking out 40 cm from train doors, there is a distinct possibility of inflicting injury on passengers at platform. Because the conductor asked to the driver to run slowly at nonstop stations, we know he recognized the danger.

So, the question is, why could he not stop the train and do what he should have done? Firstly, he might be sensitive about the delay. In the morning rush hour zone on 22nd May 2005, JR East directed by radio of dispatcher to all train crew to smooth door operation to facilitate a punctual schedule. Also, crews are directed to give apologetic announcements on trains. We insisted that only one or two minute delays are not real delays. However, when passengers complain, crews are inspected by the company if he or she made an announcement in the train.

2. When the train arrived at Hirosaki station as a deadhead train, the driver rolled the train 30 cm as an accident during shuttle service operation. Because the train was a deadhead train, this was not a problem. However, the driver was self-conscious about it. He was worrying over the question of whether he should report about it to the dispatcher or not, though he continued to operate the train and wound up passing the point at 56 km/h despite the speed limit on the point of 25km/h. Because he did not notice speed limit just before the point, a crew member's bag fell down from deep shock and he finally woke to the fact. We can easily imagine that he was worried about this accident. He did not stop the train, and though he felt the big shock, he repeated power running without stopping, and reported to the dispatcher after operating the train for another 1 km. He was supposed to stop immediately and confirm the safety of the train, but this phenomenon happened because he was worried about delaying the train and hid the fact.

Especially at the workplace to which he belongs, workers were repeatedly taken off from work as train crew or a notice was stuck out as a warning to others if other workers invite accidents. We must point out there is a workplace culture wherein workers cannot tell the truth because they worry about their reputation.

3. The 564S became inoperative between stations and stopped for about two hours. Because the cause was a broken wire for the conductor's emergency break, the driver handled the short switch and the train arrived at the next station, Shinkawasaki, two and a half hours later. Under those circumstances, the driver is supposed to stop at the nearest station, but JR East let him continued to operate the train with passengers aboard to the station which has a rail yard. JR East says one of the reasons for this was that, "passengers expressed a desire to go to Shinagawa station, though we wanted to operate the train without passengers." Because a train with a broken conductor's emergency break is extremely unsafe, this is an unbelievable occurrence for a railway company which is entrusted with passenger lives. Needless to say, inviting car trouble is

a big problem. However, it is clear that operating a dangerous train with passengers aboard means JR East prioritizes the scheduling of trains over safety. Also, if JR East lets passengers ride on an unsafe train merely because passengers requested passage on that train and prioritizes the concept of “service first” or “passengers first,” that is a terrible mistake.

III. What is the problem?

I think we need to consider why these kinds of incidents happened. JR East suggested a “campaign for stopping the train if you feel danger.” Stopping the train if danger is felt is perfectly natural, so we should recognize that it is quite a serious situation if we need to instate a special campaign merely to motivate crews to stop trains. Under such circumstances, conductors receive a prize called “Sokusho” with a reward such as 200 yen, a towel or socks if they put on the emergency brake. Giving a Sokusho prize if a conductor handles the emergency brake is completely putting the cart before the horse. In the first place, the conductor’s operation responsibilities include ensuring safety, so giving a prize for this is a complete mistake. We need to examine from various angles why conductors cannot stop their trains.

First of all, workers have more incentive to not delay trains. At the time of the establishment of JR East, JR East clearly declared their policy of “safety first.” However, they call for a mutually spiraling improvement in “safety” and “transport stability,” and this is hard to understand for workers. “Safety” and “transport stability” cannot be on equal levels. If we aim for a stable schedule, we may develop a serious desire to operate trains punctually, and safety might be eroded. Thus, a policy of “safety first” and “transport stability” should be clearly designated at workplaces.

Secondly, the situation wherein causing an accident leads to punishment might be rampant at workplaces. In the past, JR East cut a drivers’ wages because he stopped the train and went to the bathroom during work, and punished a driver who over ran because of SAS, sleep apnea syndrome. And also, it has become prominent that JR East puts priority on blaming workers “why you did not” or “why you did” over investigating causes, including background factors. Because crew members who were punished or who made a mistake are withdrawn as trainers, this inflames the principle of competition so that career progress and compensation packages become worse.

Thirdly, I feel misgivings that JR East switched to giving weight to service over safety. JR East aims to improve passenger satisfaction and to improve three services: “psychological service,” “reception service” and “functional service.” It says that its basic

focus is passenger opinion. Methods for psychological service and reception service are introduced at workplaces. A typical example is the “compliment card,” on which workers compliment each other. Workers give compliment to each other with statements such as, “Your public announcement was brilliant,” “You had a loud, clear voice during basic movement,” or, “You responded with a smile to passengers,” and these are displayed so as to inform all workers.

Workers are interested in if their own name is on a card or not, and are always so bent upon how to get high appraisal that the emphasis is on being praised rather than on their work.

JR East also established the “service memo” which garners passenger opinion as basic points.

As I described above, because JR East inflates worker rivalry and links to a focus on appraisal, the prioritizing of work and “service” becomes inverted, and railway safety is neglected. Because crews care only about passenger satisfaction, conductors make apologetic announcements on the radio for just one or two minutes delays and drivers operate unsafe trains.

IV. What is service in railway transport?

The best service in the railway industry is to transport passengers safely to their destination. Therefore, uninterruptedly enhancing worker capability to adequately respond to emergencies is important. Though stable transport can add an extra margin of safety, it can also detract from safety, and it is important do not operate a train on any terms if even a single safety guarantee is absent.

At the same time, I do not object to a complete nullification of seeking the ideal of stable transport. Properly analyzing causes that shatter stable transport and taking countermeasures are needed. If equipment or a vehicle is broken, what management must do is investigate causes and take countermeasures based on them. Instead, however, fault is delegated to the workers if an accident occurs, even if a construction schedule is impracticable and all the decision-making has been left to a subcontracting company. Also, because workers want to recover quickly from accidents such as those at level crossings or accidents resulting in injury or death, they operate trains without confirming safe conditions at the accident site, and there are possibilities that may lead to another accident again. In addition, other crews are poorly informed about this kind of accident information, and public addresses for passengers merely repeat the same thing. Particularly in this instance, the ideal service for passengers is not only an

apology by the conductor or station staff, but also it is important to address the passengers in order to gain passenger understanding of the reason for the stop and provide information for alternative transportation to their destination.

As I described above, making workers too competitive threatens safety. I believe the best service for passengers provided by the railway transport industry is that the company trains the crews capable of stopping their trains for safety based on the assumption that absolute safety cannot exist.