

Failure is the Mother of an Invention. Create Lessons from Failure!

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December 17, 2013, a driver of world's safest and the most prompt high-speed rail "shinkansen" took his own life at age of 36 because the door of the driver's cabin was opened before the train stopped at the station.

He had a dream to become a shinkansen driver when he was a child. He has been driving shinkansen with pride and job satisfaction. After the small accident happened, he told his wife "My job as a driver will change. In the worst case, I will be fired." He wrote in a note that he made a huge mistake and he did not have adequate ability.

We, East Japan Railway Workers' Union, seriously take the death of a shinkansen driver that everyone has trust for the job. We established "accident verification committee" not to happen that again and to investigate the reason of the death and background factors.

Time series:

1. Date

December 7, 2013 (Sat.) 10:39 am Sunny

2. Place

Nagano shinkansen at Ueda station

2. Summary

Driving shinkansen, Asama No.520.

The door on the right in a car No.1 (driver's cabin) was opened before the train stopped at Ueda station.

The driver closed the door after the train arrived at Ueda station.

The driver did not report the accident.

The driver reported "Nothing happened" and went home.

He was married in July 2011, and lived with his wife in an apartment. He was serious, a hard worker, strict about manuals. He loved shinkansen enough to wear a driver's uniform at his wedding. His friends said he could not say clearly, express himself, and was too gentle.

After he reported "Nothing happened" and went home, he spent time with his wife. She felt he was feeling bad because he lacked energy and had no appetite.

Two days later in the morning, she asked him what was wrong with him many times because he still lacked energy and had no appetite. He cried and said that he made a huge mistake, he did not report the accident, he did not sleep two days, and he tried to kill himself but he could not do it by watching his wife is sleeping next to him.

She said "let's go to your work place and report it." They went to in front of the door of his office. Before he went into the office, he said he would not be able to go home tonight and he had to tell the union too. 30 minutes later, he came out from the door. He said with smile that everything was all right, he would not be transferred, and he got a warning but nothing went wrong. She felt he was okay.

A deputy director and a training officer of his office reported the accident to the headquarters of the company and also reported he had a conflict about not stopping the train and about not reporting immediately.

A deputy director and a training officer of his office cheered him up by telling him that he came to report the accident on his holiday, it is not a big deal, and be careful next time. At the same time, he emailed his subordinates that he was warned because he did not report the accident

immediately but it was not a big deal and he thanked them for worry. He also emailed that he felt it was a huge mistake but it was not a huge one, he was beside himself with fear for two days, and he was all right with his wife's support. His subordinates cheered him up and many of them felt the accident was not so big mistake.

His wife left home to support her brother's move on December 12, then, he called the training officer and told that he wanted to die with crying. But in the morning on December 16, he called the training officer that he was all right. However, he committed a suicide on December 17 in his house.

We can detect some points. The first point is the driver's mental conditions. The accident happened on December 7. In the night on December 8, he wanted to die. He told his wife that he tried to die many times during the night but he could not do it by watching her face. On December 9, reporting the accident eased his. On December 15, he called the training officer with crying and told he wanted to die. In the morning on December 16, he was calm. On December 17, he took his own life. He seems he was manic-depressive.

The second point was the behavior of the family. His wife's decision was right to go to his office together. However, she went to Kyushu to support his brother's move from December 12. She tried to cancel the flight but he told her that she should have gone because he was fine. He was alone. There was no one who could read his emotion. He did not have family to trust around him.

The third point was behavior of the company and the union. Many of officers and union members recognized he was something wrong. They listened to his voice but they did not do anything specific. They received warning signs but they did not send out signals appropriately. There is a hint inside of this phenomenon. They should have not let him alone and they did not do anything specific, such as having a talk to family or taking to a hospital. This is the task for the union to consider. This is a negative lesson.

In November In his office, 42 drivers were asked to transfer to unwilling jobs. On December 19, 33 drivers were transferred forcibly such as from a shinkansen driver to a local train driver. Driving skills needed are far different from other jobs so this job transfer is unbelievable from common sense. Even an expert driver age of mid-50s was asked to transfer to another job.

East Japan Railway Company has the "life-cycle" system. In the "life-cycle" system, we experience a station, a conductor, and a driver. Before becoming 40 years old, we move to a

station and experience a transport operation for 3 years to 5 years. Then, we are transferred to a driver again. The aim is to receive and teach skills.

People who are in the life-cycle system and are well prepared to do a next job were also asked to transfer to another section. There were anxiety and discomposure that who will be transferred forcibly.

For example, in Iwaki transportation office, a train driver is taking education to get a certification of electric locomotives. The scheduled period was from November 1 to February 17. However, on February 1, at the right before the examination, the driver was transferred to a station by the “life-cycle” system.

Passenger trains are the foundation of East Japan Railway Company, so normally drivers acquire a train driver’s license. Under construction, it is necessary to tow freight cars with electric locomotives. It is necessary to acquire an electric locomotive license with considering people’s wills after experiencing a driver.

The driver in Iwaki transportation office told a director of the office that he wanted to acquire an electric locomotive license, and a 3 month education started. Drivers do not drive electric locomotives usually, so, skill educations will be done with running extra trains. Before this education was stopped, 34 extra trains run and education time was 365 hours 12 minutes, however, the education was stopped right before the examination because of a forced transfer in the “life-cycle” system.

A driving office has to educate drivers who know specialties of driving trains, have skills and ability, and have response capabilities for accidents, an insight, and discernment. This is why workers and employers agreed that skill succession has priority than the “life-cycle” system. However, personnel rotation was enforced. The responsibility of the company is huge. This personnel rotation gives drivers feelings such as a critical feeling and an anxiety feeling.

We had a questionnaire for 132 drivers. The collection rate was 95%.

1. The reason why became a shinkansen driver. 52 people (41%) answered that it was a dream since childhood. 60 people (47%) answered that they wanted to become it after becoming local train drivers. 88% have aspiration and hope for a shinkansen driver.

2. How to handle when the same accident as December 7 happen. 104 people (79%) answered they do the same as the driver did (closing the door after the train arrives at the next station). 58 people (44%) answered they do not report the accident because it is not a big deal. Thus, many drivers feel this accident is not so large problem and half of them do not report it.

3. Have you tried to hide something doubtful? 72 people (55%) answered "never." 59 people (45%) answered "yes." Thus, there is a tendency that half of them hesitate to tell the truth. It is a huge problem that 45% tries to hide a truth even though the union and the company have been asking them to tell the truth for a long time.

4. Did a forced transfer influence psychological states of the driver who killed himself? 84 people (64%) answered that they fear they may be transferred to another job. 30 people (23%) answered that they fear that they may be transferred if they run into trouble. Thus, many of them have a sense of crisis and anxiety about forcibly transfer.

5. A forced transfer from a shinkansen driver to a local train driver. 109 people (83%) have already experienced a local train driver, so they answered that it is an unreasonable and absurdity transfer. Many people have anxiety about a forced transfer because it was a dream of theirs.

6. How do you feel if you are transferred to a local train driver? 61 people (46%) answered "demotion." 69 people (52%) answered "no sense of advancement." 71 people (54%) answered "why me?" 93 people (70%) answered that they will lose their grips. Thus, they answered it goes directly into mental instability and decreases willingness to work.

7. All offices are on the same floor and an administrator can see you while having a break time. 82 people (62%) answered that an administrator is always watching them. 76 people (58%) answered they cannot talk to subordinates because they feel they are supervised. 93 people (70%) answered that they cannot rest. Office climate influences psychological states.

In April 2005, the Fukuchiyama line of JR West went off the track and turned over. The train overran the stopping place before the accident, so the driver tried to make up for the 1 min 30 sec delay. As a result, the accident claimed the lives of 107 people. An accident investigation board concluded that there were some background factors such as forced transfers and JR East had a problem about the management system of employees and safety. It is necessary not only

retribution but also the atmosphere that everyone can report the truth.

In a free comment section of the questionnaire, some people wrote that “administrators who have no experience of a shinkansen driver do not understand driver’s feelings” and “some of administrators only focus on the labor management.” Union members feel the change of office atmosphere. Making offices into the same floor makes the company easily to control employees but employees feel it is the labor management.

We received 5 advices from cognoscenti.

1. People who can be easily talked to are very important. People who feel the change of psychological states are family and subordinates.
2. People who experienced a shinkansen driver should become administrators because they know shinkansen drivers’ feelings.
3. Not industrial doctors but specialists should be talked to about mental destruction because medical care should be specialized as it is sophisticated.
4. Room which employees can rest is important. The labor management and safety come into collision.
5. An opportunity that labors and employers discuss seriously investigation, provisions, and prevention of reoccurrence.

We felt that the railway industry has to protect peoples’ lives and the work atmosphere which prioritizes safety and is well-ventilated is necessary. The pressure that a job as a shinkansen driver, which was a dream since childhood, will be changed forcibly is huge. We cannot just say job transfers cannot be helped because we are corporate employees. As a labor union, we are trying to create a pleasant working environment so that no one takes own life.

Thank you.