

Would You Drive Wearing a Blindfold?

By

Bill Tricarico

Loss Control Director

Emergency Services Insurance Program

I would hope that your immediate response to the title of this article would be a resounding “NO, that would be ridiculous!” And yet, people do something very similar every day. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the leading cause of automobile accidents is distracted drivers and driving an emergency vehicle is no different.

Event recorders are being used more and more today. These video cameras record what happens just before and just after a sudden change in the “G” force of a vehicle. Quick stops, jack rabbit starts, hard turns, and collisions. I have reviewed hundreds of such videos and a common theme can be found. Drivers deeply involved in conversations having nothing to do with response, drivers operating the radio or the sirens, or amazingly on a cell phone!

Most people when faced with the task of operating a motor vehicle simply must get the vehicle from point A to point B. Emergency vehicle operators must also get their vehicle from point A to point B, but point B is not the office, or grandma’s house, or the mall. Point B is where someone desperately needs assistance from someone with your specific training. Their required assistance may be a matter of life and death! Now, add to that the fact that your vehicle could be 25 tons in weight, you may have several people on board, you’re travelling with lights and sirens working, and sometimes you go through red lights and stop signs. Add into the mix other drivers who have radios turned up loud, who are on their cell phone, or eating, or putting on makeup, or shaving, or heaven knows what else they are doing! **Now is not the time for you to be distracted.**

Drivers of emergency vehicles should have only one job; get that vehicle from point A to point B safely and quickly. Safely being the optimum word in that sentence. The driver should not operate the siren, should not speak on the radio, should not help the officer look for the optimum hydrant, or anything else other than driving. Doing so would be the same as putting a blindfold on and remember, you said that would be ridiculous.

In the airline industry, during take-off and landing, the pilots may only discuss take-off or landing. That is an industry rule. They may not discuss the economy, the new car they are buying, their child’s graduation, or last night’s ballgame. They must be totally focused on the job at hand; safely guiding that plane to its destination. It is sometimes called the “Sterile Cockpit.”

It is time we took a similar tact in the emergency services. When the lights and sirens go on, the vehicle driver must focus on one and only one thing; getting to the scene safely. Remember, you can’t help anyone if you become part of an incident yourself.