Loading Dock Safety

Loading docks are busy areas. Trucks, trailers and forklifts move in and out all day long. Trailers, dock levelers and rolling doors can cause pinch points, and elevated docks pose fall hazards. Workers must pay attention to these hazards and focus on their safety training, proper equipment and strict observation and care in performing work tasks.

If you work at all at loading docks, you should get some training on dock safety, safe work practices and equipment like pallet movers and dock levelers/bridges. Don’t operate a forklift without proper training. Wear personal protective equipment (PPE) like gloves and steel-toed boots with grip soles and heals. Dress appropriately for the environment. Check on hearing protection and eye protection if required for the task you are performing.

Basic dock safety tips

Safety begins at the dock approach, so be sure it’s in good repair, free from potholes and large cracks. Trailer lanes and positions should be marked clearly for easy backing, parking and spotting. Be sure that chocks and dock bumpers are present and in good repair. Dock bumpers should be made of fire-resistant materials to avoid fires caused by trailer lights. To decrease exposure to diesel exhaust, don’t let trucks idle at the dock.

The typical loading dock opens four feet (or more) off of the ground, which can pose a fall hazard. Use safety barriers to mark ramps and drop-offs. They prevent pedestrians and forklift operators from going over the edge. Never lean or hang out of a loading dock! You could be crushed by a backing trailer. Don’t walk into a trailer while a forklift is loading and unloading.

Dock levelers (bridges) span the space between the dock and a trailer. Locking devices can prevent trailer creep, which can cause a gap to open between the trailer and the dock. Integrated dock levels and locking devices with signal lights communicates when it is safe to load and move the trailer to workers and truckers. Such equipment should be regularly maintained and inspected for safety.

Don’t load a trailer until it is chocked and firmly against the dock. Note the weight capacity of the leveler or bridge before loading begins and follow its limits. Inspect trailer floorboards to be sure they will withstand the load. Inspect the load itself to be sure that it’s secure, that the load meets the capacity of the lifting equipment and that the pallets (if any) are strong enough for the load.

Keep aisles and work areas free of debris, trash and materials. Mark pedestrian walkways, work areas and storage areas. Use mirrors on blind corners. When you are walking in a loading dock area, be aware of your surroundings and watch for forklifts and moving trailers.

Getting in and out safely

Another issue of concern to you as a professional driver when you are coming or going from a loading dock area is getting into and/or out of your tractor/trailer unit.

If you ever counted the number of times you get into and out of the cab of your tractor, and on or off the rear portion of your tractor or your trailer in a year’s time, the number would be in the thousands. And you pretty much take the routine procedure for granted, right? Don’t do it!

The seemingly simple process of getting into and out of your tractor cab ranks as one of the most consistently dangerous things you are required to do on the job.

Sixteen percent of injuries – Slips and falls accounted for 16% of all personal injuries suffered by drivers on the job in a study conducted some years ago by the Federal Highway Administration. In that study, over half (54% to be exact) of the slips and falls reported occurred on the trailer or driver area. The rest happen in the trailer or cargo area.

Safer equipment helps – In past years, equipment was often just plain unsafe to get into or out of. Why? To start with, tractor cabs are quite high off the ground, so there is no safe way you can just hop in like you do with your family car. Getting up to the level of the cab is no small feat.

The problem is not quite so bad with a conventional tractor, but with a COE (cab over engine) power unit, especially the high-profile ones, access can be both difficult and dangerous. Having a secure place to grip helps make entrance and exit from a cab safer and easier. Equipment now is generally provided with well-placed and sturdy handholds for assistance.

Another factor is the surface on which you will be climbing and standing when you get into or out of a tractor cab. If there are steps involved (and there usually are), their placement is critical. Even more important is the surface! Surfaces need to be ribbed to promote good traction.

Where do you come in?

Even with the best equipment and all the required handholds, etc. available, the bottom line of it all still remains the driver who chooses whether or not to make proper use of the equipment. One trucking company, with higher-than-normal slip and fall workers’ compensation costs, investigated reasons for the high number of falls. Here’s what they found:

• Drivers were not using the proper entrance system while climbing into cabs.
• Drivers were slipping on worn steps or treads.
• Drivers were jumping (rather than climbing) out of cabs.
• Drivers (and dockworkers) were jumping off docks and trailers.
• Drivers were climbing on top of the rig or load to tarp it.
• Drivers were slipping on grease or oil that accumulated on the asphalt surface of the yard.

So what can you do? Don’t take any changes when you enter or leave your equipment.

Remember to submit your quiz!
Use the 3-point system

When you are ready to get into your cab, be certain that both of your hands are free. If you have any "stuff" reach up and put it in the cab first. Here's the method (remember the three point contact principle):

- Grasp with both of your hands; put your weight on one foot and climb with your other foot.
- Grasp with one hand; reach with your other hand and have both of your feet planted securely.
- Be certain you use the correct footholds. Don’t ever use a tire or a wheel hub as a foothold. These surfaces are likely to be slippery, and there is no good traction on a rounded surface.

Another thing you can do for yourself is to be sure your shoes or boots have good traction. Excellent traction makes a significant difference in climbing power. Also be sure the surfaces you will be stepping on are either ribbed or have some kind of surface protection to make them secure.

How about your trailer?

We’ve talked about how to get into the cab, but what about the trailer? The same basic procedure can be followed as for getting into the cab. Look for firm grasp points and handholds. If the trailer has steps or other access aids, be sure to use them when you enter it.

Don’t ever "do the splits" when you attempt to get into your trailer. That means putting one leg all the way up to the trailer while the other one is still on the ground. You can easily overstretch yourself and cause painful muscle spasms.

Getting onto a dock from ground level presents the same kind of challenge. Look for steps and/or other access aids whenever possible.

Be careful when you are inside the trailer – Once you get inside the trailer, keep your eyes open and watch your step as you move around. Be alert for protruding nails, cracks or gouges in the floor, or pieces of flooring that may be sticking up to trip you. A flashlight can be very handy to help you find your way around.

Getting out or off safely

Rule #1 - NEVER jump off any piece of equipment or dock. It only takes a moment to fracture an ankle, but it takes a long time to heal it up! Spraining or breaking an ankle or other bone can happen literally in an instant if you don’t land just right. Is the tiny bit of time saved worth it?

Get off using the same principles of caution as you used to enter. Remember the three-point contact rule when you get down from your cab. And don’t forget to exit from the cab with your body facing the vehicle, so you can keep a good grip on the handholds and easily use the steps.

With trailers and docks, check for stairs or other methods of exist. If all else fails, jump off the trailer using the following method. Never jump off a trailer from a standing position. From that height, you can very easily injure yourself. Squat down and jump off with your body facing the trailer. Try to pivot your body and keep a handhold until you have landed safely on the ground. Use the same method to get off a dock if there are no stairs.

Check for any visible hazards before you "launch" yourself. Try to keep as much contact as you can with the trailer while you are getting down.

Drivers of the Month

TLC recognizes safe drivers each month.

Bruce Rinke  Lake Valley Trucing Inc.
Peter Marcinak  Langford Inc.
Davis Norton  Keeton Trucking Inc.
A. Dennis Jones  Lamont’s Trucking Co.
Jezeriah Kenzy  Lohmeyer Trucking Inc.
Thomas Quinlan  LSD Service Inc.
Melvin Kendall  Lurgan Leasing
Dennis Hedberg  K.L. Lutzschwager
John Preimesberger  Kenneth R Virnig
Jason Weisser  Kevin Weisser

TLC Safety News

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Backin – a dangerous maneuver

Even though backing is one of the most basic tractor-trailer maneuvers a driver performs on a regular basis, it is also one of the most difficult. Successful backing (especially of a tractor-trailer unit) requires patience and good judgment. Backing is the cause of many commercial vehicle accidents – approximately one in four according to some statistics. It is extremely difficult to do well. Part of the reason is that an over-the-road driver simply is not called upon to back up very often. So whatever you can do to refine your backing skills should be useful to you.

Visibility major problem – The main reason that backing is so difficult is really bad visibility while you are backing up. If there’s ever a time when your rear visibility is reduced to near zero, backing is it! The best rule to keep in mind about backing is not do it all unless it is absolutely necessary. That may sound a bit silly, but it has a grain of truth in it. Backing is a very hazardous and difficult maneuver with your big rig. Try to park so you can pull forward when you leave. If you must back your vehicle (for example at a loading dock or in a congested area) use extreme care.

Six types of backing maneuvers

There are six backing maneuvers you need to master as a professional driver. They are: straight line backing, alley dock backing, parallel parking, jackknife parking, sight side backing and blind side backing. Let’s take a brief look at each of them.

1. Straight line backing – This maneuver is the simplest to learn, yet fundamental to learning and mastering all other backing maneuvers.

2. Alley dock backing – Alley dock backing involves backing while turning at a 90-degree angle. It occurs when the driver must back off the street or between other vehicles at loading docks.

3. Parallel parking – Parallel parking involves backing into a space along a curb or dock. While the principal is the same as parallel parking a car, it’s the most difficult maneuver to learn and perform with a tractor-trailer. Fortunately, it is also the least used.

4. Jackknife parking – Jackknife parking refers to the final parked position of your rig. The tractor and trailer are at a 90-degree angle to shorten the length of the rig. This maneuver is required when the dock is too close to the street, when parking from side loading or unloading, or when there are obstructions.

5. Sight side backing – Sight side backing is backing toward the left side of the vehicle. The driver can see along the intended path of the trailer. Sight side backing gives you better visibility and control compared to blind side backing.

6. Blind side backing – Blind side backing is when backing toward the right side of the vehicle. You can only see where you’re going in your rearview mirrors. Blind side backing is much more difficult than sight side backing. For safety reasons, it should be avoided when possible.

Backin combinations

When you back a combination unit, a tractor-trailer, you are dealing with an entirely different situation. Now you are working with a rig which is articulated. It’s composed of two independent parts – the power unit (tractor) and the semi-trailer. To begin with, you need to turn the steering wheel of the power unit in the opposite direction from the one in which you want the rear to move. Why? The rear axle of the tractor serves as a steering axle for the semitrailer. Therefore, you need to think about how those wheels need to turn to get the semitrailer moving correctly.

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