

Becoming a 'Professional Driver'

By professional driver, we do not mean that is what you do for a living, but rather that you operate your vehicle in a professional manner. Everyone who drives a vehicle can improve their driving skills and techniques.

If you drive a City vehicle during your hours of employment, the vehicle – be it a dump truck, pick up truck, sweeper, police squad car, fire truck or sedan – is the 'tool' you use to complete your job requirements. If you do not operate a City vehicle, these tips still apply to your use of your personal vehicle on a daily basis.

Before you start the vehicle, you should conduct a pre-trip inspection of the vehicle. Check the tires for proper inflation, ensure that lights (headlights, turn signals) are operational, replace worn wiper blades, ensure that windows are free of obstructions, make sure that mirrors have been adjusted for you as driver, and ensure that you are familiar with the layout of the vehicle you are driving. If you carry a Commercial Drivers License (CDL), you may be required to complete and document your pre-trip inspection.

Make sure that the vehicle you are operating is being maintained properly. For a City vehicle, the fleet manager should be notified of any problems during operation. For personal vehicles you own, ensure that the oil is changed and that the battery, tires, radiators, belts, etc. are in good working condition.

Learn to drive defensively which means not only taking responsibility for yourself and your actions, but keeping an eye on 'the other guy'. You can't assume that everyone on the road is as good or as cautious of a driver as you are. Remain alert and aware at all times while operating your vehicle.

The National Safety Council and the Minnesota Safety Council suggest the following guidelines to help reduce your risks on the road:

- Ensure that all passengers in the vehicle and yourself are wearing their seatbelts – it's the law!
- Be alert! If you notice another driver weaving, making wide turns, stopping abruptly or responding slowly to traffic signals – that driver could be impaired. Stay clear and notify the authorities if necessary.
- Follow the rules of the road. Be respectful of other motorists.
- Don't follow too closely behind other vehicles. Large vehicles may not be able to see you in their mirrors. Use a 'three second following distance' as a minimum guideline for distance.
- Don't be a distracted driver! Distracted driving is estimated to be a factor in 25 to 50 percent of all traffic crashes – that's between 4,000 and 8,000 crashes every day!
- Keep your telephone conversations while driving to a minimum or not at all. Pull off safely to the side of the road while having an in-depth telephone conversation.
- Don't text while driving! It is illegal in Minnesota for the driver of a vehicle to send/receive text messages while driving.
- Constantly search the roadway for situations that could require you to take quick action. Drive so there is always an 'out' – a way for you to quickly change lanes if needed.

Finally, plan to be more cautious while driving at night. Ninety percent of a driver's reaction depends on vision, which is more severely limited at night. Also reduced are depth perception, color recognition and peripheral vision. Always make sure that your headlights are on at night. Reduce your speed and increase your following distance.