

## Episode 53:

Sharing the Road with Large Commercial Vehicles

**Host:** Ken Rayner

**Guest:** Michelle Roberts



### Announcer

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

### Ken Rayner:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm your host, Ken Rayner for this episode on sharing the road safely with large commercial vehicles. And joining me for another podcast on road safety is Michelle Roberts, IHSA's VP of Stakeholder and Public Relations, and one of our transportation subject matter experts.

And Michelle, on this episode, I think we're going to discuss some specific tips and reminders to sharing the roads with large commercial vehicles.

### Michelle Roberts:

Yes, that's great. Thanks, Ken. I'm glad to be back. This is one of my favourite topics because I'm very passionate about road safety. And I'm really hoping that our conversation today is going to be applicable to anyone whether you drive for work either professionally or as a class licensed, you have employees that drive for work or you use Ontario roads to commute and/or if you're using it for personal use or even if you're a passenger, I'm really hoping that some of the tips that we are going to share on the topic of sharing the road with large commercial vehicles will resonate with all of our listeners. But the goal is we just want to remind everybody on some of the limitations that exist and how you can safely operate when you're sharing the road with large commercial vehicles. The ultimate goal is for us to prevent motor vehicle incidents or collisions, you'll hear that terminology kind of interchanged, and that's really what our goal is let's raise some awareness to prevent that.

### Ken Rayner:

Yeah, I love these podcasts, Michelle, because the ones we do together on road safety are typically the ones that I share with family and friends. Appreciating that the majority of our podcasts are very specific in occupational health and safety to the industries we support, to the hazards that are prevalent in our industry. But when we talk about driving and particularly when we're talking about being on the road and road safety in general, it's applicable to everyone. So I'm really excited to do this one with you again today because these are the podcasts I get to share with the people that I care the most about to keep them safe.

Now you did say large commercial vehicles, so maybe we need to clarify that a little bit because if somebody is on a road in a small sports car and they pull up to a Ford F-150, they may consider that a large commercial vehicle. So when we're talking about sharing the road safely with large commercial vehicles, what do you mean by large commercial vehicles?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yeah, it's a good question and just to keep it simple, we're referring to large trucks like tractor trailers, could be straight trucks, it could be tankers, dump trucks, those types of things that are on the road. Not your traditional F-150s and Dodge and all of those, but the larger commercial vehicles itself. And also we don't want to exclude, so when we think of large commercial vehicles, this also transfers to like buses. So both school buses and coaches for example. When we talk about some of the unique factors and the hazards, but also the safe practices, they can be applied to bus and coach as well.

**Ken Rayner:**

And why is this an issue? So we know if a car collides with another car, it's one vehicle incident. What occurs when one of these large commercial vehicles gets into an incident with a regular vehicle?

**Michelle Roberts:**

It's typically, it can be very tragic. When a large commercial vehicle is involved in a collision, typically with a, we'll call them a smaller passenger vehicle, it can be very catastrophic. And some of the stats that either provincially or even Transport Canada show is that when a collision occurs involving a large commercial vehicle, sorry, it's a small percentage of incidents, so less than 9 per cent of the collisions involve a large commercial vehicle. However, they do account for over 20 per cent of the fatalities.

**Ken Rayner:**

Whoa. Wow.

**Michelle Roberts:**

So that tells us, yeah, that's the severity, right? That tells us that when a collision does happen, typically there's a lot of damage, there's a high impact and the severity could result in fatalities. So we want to pay attention so that we can avoid those, that's obviously our purpose here. And unfortunately the stats show that those that are most impacted, it's not the commercial vehicle operator, it's typically the operator or the passengers of the smaller vehicle. That's important.

I also want to make sure we emphasize that the stats also reflect that when they do the investigations, it's typically not the fault of the large commercial vehicle operator. In some way, shape or form it's been the poor decision or poor behavior that's been demonstrated from the smaller vehicle itself. So that's why we're talking about this is because MVIs [motor vehicle incidents], collisions on the roadways, they continue to be a top hazard and we all have a part to play in sharing the road so that we can prevent those incidents.

**Ken Rayner:**

Wow. So three things I heard from that. One is in the total collisions on the road, less than 1 in 10 involve a commercial vehicle. But when they do occur that fatalities occur in one in five approximately or a little bit more than one in five. So that's huge. And that the personal vehicle is in many cases at fault to the collision. So, wow. If that doesn't wake people up to just being careful and mindful around large commercial vehicles, I don't know what else will.

And people who are on the highway driving beside a large commercial vehicle, they feel it, they sense it and they know that the danger is there. So what should we consider or what should our listeners consider when they're driving on the road in particular on a highway in some of these really large commercial vehicles?

**Michelle Roberts:**

And I think some of the obvious stuff that we just need to remind people about is a large commercial vehicle, truck or a bus, doesn't operate, physically operate in the same way as a smaller car or a truck does, right? It's got limitations in the size, the weight of the configuration itself. Drivers of these large commercial vehicles, they have received specialized training, they do have extra skills and experience and they know how to adapt when conditions change. So whether that's road or weather heavy traffic, they understand the limitations of the vehicle so that it takes longer for them to speed up or that it takes longer for them to slow down and break and how the vehicle might operate on a hill or with the rollback or the need for blind spots.

So the driver of the commercial vehicle understands those limitations, but us as passengers, or sorry in a passenger vehicle we may not understand some of those physical limitations. And like you had said, we also understand that some of those in passenger cars may not feel necessarily comfortable around or sharing the road. They may get intimidated and understand they are large vehicles beside you and they can create whether we call it the air turbulence or block your view and all of that. And so it's important to know that the physical limitations are different, the size, the configuration, the need to greater stopping distance, that it takes longer for that vehicle to speed up to reach the speed limit, especially if they're hauling a lot of weight. And most importantly that it takes a long time to stop and or shift or manoeuvre and react.

So the physical differences between the vehicles itself is something that we can't lose sight of when we're talking about some of the hazards that exist when we share the roads.

**Ken Rayner:**

Michelle, so when you were going through that right then I just in my mind was visually picturing in each of those aspects that you were talking about a Honda Civic compared to a large tractor trailer. And they are so different. I mean, good luck making a simple three-point turn in a tractor trailer when you can do it with a Honda Civic, they're just very difficult vehicles to drive and to maneuver, and you have to think of them as different when you drive alongside them on the road. And I would guess that most people just forget about that. They don't really see them as that different or they just forget about it. Would that be fair?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yeah, and I think one thing that we could be doing better I think as a province is making sure that when we are educating new drivers through the Beginner Driver's Ed program, that there is a lot more awareness on the emphasis of some of the unique factors that exist with large commercial vehicles. And so when I'm getting my regular G-class license that I'm aware of that and we should be putting greater emphasis on it so that it, with the intent, may make you think differently on how you manage your vehicle on the road.

And some of the tips that I want to share, understanding things like blind spots. Some people are like, "What is it? I don't even know what a blind spot is." Well, the blind spot is where when the operator themselves in the large commercial vehicle, there's mirrors which are ideally there so that they can see around the vehicle, but essentially based on design there's spots where they can't see, which is called the blind spot, what might be in front of them, to the side or behind them. So as a passenger vehicle, if you put your car in their blind spot, they can't see you. So if they're going to go past, merge into a lane and you're in their blind spot, they physically through their mirrors wouldn't see your vehicle.

I mean the benefits of a large commercial vehicle is that that operator is sitting up much higher, typically, they have a longer field of vision down the road, they do have large size mirrors. But based on the design of the vehicle, blind spots exist and we need to recognize that and not put ourselves in the blind spot.

And so the rule that's probably the easiest to follow to keep it as simple is, as a driver, if you can't see the operator of the large commercial vehicle in his or her side mirror, then that means they can't see you and the vehicle you're in. So that's one thing when you visualize and you're driving and you're like, "Oh yeah, if I look ahead and I'm looking at their mirror, can I see them?" And if you can't, chances are they can't see you and you're sitting in their blind spot. So that's one of those behaviours that we want to remind everybody is don't put yourself in those blind spots.

**Ken Rayner:**

So when you're saying you can't see the driver, you mean the actual driver sitting behind the wheel that you need to see in their mirror?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Correct. Yep.

**Ken Rayner:**

And if you can see them, they can see you. But if you can't see them, they can't see you. Is that fair?

**Michelle Roberts:**

That's right. Yep.

**Ken Rayner:**

I ask you about one, if I could, sometimes on the highway while I'm driving and coming up to a large commercial vehicle, depending on the nature of the highway and maybe the weather that day, even though I drive a pickup truck, I find that it swerves or when I get near a truck that I've really got to be in control of the vehicle. Why does that happen?

**Michelle Roberts:**

And I think that's just like the air turbulence, the airflow between your vehicle and the large tractor trailer itself. And so that's one of the tips is you got to be cautious when you're approaching that large

vehicle because those conditions can occur. So you could have that vibration like the air turbulence, but also if you think of right now we're in spring, so we've got a lot of weather and road condition changes, whether that's snow and rain and all that muck and mess is, that's another factor, the slush can fly off or be pushed up from the road, from the track to trail.

And if you're approaching it with your vehicle, two tips here, one, make sure you've got your hands on the wheel. So that's one way of if you do feel that vibration or air turbulence and you need to react and respond, you've got both hands to be able to do so in a safe way. And then if those weather conditions, snow, sleet, slush, all of that, you could get that spray back. So make sure you've got your wipers already on versus as you're approaching that vehicle and then they spray and then you're scrambling to get your wipers turned on because then that's a delay. And we always talk about your reaction time and how important your reaction is when you're driving to be able to respond. So then if you're delayed in being able to... "Oh my goodness, I got to be able to put my wipers on, I can't see now." Seconds can go by and as those seconds are going by you're still traveling. So you need to be cautious. So approaching large vehicles, you need to do so safely, for sure.

**Ken Rayner:**

For sure. And that spray that's coming off when we're talking about the comparison between a Honda Civic and a large tractor trailer, that spray that's coming off the road if it's wet is going to be very different between those two vehicles, right?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yes.

**Ken Rayner:**

Michelle, we're going through getting G1 license for our youngest child and one of the things that we've talked about is when you come up to a stop light or a stop sign, and if you're on an incline and there's a truck in front of you to be very mindful. Because we're talking about sharing the road with vehicles and so far we've talked about while you're moving and while you're on a highway, what other aspects, because there are other things that you have to be mindful of when you're dealing with large commercial vehicles, not just traveling, but also when you're starting and stopping?

**Michelle Roberts:**

So let's start with what you're saying, the starting and the stopping. You want to be able to leave space when you're stopped behind a large commercial vehicle, like you said, on an incline or a hill. There can be what they call that rollback. The time when the driver removes their foot from the brake back to the accelerator, you could experience that tractor trailer or a large commercial vehicle could roll back slightly. So you want to have a safe cushion or a safe space between your vehicle and the back of the vehicle ahead of you. So that's important.

The other piece here when we're talking about being close to and following a tractor trailer or a large commercial vehicle is tailgating. I'm hoping you're emphasizing with your new young driver the riskiness that tailgating can present. And when we mean tailgating is like when you're following the vehicle ahead

of you so closely, I'll use the description bumper to bumper, obviously that's an exaggeration. But if you're riding their tailgate, basically, you're putting yourself at such in a dangerous spot. Not only because it blocks you from being able to see the road ahead because you're basically going to be looking at the back of a tractor trailer for example. It's going to block your field of vision. You won't be able to see what's ahead in the road. Which then delays your ability to respond if something happens.

You've placed yourself in that blind spot that we talked about earlier. The operator of the large commercial vehicle can't see your vehicle and therefore you're in a blind spot that creates a hazard for you. So we really want that safe distance not only on an incline when it comes to potential rollback, you want the safe distance when you're following a vehicle on the road as well. And that's really important.

**Ken Rayner:**

Yeah, unfortunately, you and I both travel on 400-series highways in Ontario on a regular basis, and I know I see tailgating on large commercial vehicles on a regular basis and it just seems like a really bad idea. I'm not sure why people do it. If they're not thinking or they're not considering the consequences. But that's an easy one to fix. Just pull back a little bit and that's that.

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yeah, give yourself space. And like you said, Ken, because on the 400 we hear a lot of tragic incidents that occur. So let's say you are in your vehicle and you're behind the tractor trailer and your vehicle gets reversed from behind, hit from behind, sorry, not reverse, but hit from behind. Your vehicle's going to be smushed and crammed in underneath that potentially tractor trailer. You haven't left space for you to look up in your rearview mirror and go, oh, my someone's coming and I need to take an invasive move and maybe move over to the other lane, you don't have any space because you're tailgating. You don't have space for your physical truck or your vehicle to move out of the way. So that's when you see a lot of tragic incidents happen as well. And as we know with the dynamics of the vehicle, small, as you say, a Honda Civic would be crushed underneath the trailer. So we want to avoid those scenarios. That's what we want to avoid.

**Ken Rayner:**

Absolutely. And we're talking about, so tailgating and then breaking. So again, educating our young driver in our family that, we have two different vehicles, one's a pickup truck and one's a smaller vehicle. When we go out, we talk about the difference between breaking because if you're in the pickup truck, the full-size pickup truck as opposed to the smaller vehicle, and there's snow or there's rain or whatever the conditions are, you have to drive those two vehicles differently. Now, the size difference between those two is nowhere close to the size difference between a passenger vehicle and a commercial vehicle. So what do we have to remember about braking distance when we're sharing the road with large commercial vehicles?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yeah, that large commercial vehicles need a greater distance. So they need that braking distance. And so this is one of my biggest pet peeves is when you're traveling on the highway and let's say you want to merge or you want to do a lane change and you take that space because you're like, "Oh, that tractor

trailer, look at that space in front of them, I'm going to take that and merge into it." That driver has kept that space between them and the vehicle ahead is because that's their braking distance. So if they need to take an aggressive move and slam on the brakes or brake, then it's going to take that space for their large commercial vehicle to actually come to a stop.

So braking distance is very important. Commercial vehicle drivers give themselves that cushion so that they can brake, and the braking distance would vary based on the length of the vehicle, the weight of what they're potentially hauling. All of that physics would impact the braking distance. And obviously we want to make sure that you're leaving that space for the commercial driver and that if you are reducing their braking distance, unfortunately, you may be forcing that driver to take a very aggressive move slamming on the brakes, which then could consequently result in something like jackknifing. And we've heard that terminology where the trailer swings out. And/or if you've taken that space cushion ahead of them and now you're braking and that tractor trailer is right on the back of your vehicle, you could be rear-ended, right? So we want to make sure don't cut them off and don't creep into that space that they need to brake.

**Ken Rayner:**

And you mentioned jackknifing and swinging, which made me think of turns and turning. And again, thinking about our Honda Civic example and our transport truck, oh, going around a turn is almost exactly the same, right?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yeah, no.

**Ken Rayner:**

Taking a turn with a Honda Civic is exactly the same as a transport truck. They're so different. Turns is, I think it's a great visual in terms of just how different those vehicles are. When you see a transport truck needing all that additional room to make a turn, it's easy to understand how different those vehicles are to operate.

**Michelle Roberts:**

And I think it's easy to visualize, they need a wide space to turn. So typically they go wide. So if they're going to turn right, their vehicle may creep into the left lane before they actually turn right, because they need the clearance not only for the tractor but for the trailer to clear the curb. And what you don't want to do is take that little space and put your vehicle in there, because you don't want to drive in that space while a vehicle is turning because you could get stuck, you could get sideswiped and it won't be good. So you got to make sure you understand that they do require a wide distance when they're making turns.

**Ken Rayner:**

What are some of the other factors? I'm just trying to think in terms of maybe reversing. What are some of some other things that would be different for a large commercial vehicle compared to somebody

that's in a passenger vehicle and maybe the passenger vehicle, that driver isn't taking those things into consideration because they're not thinking of that large commercial vehicle as different?

**Michelle Roberts:**

So one of the things, and it's funny when you talk about young drivers is I have a 14-year-old, he's not yet driving, but I often do a few of those kind of like, "Hey, what does that sign mean? That sign on the road, what is that highway sign telling you?" So this is one of the things that I think we need to educate other road users on, and it's in regards to passing. We often get frustrated if we're stuck behind a tractor trailer that might be going a certain speed. Another side note here is in Ontario, tractor trailers are governed at 105, meaning 105 kilometers, so maximum speed. So again, understanding that might make you put into perspective why are they only traveling at that speed? Everybody else is flying by 120 on the 401. So that's one thing.

The signs. So large commercial vehicles in Ontario in the 400 series is restricted or has passing lane reductions so that they can't put their commercial vehicle in the far left-hand lane. So this is the sign I asked my son not that long ago, "What does that sign on the overhead pass mean there?" And if you can visualize this, it's the sign that it looks like a straight truck and it's got a line through it and then it's got the measurement and it says over 6.5 meters. So I said, "What do you think that sign means?" He's like, "Oh, it means that the truck can't be that tall or it's going to hit the overpass." And I giggled and I was like, "Nice try. But no, that's not what it means. That sign is actually the length of the vehicle and if your length is exceeding 6.5 meters, you're not allowed to travel in that lane." And typically you see these in the far left-hand lane, which restricts the commercial vehicle from using it. And typically for us as passengers, that's a passing lane.

So if you know that that's a lane reduction, you're in that designated part, that means the tractor trailer can't move over. They're not to travel in the left-hand lane. Then the center lane is their passing lane. So if you are traveling in it, you need to be respectful that maybe as a tractor trailer needs to merge over or let traffic in, they will use that center lane as their passing lane. So that's something to be aware of. It's another limitation. Hopefully, if we can educate people on what some of those signs mean and what that means for a tractor trailer in particular, then that's why they can't travel that way or use that far left lane.

**Ken Rayner:**

Well, I just learned something. So your son and I are in the same boat because I have totally forgotten what that sign means. Thank you. That's a complete... Yeah. Wow. That's an eye-opener for me. So thank you. I had completely forgotten what that all means. So, all right.

**Michelle Roberts:**

And one thing about passing we should also make sure we're doing is signaling well in advance as we talked about. One, you could be entering a blind spot, which we don't want to do. Two, if you can signal in advance, that's a way we communicate with other road users that I'm about to make a change, I'm going to merge, I'm going to move, and that allows people to react. So that if you signal earlier, the commercial vehicle operator can go, okay, I see they want to come into this lane. I can either back off or they can respond in a safe way versus an aggressive reaction, which we want to avoid. So I can't



emphasize that enough, is signal your intentions early that way that everybody has a chance to react safely.

**Ken Rayner:**

Absolutely. Oh, how about this one? Just thought of this, Michelle. Going up and down hills, that's very different. Again, Honda Civic compared to a tractor trailer. Honda Civic, the gears that they use, the amount of gears that they're using going up and down, using gears to sort of slow down as opposed to the brakes. There's so many differences between sort of driving a Honda Civic and a transport truck going up a hill or going down a hill, right? And again, that's maybe something that people that drive personal vehicles just don't think about.

**Michelle Roberts:**

And like we said, traveling up a hill in a large commercial vehicle that's loaded with cargo weight has lots of gears it needs to convert through to get to its ultimate speed. It's going to go slower. So be prepared. It's not necessarily the intention of the truck driver themselves, that's the physical limitations of the vehicle to operate it safely, they got to take their time. It takes distance to be able to get up to a speed. So when you're climbing up, it's going to take longer. Likewise, as they're going down, they're going to gain that physics, the momentum, and could be picking up speed. And if you know you're traveling in an environment that's a hilly environment, up and down, up and down, a lot of the tractor trailers themselves are trying to ride that momentum of coming down a hill knowing that they're about to come back up again. So maintaining that speed.

So be patient, be aware, and maybe you can take actions that would allow them to maintain their speed safer. So those are some common things, and again, it's putting yourself in the perspective of understanding what the physical limitations are of the vehicle so that we remain patient as well.

**Ken Rayner:**

Michelle, on many other podcasts that we've done with you on road safety you've mentioned other aspects that I would like to believe are common sense that would still apply to driving today. In fact, it's probably more heightened because just thinking of if you're driving fatigued and you are tired and you're not paying attention and you're on the road with a lot of large commercial vehicles, again, if there's an incident and it's your fault because you're fatigued, the results could be catastrophic if you are getting into an incident with a large commercial vehicle. So what are some of those other aspects that you just want to remind people to be vigilant about in terms of when they're getting behind a wheel and again, sharing the road with large commercial vehicles?

**Michelle Roberts:**

And it's a good point, Ken, fatigued, right? So you're tired. So we want to encourage you to plan, do proper trip planning, take regular breaks. Maybe if you have another driver you could swap drivers. Find safe places to pull off and rest, that's important.

But other, what we talk about, common sense road safety behaviors in addition to not driving when you're fatigued, is we definitely don't want you driving under the influence, right? So that includes

alcohol and drugs and we know that it can cause an impairment while you're driving, which then slows down your reaction time. And that's what we had said is a key fundamental factor in being able to react to the changing condition so that you can avoid a collision. So being careful when you are taking medication, even if it's over-the-counter medication, understanding how that might impact your ability to drive.

When you are operating a vehicle please use all of its safety features. Most importantly, your seat belt. We know that seat belts can save lives, so make sure that you're wearing those. If you have passengers in the vehicle, make sure whether it's a child's seat that they are secured or even pets and other items, making sure that they are safely secured in the vehicle so it's not a distraction and/or loose if something does happen.

And I think the last two that I want to re-emphasize is the patience piece. Everyone needs to practice patience when we are sharing the road. And that goes a long way in defensive driving and as well as making sure that we're not distracted so that we're staying focused. Driving requires a lot of your attention, a lot of skill. So don't try to multitask and put those distractions away. Things like eating and drinking or changing your radio station or flipping between apps and all of that, that is a distraction and it does slow down your reaction time. So we are going to emphasize here is stay focused. Hands, eyes, your eyes, you want them to be on the road paying attention. You want your hands on the steering wheel, you want your mind on the task. Those are all things that we can do to safely share the road with everyone in Ontario, and particularly when we're traveling alongside large commercial vehicles.

**Ken Rayner:**

Yep. Great tips. Thank you so much, Michelle, for all those. So, you and your team post a lot of information on the IHSA website, [IHSA.ca](http://IHSA.ca). Are there any resources that you want to recommend to our listeners to check out, to perhaps download, to review that would be applicable to the podcast today?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yeah, for sure. So we have a ton of resources on road safety and they, everything from free to download safety talks, policies, procedures, we have webinars, we also have some eLearning. But if you're finding it hard to navigate, if you go to [IHSA.ca/roadsafety](http://IHSA.ca/roadsafety), we've packaged our top resources in a toolkit on sharing the road safely with large commercial vehicles. So that's the place to start, easy to navigate through. And of course we're here to help. So if you have any questions, people can reach out to us and we'd be happy to guide them to solutions and resources. But I believe you're going to also put a link in the bottom of the podcast so they can click on those and find them really quickly.

**Ken Rayner:**

We'll do that for sure. So Michelle, thanks again for all the tips and guidance you provide. Again, not only to our members and those in the industries that we support, construction, electrical, utility, and the transportation, but perhaps to those people who listen and their family and friends that they're going to share this podcast with. Because driving is applicable to just about everybody, so many millions of people in Ontario. And you've provided a lot of great tips and guidance to help ensure that when people are on the road with large commercial vehicles, that they're doing their part to drive safely and make sure that everyone goes home safe at the end of the day. So thank you very much and thank you to the

listeners for listening to our podcast on sharing the road safely with large commercial vehicles. Be sure to subscribe and “like” us on your podcast channel and visit us at [IHSA.ca](http://IHSA.ca) for a wealth of health and safety resources and information.

**Announcer**

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