

Let's talk about OPs

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Developing a realistic ops mindset

On my Siskiyou Line 1 at the beginning of an op session, I would discuss how to get a more realistic ops mindset, and hand out a sheet with these guidelines. I find it helps the “enjoyment factor” of running a model train to think more “prototypical thoughts.” What do I mean by this? Consider the following points.

1. Full-sized trains are heavy and can be dangerous if not operated safely. Take your time and don't rush things. Carefully check your train before you start, and stay alert for problems as you run so you can catch things before they develop into a major mishap. Such mishaps can mean costly damage or even a fatality on the prototype, so stay alert!
2. One person is the engineer, and operates the locomotive. The other is the “rear-end” crew, including the jobs of conductor and switchman/brakeman.
3. The rear end crew cannot see the track ahead of the train, and the engineer can seldom see much of the train behind. The rear-end crew person should refrain from walking out ahead of the train to check the track, but should keep their eyes on the train itself to make sure all is well. Note that the rear-end position is great fun, because you can railfan the train and do your job at the same time!
4. Meanwhile, the engineer should stay with his engine set and watch the track immediately ahead. The engineer should not walk way out ahead of his train to track he would not be able to see from his loco-



1. I prefer two-person ops crews. Per the realistic ops mindset, John (left) is the rear-end/conductor and Jim (front) is the engineer. John watches the entire train while Jim focuses just on the locomotive and what's immediately ahead.

motive. The engineer should not watch the train itself, but should rely on the rear end crew to find out how things are going with the train and check with them now and then.

5. When approaching a turnout that needs thrown, the engineer should stop the train, throw the turnout, pull the train through the turnout, then stop the train again to allow the rear-end crew to re-align the turnout. Things like this lengthen the run, and add to the enjoyment of the assignment. Obviously, this is manually thrown turnouts only.
6. In fun, I would occasionally give out a “pink slip award” to perpetrator(s) of the worst snafu or derailment of the session! If the mishap was especially bad, we may declare that it was a fatality and one of the two crew members (chosen with a coin flip) may have to start out next session at the bottom by working in the yard throwing switches for the yardmaster. In effect, they're a new hire. Note: I grant first time visitors grace on this and exempt them from the pink slip award.

While realistic ops often focuses on car and train routing procedures, I feel we should also talk about the realistic ops mindset. ☑

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