

Driving in Snow: How Culture Affects Our Learning

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school were full, and I had to wait a few months more than I would have preferred. Finally, I enrolled in the course and passed in late March, and was awaiting my license and driving test on the second Saturday in April.

I was now 16 and three months. I drove to Hartford with my father the day of my final test, and it suddenly started snowing. While taking and passing the 'indoor' tests, the snow came down harder. As I entered our car with one of the DMV officers for the driving test, at least half an inch covered the ground. This was of no concern to me. While I was learning to drive in December, January and February, it snowed in Connecticut at least every couple of days. That's par for the course in Connecticut.

A Cultural Tradition

A few years later, the entire time I attended the University of Connecticut, including four years as an undergraduate and a year and a half in graduate school, the university never canceled classes or declared a snow day. It didn't matter if the snowfall was 8 to 10 inches. Connecticut, and New England in general, maintained the equipment to clear the roads, and motorists, as part of a long tradition, knew how to drive in snow, heavy rain, and even icy conditions.

That April morning, as I drove out of the parking lot with the DMV officer, I approached my driver's test as I would if it were a clear day: with confidence. Sure, you have to be a little more cautious, enter turns a bit more slowly, and be wary of other drivers who might not be fully adept at foul-weather driving. Still, if you know what you're doing, driving in snow is no big deal.

For my driving test, we cruised around some city blocks, pulled up to a couple of stop signs, passed a yield sign, encountered a blinking yellow light, circled the DMV building, and then headed back into the parking lot. My test was complete!

Inside, my father was beaming. He was so glad that I was "one and done." He let me drive home as well. It was a great feeling.

When Culture Impedes

Flash forward to today. In the south, particularly the Research Triangle area including Chapel Hill and now Raleigh, people have little or no experience of driving in snow. Rain even throws off most drivers here, much like in Northern Virginia where I lived previously for 15 years.

Truth be told, a hard nightfall rain with a bit of wind does make for treacherous driving in those parts, even for a veteran driver like me. Why? Typically other drivers in the mid-Atlantic states are unskilled at driving in foul weather, and for many of them, driving in snow is out of the question. A little ice? Forget it! So, in the mid-Atlantic, no matter how good a driver you might be, it is treacherous to be on the road because nearly everyone else is an amateur.

In North Carolina, the situation is worse. Here, wind mixed with precipitation might prompt large numbers of people to stay home. School is canceled the day before the anticipation of snow. Where I live, snow plows do not exist. Cars do not have snow tires. Sand or salt for covering the roads is in short supply. Many people don't own snow shovels, and if they happen to be snowed in, well, that's it until Mr. Sun melts us back to clear roads.

No Escaping the Impact

How is the above anecdote about driving in the snow related to you and what you're seeking to accomplish? The culture that surrounds you invariably impacts your behavior when you otherwise could proceed with aplomb. When everyone else acts in ways contrary to what you prefer to do, your progress can be impeded.

If you work for the wrong organization, report to the wrong boss, or work on the wrong project, your behavior and performance will not be optimal —although this is not an excuse or a catch-all for poor results. Nevertheless, it behooves each of us to be aware of our surroundings and how sometimes they can hamper our progress. Such impedance can occur on national, regional, state, county, town, or neighborhood level, as well as in major organizations, companies, professional firms, or small businesses.

Be cognizant of whom you associate with and where you tread, because the surrounding culture can impact your performance and progress.