

Safety is a Process, It Isn't Piecemeal

Safety counts in the field, not the classroom. Experienced climbers could play a more important role through mentoring. Responsibility and a safety culture have much to do with protecting workers.

By Dr. Bridgette Hester

As of April 3, the tower industry has lost six climbers: Chad Weller, Ronaldo E. Smith, T.J. Richards, Kyle Kirkpatrick, Martin Powers and Seth Garner. We also lost Michael Garrett, a firefighter, during the attempt to rescue Richards and Kirkpatrick. We are not off to a good start to 2014. We are averaging one climber death every 15 days.

Having attended the National Association of Tower Erectors conference in February and having read and viewed the speech delivered there by video by Dr. David Michaels, who heads the Occupational Safety and Health Administration as an assistant secretary of labor, I felt motivated to write about NATE's new 100 percent tie-off initiative and OSHA's renewed interest in the tower industry's fatality rate. Several people contacted me for my thoughts on the matter. I became a widow myself when a tower my husband was working on collapsed, fatally injuring him, and I represent families who have lost loved ones because of fatal injuries on tower jobsites.

No one is happy with the rising fatality rate. No one wants men and women to die in the execution of their jobs. Although various organizations play different roles within

the tower industry, all of us support any initiative that works toward saving lives. Furthermore, everyone in the industry wants a zero fatality rate. I regret to say I don't believe that will come to pass. Accidents happen in any industry, and the telecommunications industry is no exception.

What's needed is an overhaul of the industry's culture. Far too many variables affect safety. You cannot simply take one variable and treat it as though it is independent of the others.

Earlier this year, Michaels sent a letter from OSHA to the industry that read, in part, "During inspections, OSHA will be paying particular attention to contract oversight issues, and will obtain contracts in order to identify not only the company performing work on the tower, but the tower owner, carrier, and other responsible parties in the contracting chain."

My immediate thought was, "And this hasn't been a priority before, and you haven't been vigilant about this before because ...?"

Training: I hear far too many stories from climbers about their training or the lack thereof. Climber safety and rescue certification teaches how to climb safely. Period. There are still months, even years, of learning before you become a real tower hand, yet green hands are being thrown into the field with no experience and are expected to perform work they don't know how to do. Several climbers told me they have been climbing for months, and their employer hasn't yet sent them to basic certification training.

The training culture in the industry has to be addressed in its totality to achieve a tangible change. If you don't change the training, its execution or the paradigm under which it operates,

Hubble Foundation Research

The Hubble Foundation is conducting academic research on climbers' perceptions of their fall risk. To participate in the study, send an email to Dr. Bridgette Hester at bridgette@hubblefoundation.org to receive

a consent form and a link to the online survey tool. Participants must be at least 18 years old and either currently active climbers in the industry (40 hours a week) or active climbers in the past five years.

people will continue to die at the unthinkable rate we have witnessed so far.

Mentoring: A natural extension of training is mentoring. When I say mentoring, I do not mean bashing, hazing or abusing new climbers. I realize there is a period of “tough love,” “initiation,” or “earning your place” on a new crew, and given the culture of the industry, that is understandable to a degree. However, I am talking about mentoring. I hear of few cases in which a seasoned climber invests himself or herself in a new climber to pass along knowledge, information and wisdom. As a climber or business owner, you cannot expect to turn out high-quality workers if you don’t invest in them.

In this industry, turnover is high. Consequently, I understand there are reservations about seasoned hands or employers investing in a new climber. However, if you want a safe crew, you need to invest in the newcomers you are training in the field. Climbers depend on one another too much not to take the time.

Subcontracting: Moving from training and mentoring, we need to address the particulars of what’s expected in the field and the common use of subcontracting.

Because of the increasing amount of work available, subcontracting makes perfect sense from a business standpoint. A carrier hires a turf contractor, turf hires sub A, which hires sub B, which hires sub C. I don’t believe it’s unreasonable to assume that sub A doesn’t know sub C’s safety policies or how it trains crews in the field. Does sub B know the safety policies at sub C? Or at the turf company?

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Probably not. If they are aware of each other’s safety policies, how involved are they in making sure that the policies are followed?

Even with the renewed vigor for holding companies and individuals accountable, determining where the accountability lies seems to be the ongoing problem. Holding people and companies accountable for an accident or fatality, which should happen, doesn’t appear to happen often in this industry. Carriers expect turf vendors to be accountable, the turf vendors expect the subs to be accountable, and the employers of the subcontractors expect employees to be held accountable. Given those expectations, is it so unreasonable for families of those injured or killed to expect the same accountability from everyone involved?

Once the initiatives and the task force determine ways to address the fatality problem, my question then would be: Who is going to be held accountable, and what are you going to do about it? I’m interested to see the second half of the equation and the answer to that question.

Carriers: I have heard the argument far too often that carriers are too insulated. I tend to agree. It is understandable that carrier companies can’t be held responsible for every

nuance. There needs to be personal accountability from the climber and from the crewmembers on the ground. However, if a carrier company issues job orders, it needs to be held accountable all the way down the line. For example, if I contract work to build my office building and that contractor subs my work out to two more companies, and company C is now building my office, I have a moral, ethical and fiduciary responsibility to make sure the job on my building is executed correctly and safely. If during the construction or after its completion, something collapses, and contractors, employees or someone on the street is killed, it is my responsibility — maybe not entirely, but at least in part. I ultimately allowed company C to do the work on my building. If I didn’t follow up to make sure that company C knew what it was doing and that it was doing it safely, that’s on me. It’s called being responsible.

Personal climber responsibility: Ultimately, the climber and the foreman are responsible for their own safety. If it’s not safe, don’t climb. If the structure isn’t sound, don’t climb. Say no. Although this is good in theory, often climbers believe they can’t speak up for fear of losing their jobs or, more foolishly, because they want to be able say they got the job done.

The industry's just-in-time (JIT) hiring probably has resulted in more safety incidents than any other determinant factor. JIT hiring is defined as programming personnel hiring to match workloads, and this process does nothing to develop safety culture. In fact, it does nothing to develop company culture.

This is an issue in any industry when the majority of the workforce is made up of alpha personalities. In the case of ego, the foreman should not allow it, and the company owner should back up the foreman in his decision. Does it always happen? No. Should it? Yes.

The climber and foreman responsibility cycles back around to the first point I mentioned: training.

Changing the Safety Culture

How do we change the safety culture? Although change will take time, there are a few ways to lead the industry in a more productive direction. Some industry professionals may suggest that I am ill informed, that I do not understand the complexity or the costs involved, or that change simply isn't feasible. Nevertheless, from a research perspective, an investment in comprehensive and structured training is not only smart, it's cost-effective.

Uniformity: Creating a training system based on proficiency is crucial. Internal and external training sources must teach the same subject matter, but not necessarily in the same way. Adult learners are not taught in the same way that children are taught, so there will be some variation in the method of delivery. Nonetheless, the subject matter should be taught to

the same level of proficiency. Proficiencies must be at the 80 percent level or higher. Safety must be at 100 percent proficiency. In addition, all evaluations must be objective.

Demanding such a system will enable employers, trainers and other industry professionals to specifically define tasks, conditions under which they are performed, and the standard to which they should be performed. Accidents and fatalities can be reduced, but it requires the employers, employees, and the industry as a whole to develop a plan and to follow the plan to mitigate safety issues through uniform proficiency standards that apply to everyone.

Structured and measurable OJT: On-the-job training plays an integral part in training within the telecommunications industry. OTJ training is one of the most important and effective ways to train a worker, thus the structure of the OJT should reflect this importance, and currently it does not. Success in restructuring the OJT paradigm lies in a measurable system of skill level: apprentice, journeyman and master. In such a system, workers are held accountable for their knowledge and proficiency and the practical

application of their knowledge. Furthermore, such a system would codify the practical knowledge learned and would identify the skills and the skill level required to perform specified tasks safely and properly.

Pre-hire screening and testing:

If you are going to train people, invest in them. Invest in them monetarily and invest in them personally, and treat them with respect. People not only learn, but they are more likely to apply what they have learned when they feel appreciated. Part of investing in them also requires the companies to invest in themselves. There are methods to use to screen employees' personal characteristics and professional capabilities for their suitability for the job, but such a system is not utilized.

Behavioral and cognitive testing prior to hire is relatively inexpensive, especially when compared with the costs to be paid in connection with an accident or fatality. Behavioral screening before hire is also a concept the industry should embrace because employees repeat behaviors. Employers already observe climber behavior daily to see that they test their equipment and report anomalies.

Although cognitive testing for prospective employees, like IQ testing, is illegal, tests that measure skill and knowledge typically correlate to high cognitive functioning, hence skill and knowledge test results provide a good indication of general intelligence. Two valuable tests that employers can utilize as tools to evaluate an employee's ability and judgment are

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the Employee Reliability Inventory and the Situational Judgment Test. Both are easy to administer, reliable and valid.

Opponents may argue that screening is too expensive or not feasible, but the cost of pre-screening employees and matching job skills, personality, reliability and past employment experience will far outweigh the human cost in the event of a catastrophe. Effective planning equates with reduced risk — this is Risk Management 101.

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Changing the safety culture in this industry is a marathon, not a sprint. No matter how well intentioned any of us may be, it is important to remember that education and awareness, unless manifested and applied in the field, will be a fruitless effort.

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